

KINGDOM
OF
FROST
AND
FEAR

WHITNEY
DEAN



A KINGDOM OF FROST AND
FEAR

BOOK TWO

THE FOUR KINGDOMS



WHITNEY DEAN

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INSTALLMENT

BOOK TWO OF
'THE FOUR KINGDOMS'
BY: WHITNEY DEAN

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- CH 1: HONEST - KYNDAL INSKEEP
- CH 2: DANCING WITH YOUR GHOST - SASHA ALEX SLOAN
- CH 3: I FEEL LIKE I'M DROWNING - TWO FEET
- CH 4: ARCADE - DUNCAN LAURENCE
- CH 5: RUNAWAY - AURORA
- CH 6: SHATTER ME - LINDSEY STIRLING
- CH 7: I'LL MAKE YOU LOVE ME - KAT LEON
- CH 8: DEEP DIVE - ZARYAH
- CH 9: HEAVEN - JULIA MICHAELS
- CH 10: FOR YOU - LIAM PAYNE
- CH 11: HEAD UP - THE SCORE
- CH 12: NEVER TEAR US APART - BISHOP BRIGGS
- CH 13: I KNOW YOU - SKYLAR GREY
- CH 14: I'M TIRED - LABRINTH
- CH 15: LOVE IS A WEAPON - LETDOWN
- CH 16: MOVEMENT - HOZIER
- CH 17: IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT (VIOLIN) - JOEL SUNNY
- CH 18: EVERY TIME YOU LEAVE - SONYA BELOUSOVA & GIONA OSTINELLI
- CH 19: THE ENEMY - ANDREW BELLE
- CH 20: SPEECHLESS - NAOMI SCOTT
- CH 21: FAR TOO YOUNG TO DIE - PANIC! AT THE DISCO
- CH 22: REVOLUTION - UNSECRET FEAT. RUELLE
- CH 23: HEARING - SLEEPING AT LAST
- CH 24: LOVE IS THE CURE - SLEEPING WOLF
- CH 25: DIRTY THOUGHTS - CHLOE ADAMS
- CH 26: LITTLE DO YOU KNOW - ALEX & SIERRA
- CH 27: MILLION DOLLAR MAN - LANA DEL REY
- CH 28: CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE - HALEY REINHART
- CH 29: EVERYTHING I WANTED - BILLIE EILISH
- CH 30: BREAKFAST - DOVE CAMERON
- CH 31: MAYBE I'M AMAZED - JAMIE DORNAN
- CH 32: CRAZY IN LOVE - SOFIA KARLBERG
- CH 33: LIPS OF A WITCH - AUSTIN GIORGIO
- CH 34: I SHOT CUPID - STELA COLE
- CH 35: FEAR OF THE WATER - SYML

- CH 36: DROWN - SEAFRET
- CH 37: TWIN FLAME - MACHINE GUN KELLY
- CH 38: MOMMY ISSUES - CLOUDY JUNE
- CH 39: BENEATH YOUR BEAUTIFUL - LABRINTH
- CH 40: RUNNING UP THAT HILL - MEG MYERS
- CH 41: WE BELONG - DOVE CAMERON
- CH 42: WINTER SILENCE - J.T. PETERSON
- CH 43: I WILL FIND YOU - AUDIOMACHINE
- CH 44: COME BACK FOR ME - JAYMES YOUNG
- CH 45: BURN - 2WEI
- CH 46: EYES ON FIRE - HAHLOWEG
- CH 47: CLOSER - NINE INCH NAILS
- CH 48: PAINT IT, BLACK - CIARA
- CH 49: GOODBYE - RAMSEY
- CH 50: PROTECTOR - CITY WOLF
- CH 51: CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE - TOMMEE
PROFITT

DEDICATION

TO THE ONES WHO FELT UNSEEN.

I SEE YOU.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Book two of a Dark Fantasy series.

For the romantasy lovers.

Trust the process.

It contains sexually explicit scenes, graphic content and is intended for mature readers.

For detailed content warnings, please visit my website:

whitneydean.com

Seriously.

This is darker than book one.

PROLOGUE

RAVEN

I STARED AT THE CEILING, MY EYES MOVING IN AND OUT OF FOCUS WHILE I THOUGHT OF HOW BLOOD LOOKED WHEN IT WAS COMBINED WITH ICE. HOW IT WOULD MIX WITH WATER, THINNING AGAINST THE LIQUID YET MAINTAINING ITS DEEP RED HUE, MATCHING THE COLOR IT WAS WHEN I STOLE IT FROM ITS HOME — THE BODY IT SPENT ITS LIFE TRYING TO PUMP THROUGH, CODDLING THE ORGANS THAT WERE NO LONGER THROBBING WITH A PULSE. I GREW COLDER AS THE UNFAMILIAR PULL IN MY STOMACH SPREAD.

THIRSTY. INSATIABLE.

CHAPTER ONE



RAVEN

*P*ulled from my dark and delicious thoughts as I dragged my tongue across my lips to cure my dry mouth, I looked toward the door. The knocking hadn't ceased, and it had been well over a minute, but I couldn't move from this bed.

This room was too fucking pink.

Everything. Everything was pink, down to the color of the soft floor. If they planned for this to be my nursery, they had severely underestimated how twisted I would end up as an adult. It was unbearable and nauseating being in this room, and I suddenly ached for the dark hallways of this gloomy castle.

The only resemblance I had to the outside world was the silver of my bedposts. Everything else was pink — light pink, dark pink, pink that didn't even have a name because there wasn't a word in this world that could be as vomit-inducing as this color. No one could be this happy.

After meeting Mira, the dress I was still wearing was a stark contrast to the happiness that this room was attempting to conjure up and failing tremendously. If anything, it only added to my annoyance — as was the persistent knocking on my goddamn door.

Day one of my living hell in Reales left me with little to no energy. My doorknob rattled, and I sighed, listening to my name called from behind the door. He wouldn't go away until I answered.

Sitting up slowly, I rubbed my face with my palms and rolled my neck. I had the damndest feeling that my weeklong excursion here would be extended.

A headache formed behind my eyes as the knocking resumed. Clutching the portrait of my mother holding me as a baby to my chest, I threw my feet over the bed and begrudgingly walked to the door.

After pulling it open, I shoved the portrait at Cade's chest. He cocked an eyebrow and looked down at it. "My mother." I took a step to the side so he could come in.

Zeke was leaning against the wall of my hallway; his cheeks stained with dry tears. His head was hanging; his shoulders slumped as he stared at the floor. It had been hours since I left him there on his knees, begging for my forgiveness. "Go, Zeke."

He didn't look up as I shut the door behind Cade, whom I assumed had been trying to find me since I hadn't shown up for dinner. "You look like her," he said as he stared at the large portrait of her on the wall.

I fell back on the bed and grabbed one of the thick, pink pillows, which I guessed were for decorative purposes since it was prickly and not at all comfortable, and smushed it over my face in an attempt to suffocate myself.

He started trying to yank it away from my clutches, but I shook my head underneath the plush, groaning as he finally overpowered me. "Tell me what happened." He sat beside me and pulled me into his lap, leaning against the iron rails of the headboard.

Burying my forehead against his neck, I curled into him as his arms wrapped around my body. I felt too tired to speak. It would mean it was all true if I said everything out loud. "Mira came into the throne room and told me my entire life story."

Hot tears pooled in my eyes as I blew out a hot breath. After the extremely trying last few months, I wasn't sure how my body could still produce tears. "Leonidas is my father."

He drew in an audible breath. "Raven, I swear I didn't know that." He rubbed my arm. "He never told me who you were, just that you needed protecting."

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I nodded against him, unsure what or who to believe anymore. "He murdered my mother because she was a witch and stole me away to give to your father. My sister, Mira, was there the night it happened." My tone carried heavy disbelief as I tried to imagine the horror that Mira must have experienced at that moment.

"Raven," he breathed, tightening his hold. "You are an heir to Reales."

That would never sound normal. "I am the Princess of Reales and the rightful Queen of Seolia."

"The engagement is to bind our kingdoms," he lamented, and I wondered if he would ever be able to utter the word *engagement* again without sounding so bitter.

"She wants me to marry Zeke so we can rule together and so we're never pulled apart again."

"What do *you* want, Raven?"

I wanted to go back in time, reverse all of it, return home, know my mother, and not hate Zeke. I wanted to love Cade. I wanted all of the things I couldn't have. "I want to sleep. I don't want to stay here alone, but I don't want to stay in that house."

He kissed the top of my head before shifting me from his lap to the bed. "I'll get our things and be back soon. We can sleep, wake up, and digest all of this better." Leaning over, he kissed my temple before he stood and left.

I curled against the pillows and closed my eyes, trying to talk myself into sleep, when another knock on the door had me groaning into the pillow. Hitting it with my fist, I stood and wondered if Cade had forgotten something. But when I opened the door, my face fell.

Zeke looked as ravaged as I felt but beautiful with his forearm propped against the doorframe.

I didn't say a word, keeping my eyes off his and on the floor behind him. He remained silent but watched me, the heat from his gaze warming my skin. "Please come back and stay with me," he whispered. "Raven, please. Don't let him touch you as I have."

"I can't do this right now," I murmured, trying to prohibit more tears from escaping.

He lifted his hand to wipe away the ones that did, but I jerked my head away from his touch. "Please leave." It was taking everything I had not to look at him as my voice broke on the words.

"Raven, I am not giving up that easily, or ever. You may as well get used to it."

I put them behind my back when he tried to reach for my hand and finally met his eyes. "Do you need me to say it?" I shrugged my shoulders. "Do you need to hear me tell you that I don't want to be near you? That the thought of you physically makes me ache. Is that what you need to hear so you'll leave?"

A tear fell down his cheek as he inhaled a stuttering breath. "Raven," he said on a choked exhale.

I averted my eyes again. "You should have stayed today instead of leaving me again, instead of letting me find you with Jeanine."

"Raven," he whispered again, leaning his head against his arm.

"But you know who was there for me? Who helped me clean off my dried blood? Who listened as I told him the horrors of what I went through? It wasn't you."

"Baby."

I covered my face with my hands.

"I'm sorry, Raven."

Dropping my hands as he reached for me again, I shoved his away. He towered over me as he straightened from the door, running a hand through his hair. “I was scared and irritated with you. I didn’t know what to do. I don’t know how to do this, Raven, but it doesn’t mean I’m unwilling to learn.”

“You fight,” I cried. “I told you not to walk away from me, but you did it anyway, and every time you do, I find you with Jeanine.” He opened his mouth to speak, but I didn’t let him. “Every time you’ve hurt me, I haven’t walked away from you. I’ve let you explain, let you apologize. I don’t leave you. And it makes me pathetic.” I took another step away as his fingers brushed mine. “You should have told me the truth.”

At that, he stopped moving, stopped fidgeting.

“I am tired of forgiving you. I am tired of kneeling to you only to get my knees bruised.”

Our eyes were glazed and sunken in as we stared at one another, our souls fighting within us to reconnect, but I felt nothing but heartbreak. “I need you to leave me alone. Find someone else. Go back to Jeanine. I don’t care what you do, but I need you gone.”

Shaking his head as I closed the door, he stopped it with his hand. “I promised you I wouldn’t move on, Raven. I *can’t* move on. You are it. We are it.”

“You promised me a lot of things,” I whispered, his hand falling. I had nothing left to give him as I closed the door, no tears left to cry for the man behind it.

Kicking off my shoes, I pulled back the quilts on the bed to climb in and tugged them over my head, burying myself under them.

I had a sister, so something good had to come out of this mess that had become my life. I could spend time getting to know her and listening to stories about our mother. Being around her made me uncomfortable, but it had to be because of all the information I’d had to take in.

She was my sister. I owed it to myself and to her to try.

I groaned, imagining the effort it would take to stay away from Zeke. He lived in this castle and would be everywhere: my fiancé. My eyes rolled at the idea of marrying him now. How could I? I refused to pretend in my kingdom, which meant we would have to live separately. He could stay here with his precious Jeanine, and I would return home — only if I decided to marry him. I wasn't sure what binding our kingdoms together could do. I could stay in touch with Mira without needing to marry Zeke.

A muffled knock on my door had me peeking out from under my fortress of quilts, realizing that Cade had no way of getting back in. Again, I threw off the blankets and shuffled to the door, throwing it open to see him and four servants carrying our two trunks.

I stepped to the side and held the door open while they brought them inside. Zeke stared at me as Cade waited in the hall while the servants finished; determination etched into every line of his face.

When the servants passed by me to leave, I thanked them, and their eyes widened. I flicked my eyes to Cade, who had also noticed how they seemed shocked. And then Cade looked at Zeke, whose eyes never left me. “Do you need something?”

I tangled my fingers in my hair, scrunching it. These men were going to age me. Today had been the longest day of my life, and all I wanted to do was sleep, but they seemed hellbent on making sure I didn't.

“Her,” Zeke replied assuredly.

Cade looked at me.

I sighed. “I told you to leave. You can't stand in my hallway all night.”

Cade looked at Zeke again and motioned for him to go, but he wouldn't stop staring at me.

“Cade, just come in. I'm tired.”

Cade hesitated before he nodded, putting his hand on my waist and kissing my temple before walking into my room. Zeke's fists clenched at his sides, his jaw tight as he pulled up

from the wall and came to me again. I shook my head, but Zeke wrapped his fingers around my wrist and yanked me out into the hallway, the door falling closed behind me. “Stay with me,” he said again.

Putting my hands on my waist, I blew out a frustrated breath.

“I am not leaving this hallway until you leave with me.”

Groaning, I rubbed at my temple as my headache spread to my bones, making everything inside me ache. That, and I missed him terribly even as he stood here. “I am not leaving with you.”

You stubborn man.

Throwing his hands up, he leaned against the wall again and crossed his feet at the ankles. “Then I will be right here for when you do.”

“You do not understand what I am trying to tell you,” I snapped, flames flaring behind my eyes. He grinned at my anger, and I glared. “We are done. Whatever this is, it’s over. I can’t do this.”

“I don’t like repeating myself, Raven.”

I arched a brow. He quickly closed the distance between us, my spine hitting the wall behind me. He caged me in with a wicked grin spread across his soft lips. “I told you when we got here that you are mine. You will not escape me.”

I moved to duck out from underneath his arms, but he slid them lower on the wall to trap me. “I don’t want to be the asshole, but I will be if that’s what it takes to get you back.” His voice was so low that it sent chills dancing across my skin. “And I will, Raven. I will get you back.” His grin had turned smug, knowing exactly what he was doing to me. “Miss me?”

“Don’t get excited because of how my body reacts to you. My mind is louder.”

“Oh, baby.” His chuckle was gruff. “I am always excited around you.” While running his fingertips down my arm, his eyes slid even lower. “Thinking about you in my bed,

underneath me..." His hand slid over my heart. "Falling asleep with your heart beating in my ear." His eyes were pools of gray and filled to the brim with pain as they rose again. "Please stay with me. I can *feel* you, Raven. I know there's something there."

There would always be something there, but it didn't take away from the simple fact that he had lied to me. But even with that knowledge, I found myself considering his offer.

I would never get the chance to know what my answer would be since the door to my room opened before I had an opportunity to speak. My head rolled against the wall to look at Cade as he glared at the two of us. Zeke's gaze remained locked on mine; his palm planted firmly against my heart.

Sighing, I pushed at his arm to uncage me, but he stayed right where he was. I did it again, and he finally dropped it, but not before putting his mouth right against my ear. "Don't let him touch what's mine, Raven. And you are." Towering over me again, he looked at Cade. "I'll see you two for breakfast in the morning."

Cade came and grabbed my hand, tugging me with him to my room. I looked back at Zeke again, and there was desperation behind that cocky smirk.

When the door closed behind us, I stared at it as if I could still see him standing there.

Cade paced back and forth across the room. "What's going on between you two?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that question, so I didn't.

He crossed the room to me. "Do you still love me?"

I wondered if I'd ever be allowed to sleep. "Men," I grumbled, sidestepping around him to walk to the bed. "I received life-changing news tonight, and you're both more concerned about how I feel about you."

He sighed while helping me fold the bedding back so we could lie down. "You're right. You're completely right." He removed his shirt and tossed it to me. "Still want to sleep in my shirts?"

I caught it with a smile on my face. That warmed my deadened heart a little.

Nodding, I dropped it back to the bed and pulled my dress off, looking down to see the bruises fading from my near extinction in the forest. When I caught Cade staring for entirely different reasons, I quickly pulled his shirt over my head.

“Still fits,” he mumbled.

I giggled, tugging it lower to cover my thighs. “Maybe I should wear this around Reales and tell everyone it’s how we dress in Seolia.”

He laughed, lowering down into the bed. “That would keep tourism thriving.”

Climbing into bed next to him, I rolled on my side and allowed him to put his arm around me to pull me back against his chest. I missed Zeke, but Cade was still my best friend. I wasn’t going to feel guilty for letting him comfort me. At least, that was what I kept telling myself until I heard his heavy breathing behind me.

But even still, Zeke had been frustratingly correct about one thing: I was his. And I was very aware of another man’s arm around me. It didn’t bring me the same feeling of safety as it once did.

Once Cade was in a deep sleep, I moved out from underneath his arm and grabbed a woven quilt from the edge of the bed, lying down on a small bench at the foot of it. Curling up in a ball underneath the blanket, I stared at the door and wondered if maybe he was still out there, waiting for me.

And like every night since we’d met, he was my last thought before I fell asleep.



I TREMBLED, knowing I was deep within a dream, but Zeke wasn’t here.

Black ink dripped on my skin as I felt for a way out of this box made of glass. Bringing my hand to my face, I watched as it stretched between my fingers, thick with something corrupt.

Vile.

My head rolled back as it seeped into my skin, power thrumming through my veins. “What are you?” I muttered to the black sludge as it continued to dribble down.

All I could do was think while it sank into my veins.

Building and encouraging my hatred.

Leonidas took my mother from me. My sister had been in a kingdom only separated by water for twenty-five years. My father had left me stranded in my domain and murdered my mother simply for possessing magic — the same dark magic he entrusted his kingdom to — a kingdom that I had been the rightful heir to for my entire life. I relied solely on a man’s attention to keep me going daily — a man who had lied to me my whole life.

I fell deeply in love with my mirrored soul, only to find that he contained all of my answers and refused to share them. I received the answers to the questions I’d been asking my entire life, answers I craved, and they only bred more questions. I was tired of asking them. It only added to the layers of woe currently wrapping my heart in layers of black. Impenetrable.

I could feel magic deep in my bones. Growing. Becoming. Like I hadn’t yet scratched the surface of my capabilities.

Someone would burn for this. I would satisfy the need for blood, but I needed more time. The decision to kill was never a light one.

I slowly lifted my head. My reflection stared back at me, but it was unrecognizable. My green irises were black, and every inch of me was cold. “Hello, you,” I cooed to the stranger staring back at me.

“Hello, Morana.”

CHAPTER TWO



RAVEN

*A*s I awoke, I tried to pull the scattered images of my dream to piece together. This new darkness, I wasn't convinced it was magic. It wasn't from the earth like my elements; it felt more profound than that, like it was from somewhere else — underworldly. I could feel it growing, wanting to become part of me. It was heavy, and instead of wanting to pull my warmth all the time, all I wanted to be was cold.

I lifted my head from the bench and looked at Cade, still sleeping peacefully. Sweat beaded on his brow from being under the heavy quilts all night. We looked much older than we did three months ago, and I felt none the wiser for it. His birthday had passed while we sailed here, and it was the first birthday of his that I had missed in fifteen years.

It felt like a different lifetime — celebrating every year on my balcony. We felt like different people.

Even from here, I could feel his body heat radiating from him. I wanted to stay here and let it try to combat my gloom. My soul had always allowed joy to cradle misery, and they had coexisted peacefully my entire life. Still, I had difficulty remembering what it felt like to be truly happy.

Was it only two days ago that I was blissfully unaware and staring at the stars on deck with Zeke? It felt as if I might never experience that kind of happiness again.

All I felt was anguished.

And I missed him.

A gentle knock on the door made Cade stir slightly, but not enough to wake. I wished for his peacefulness.

I wasn't ready to face Zeke yet, but I hurriedly walked to the door, mentally cursing myself for being so desperate to see him.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, but no one was around. I stepped into the hallway and peered down, but it was empty. When I turned around, I glanced down at the floor. Sitting neatly next to my door were three boxes, stacked one on top of the other with a dainty brown string holding them together.

Bending down, I grabbed the bottom one and searched for a tag while I brought them inside, setting them down on the table just as Cade sat up in bed. "What is it?" he asked, his voice laden with sleep.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. These were at my door." The brown string fell to the table as I pulled apart the bow. Starting with the bottom box, I lifted the lid to reveal a heap of black fabric with an ivory note sitting atop it with 'Little Bird' scrawled in a crisp cursive. "It's from my sister."

I ran my tongue along the bridge of my mouth after I said it. Those words tasted so unfamiliar.

I placed the note on the table and pulled the black dress from the box. It was breathtaking — cut in a style that I'd never seen before: floor-length, except for the front of the skirt, which looked like a waterfall as it appeared shorter than the back. And it was made of the most decadent black velvet I'd ever seen. Lace cutouts of intricate detail were where my ribs would be. Upon closer inspection, I spotted outlines of ravens spread throughout. "She had this made for me." It felt like such a personal gesture.

Setting it down gently across the table, I removed Cade's shirt. Using extra care, I maneuvered the dress over my body

and smoothed it down my stomach. My new sense of cold felt at home in this dress that resembled my soul.

Black. Resentful. But with flair.

As the dress fell to my feet, I turned slowly and watched how it moved perfectly with my body. The long sleeves clung to my arms, as did the half-velvet, half-lace bodice with a slight V-neckline that cut beneath the gap between my breasts. The skirt was tight and accentuated every curve, yet I felt light, even with the heavy material.

Not light enough to sprint through the forest again, but enough to attend breakfast.

Untying the second box eagerly, I flipped the lid off and ignored it as it fell to the ground. Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I pulled out a pair of black boots. They were long — much longer than my usual pair that hugged the bottom of my thighs. These were flat on the bottom and wouldn't add any extra inches to my height, but as I slid one on, it wrapped snugly around the middle of my thigh and covered up most of the exposed skin from the skirt.

“You're drooling,” I said, reaching for the last box, which was significantly smaller.

“You bet your ass I am,” he mumbled in reply.

I carefully removed the last lid with a slight grin spread across my lips. My heart thundered in my ears as I picked up another note sitting on top of ivory tissue paper. “This was our mother's.”

Without needing to remove the tissue paper, I knew what it was.

Cade came up beside me and placed his hand on the small of my back.

With shaky fingers, I pulled the paper off, and my heart felt caught in my throat as I stared down at the tiara. It was black, even the tiny diamonds that danced across in extreme detail, weaving beautiful patterns around three green rubies set in the center.

Sniffing, I turned my body into Cade's. He wrapped his arms around me tightly, kissing the top of my head. "How does it look like you?"

He was right. Somehow, this tiara looked like it had been made just for me.

Pulling back to look at him, I shook my head slightly. In awe, in disbelief. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to feel about any of this.

Brushing his lips across my forehead softly, he nodded to the tiara. "Let me put it on you."

I blew out a shaky breath as he released me and gently cupped his hands around the tiara, looking at me for permission. Biting my lip as I nodded, he tenderly lowered it to rest upon my head, molding perfectly.

He took a step back to admire me. "My queen," he whispered and took my hand, pulling me toward the mirror in the middle of the room. "You are the most beautiful."

I stared at myself — really stared at myself — for the first time since the night of my ball. I felt like a queen for the first time in my life. My wavy hair framed my face and shoulders while falling down my back. I felt beautiful. Cold and empty, but beautiful. "I want to find Mira."

His eyes didn't leave me until they had to for him to get dressed. I turned to look at the portrait of my mother hanging on the wall, feeling connected to her today as my fingertips brushed across the tiara. I wondered if she would be proud of me — if she would look at me and see a queen.

Cade chose a light-blue tunic to wear under a black jacket. I was wearing the colors of Reales, but I was the Queen of Seolia, and I needed to remember that — while it felt good to connect to my family, I was still responsible for hundreds of people back home. "I need you to promise me something."

He looked at me while he stood.

"Don't let me forget who I am." Because as I wore my mother's tiara, I was starting to. I feared my desperation to feel close to her would eat away at who I was before I came here.

Resting his hands on my arms, he kissed my forehead. “I promise. You are the Queen of Seolia, even if you look damn good in their colors.”

I rolled my eyes as I laughed. Walking to my trunk, I dug through until I found my favorite red lipstick and painted it across my lips.

Smiling at me, he grabbed my hand and rested it in the crook of his arm as he led me out into the hallway. I couldn’t help but smile as we walked toward the dining hall. It reminded me of our mornings in Seolia when he escorted me to breakfast. “I never made it to the dining room last night, so I rely on you to get me fed.”

“Some things never change.” He snickered as I nudged his side with my elbow, moving his arm to drape across my shoulders. “You’re lucky I’m good with direction. I can hardly see anything.”

I nodded in agreement as we turned down another hallway. “Remind me never to complain about how dark our castle is again.” The faintest sounds of voices echoed off the walls, and the smell of food wafted into my nose. “My mouth is watering.”

“My mouth has been watering all morning.”

I laughed as we crossed the threshold. Dropping his arm, he kissed me on the temple and guided me toward the table with his hand on the small of my back. Chairs shuffled, and I lifted my gaze at the noise, noticing that we were the last ones here. My cheeks flushed as everyone stared at me with parted lips.

I met Mira’s glistening eyes first. She stepped out from between her chair and the table, extending her arms to me. I stepped into them, and she held me tightly against her.

Family. I was in the arms of my family — actual, blood family.

A sister.

The black dress she wore made us look like sisters, except for the mismatched color of our hair. And I was quite a bit

shorter than her. We both resembled our mother, though she looked older than me by at least a decade.

Resting my chin on her shoulder, I rose to the tips of my toes and rested my gaze on Zeke. He seemed like he was struggling to swallow, his knuckles white around the orange he was holding.

Good. He needed to ache for me.

Sitting on his left was Jeanine, and as my eyes slowly traveled back to him, my body heat dropped, my blood running cold. His eyebrows drew in slightly as he sensed the bleakness clinging to me.

Of course, they were together.

That hadn't taken long at all.

Mira released me and put her hands on my cheeks. I went rigid as I remembered her cold hand on me from my dream. "You are everything I dreamed you'd be," she said.

So are you, I wanted to say but didn't since mine seemed more like a nightmare. I never dreamed of having an actual sister or any true family. I remained unsure of how I was supposed to feel about her. Something about her still seemed so distant, and my familiarity with her wasn't pleasant.

Instead of responding, I smiled brightly and touched the tiara on my head. "Thank you for the gifts. I love them."

She gave me a sad, small smile. "It was created for her after you were born."

My limbs felt heavy, and my throat was scratchy from the crying and screaming I'd done since last night. Instead of expecting a reply, she pulled me to her again. "Come, Little Bird. I have a seat for you next to me."

Cade pulled out my chair to sit. Even as I felt Zeke's eyes burning into me while I sat, I refused to give him any more of my attention.

Lying to myself, I glanced over at him and hated how handsome he looked.

And how it seemed like he wanted to devour me where I sat.

Diverting my attention away from his piercing gaze, I looked around the large but bleak dining room. It was gray, but that was nothing new. There were six large windows with heavy emerald-green curtains made of velvet that spanned across the entire back wall. It seemed like any time there were windows, there were coverings to prevent sunlight from being let in.

Outside the windows were more stone walls, prohibiting my view of the town, which I assumed was behind them.

And the sky was slate-gray in color like a storm was moving in.

The dining table was smaller than mine, with only six chairs, which meant she didn't often host guests unless there was another dining hall I hadn't seen yet. The black table with mismatched brown chairs made my nose wrinkle. Behind us were two large entryways with rounded ceilings. Besides that, the large room was empty and plain.

Unwelcoming — like the rest of the castle.

Raven.

I flinched at his voice in my mind, freezing in place.

It's somewhat different than your dining room. I miss the golds of Seolia.

I miss you, I thought, wondering if I could burn a hole into the curtains from how hard I stared at them.

A memory was pulled of us dancing together in one of my banquet halls from the Feast Day banquet. He pushed it forward gently, caressing my mind.

This was the night I knew I loved you.

Mira asked, "Is there anything you'd like to do today, Princess?"

I jerked my head at the nickname and blinked, clearing the memory. I didn't want to be rude — I was the princess, but I

should be referred to as a queen out of respect.

I cleared my throat, bypassing the discomfort and waiting for my glass to be filled with wine, thanking the servant after he finished pouring. He gave me the same confused look the others gave me last night. I shook it off and took a long sip from my glass. It had been a long time since I'd eaten anything, and I would be stumbling out of here if I only drank wine, but the one in my glass was much sweeter than any we had in Seolia, and I wanted to bathe in it.

"I would like to see your village. I promised to return with gifts to Seolia and would love to explore everything Reales offers."

"Our village, Little Bird."

Why did I hate that nickname so much?

As her hand wrapped around mine, I stared at it. I needed to relax. She was my sister. And while I didn't understand why her presence made me uncomfortable, I needed to push it down. "And, of course, you can. Ezekiel would be more than happy to give you a tour."

"That's not necessary," I replied. "Cade can take me. He's with me everywhere in Seolia."

No.

I ignored him and wondered if I could build a mental wall to prevent him from speaking to me like this.

When Zeke cleared his throat, John shifted in his chair across from me. "Queen Raven, I believe it would be best that Zeke shows you around Reales. It is, after all, his kingdom."

"Mm," I hummed, narrowing my eyes on him. "I thought it was mine."

"Raven," Mira began.

I arched an eyebrow. I wasn't in the mood to be told no by anyone else.

"You don't need permission to do anything. Reales is your kingdom, your village, your castle. You can go alone if you'd

like, and no one can object to that.” Mira met the eyes of everyone at the table but lingered on Zeke for a second longer before returning to me. “If anyone at this table tries to tell you otherwise, tell me, and I will handle it.”

Glancing over at Cade, I tried to gauge his reaction to me wandering around alone, but all he did was shrug. I licked my lips as a cocky grin spread across my mouth and turned back to Mira. “I would like to go alone then. Thank you, sister.”

Zeke sighed from his chair, but Mira beamed at me after I called her that. I relaxed in my chair and played with the ends of my hair. I’d been clung to too often in the last three months. It would be nice to breathe on my own in a new place. Mira didn’t seem worried about letting me do so. I could understand why Zeke wouldn’t want me in the forest, but what could be horrible about a village?

Taking another long sip of wine, I rested my head against the chair. This large room was unsettling, and I couldn’t stop staring at the dust on the curtains as particles floated slowly in the air. Our castle was well-maintained because villagers and travelers often shuffled in and out. This one seemed unkept.

When a servant came by and refilled my glass, I didn’t bother saying anything because they made me feel like I was doing something wrong every time.

The wine began mixing with my blood, making my mind fuzzy. “Tell me about our mother.”

As I felt everyone’s eyes on me, I had a sinking feeling I would be the main attraction for the entirety of my trip.

The poor little lost princess with deep-rooted abandonment issues longing for a man who lied to her.

And, as if he could hear my thoughts, he entered my mind again. *I love you*, he whispered, causing warm tears to flood my eyes. *I will tell you every single day, Raven.*

I took another draw of wine, though my sips were most like guzzles at this point, working to numb the pain I had become so familiar with.

Mira squeezed my hand as she leaned back in her chair. “She was beautiful, just like you. It is like staring at her when I look at you.”

I stared down at my empty plate.

“She loved being outdoors. It would drive her mad being cooped up in the castle.”

That sounded familiar. I had spent many nights exploring the Black Forest, trying to catch my breath from the weight of responsibility.

Cade squeezed my knee under the table, and I leaned against the chair to look at him. He wiped a tear that fell down my cheek, rubbing my cheekbone with the pad of his thumb.

The man I wanted was staring at me heavily down the table.

“My father would get irritated at her need to sneak out. She would take me with her sometimes.” Mira’s voice was softer as she recalled her memories. “We would sit on the dock, and she’d tell me of the world outside our kingdom. Before becoming queen, she loved to travel around the realm, always bringing back the most insane fashions and trinkets.”

My eyes fluttered closed.

“She visited Seolia a few times. I believe that was how they met.”

They. My father and mother. I wondered if she ever went into my forest. If perhaps her magic had been born there, too.

I looked at Mira again. We stared at one another for a moment, everyone around us silent. “And she loved you,” she whispered with a tear. “I was there the night you were born. As was John.”

My eyes flickered to John, and he dipped his chin in a nod. I wished I could feel something other than complete desolation. I missed my fury, my rage.

“It took her only seconds to name you,” Mira continued. “She said you were to be her Raven with wings to carry you anywhere.”

“How old was I?”

“Ten days.” But it wasn’t Mira who answered me.

It was Zeke.

Honey and chocolate and memories filled me as I heard his voice. My heart broke all over again.

“You were taken a day after I met you.”

A day. A beginning before our beginning.

“Wait,” Cade interjected.

I stared at Mira. I had only ten days with her and my mother. Suddenly the idea of Seolia tasted bitter.

“You knew her? You knew who she was?”

I finished my glass and held my arm up as the servant poured more. “He knew everything,” I whispered, answering for him. This bleakness, this icy hatred, flushed through me as the feeling of love for him changed into something darker. My head rolled back as the hand that held this dark magic started to burn again.

“Raven,” Zeke said in a panicked tone.

“Little Bird, are you feeling well?”

I shook my hand as the burning faded, refocusing my attention on Mira. Everything around me seemed blurry, but that didn’t stop me from finishing my fourth glass of wine. “I’m fine,” I lied, lowering the glass and squeezing her hand. “I don’t want to leave you again.”

She placed her hand on my cheek. “You take all the time you need. We have all the time in the world.”

When I stood from my chair, I felt unsteady on my feet as the alcohol outweighed my blood. Everyone stood with me, but I looked at Cade first. “You stay.” He shook his head, but I squeezed his hand. “I need some time alone.”

I turned to Mira next. “I promise to spend more time with you soon.”

She rested her hands on my arms and gave me a warm smile, which seemed misplaced on her face. “You’ve been through something horrible, Little Bird. Don’t let guilt eat away at you.”

I didn’t say goodbye to anyone else after she released me. Inhaling an unsteady breath, I slowly walked out of the dining room, my mind spinning from this new identity trying to claim me.

Another morning without eating.

I would let my darkness feed me.

CHAPTER THREE



ZEKE

I didn't want to leave her hallway, but I had to. She wouldn't relent on staying with me tonight. There was too much fresh betrayal between us. I knew she would hate me for what I did, and I was too hopeful that she would look past the deceit and forgive me anyway. What I had chosen to do to her was deplorable, and there wasn't one part of me that blamed her for not wanting anything to do with me, but I refused to give up on her. On us. Now, or ever. Nothing would stop me from loving her, even her stubbornness.

It only made me want her more.

I only wished she hadn't invited Cade into her room. I was confident that we were too in love with one another for her to return to him, but that wouldn't stop him from trying. I still sensed nothing but lust and envy in him. He wanted to claim her again. In her weakened state, could she give into him?

The thought made me ill.

Revenge was not something Raven sought. Was she stubborn? Yes. Infuriating? Fuck yes. But she never wished to incite mental or physical harm to those who hurt her. Her heart was too pure, unlike her sister's. I would have to sit by and watch as Mira tried to manipulate Raven or risk harming my mother and Luca, who she had refused to let me see since returning.

Pounding the wall with my fist as my irritation grew, I wanted Raven in my arms.

I hated myself for leaving her today. I should have stayed with her, should have fought. Our fighting always led to something good. I should have done whatever it took for us to move past it, but I had left her. I hadn't purposely sought out Jeanine, but she was still outside when I came out and wanted to calm me down enough to speak with Raven rationally.

Oxymoron. Raven would never make me rational.

Fisting my hair in my hands, I replayed Raven held down in the forest. Nothing but rage and lust were coming from those men, and if I hadn't found her when I did... I shook the thought out of my mind. I didn't take care of her afterward. She needed me, and I walked away. Cade had been there. It wasn't a wonder why she didn't want to stay with me. I'd been nothing but an asshole today.

I was buried inside of her just this morning. My cock was already hardening, and I remembered how it felt when her throat vibrated against my palm when I suppressed her from moaning as she came on my lap. And now another man was touching her, and I was the one who had pushed them together.

Perhaps I walked away too soon.

Stopping my retreat, I looked back toward the hall that housed her room and debated whether I should try again. No. She needed to sleep. I couldn't keep her up all night with my constant begging. Her health was more important than my need for her. I would see her again in a few hours at breakfast and could try to talk to her there.

As I climbed the steps to my floor, her scent of pears and jasmine still lingered in my hall. Groaning, I threw open my door in frustration. We were going to spend all night in my bed making love.

I fucked everything up.

Kicking off my boots, I fell face-first into the bed. I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. I couldn't even invade her

dreams to see her unless I were to break into her room, which wouldn't be impossible...

No. She wanted space. Maybe she would feel differently in the morning. I would corner her. Write her love sonnets. Shower her with gifts. I would do whatever it took for her to talk to me, to look at me. I would let her glare at me with those green eyes if she looked at me for longer than five seconds.

Remembering how broken she looked when I left her, I frowned. Had she meant it when she said she no longer wanted to be twin flames? While I hated to disappoint her, even the gods wouldn't be able to keep me away from her. I was too devoted.

She wouldn't dispose of me that easily.

I would make this right, and she would be mine again.



PEELING my eyes open as the sun peeked over the trees through my windows, I groaned. I hadn't slept at all. I'd chosen and dressed in some of the nicest clothes I owned hours before breakfast. I'd laid back down, hoping to fall asleep, but the anticipation of seeing her prevented that.

Standing from the bed, I went to my mirror that was too short for me but perfectly sized for Raven and bent, smoothing the hair out of my eyes. Her body still wanted me, and I would use that to my advantage.

I couldn't believe I was standing here, studying myself. I never cared about this shit before her.

Should I wear my crown? No. That would make it seem like I was rubbing it in her face that I was a prince and never told her. Sighing as I straightened, I mussed up my slicked-back hair with my hand. It wouldn't matter what I looked like, although I was wearing all black which was her favorite to see me in.

Jogging down the steps of my corridor, I wondered if she was in the dining hall yet. I couldn't get to her fast enough.

Crossing the threshold, I slowed to a walk and inhaled deeply. I nervously fidgeted with my sleeves, pushing them up to my elbows as I glanced around the table, my stomach falling when I realized she wasn't here yet.

Maybe she wouldn't come at all.

I allowed my disappointment to mingle with my impatience as I sat across the table from Mira. As John conversed with Mira, Jeanine sat beside me, patting my arm. I cringed, only because I was so desperate for Raven. Much to Raven's disbelief, I never wanted another woman touching me and could barely tolerate it when they did, even if Jeanine was my friend.

Quietly she asked, "How did it go?"

"Like we thought it would," I answered. "She hates me."

Her smile was sympathetic. "I'm a little surprised to see you here. You never come to any meals."

"If there's one thing I've learned about Raven, she never misses breakfast." I grabbed an orange and leaned back in my chair. "I try to see her here or return to stalking her."

Jeanine snorted. "Why do I have the nagging feeling that you'll be doing that anyway?"

I was heavily contemplating satisfying my itch to find her when I heard her laughter coming around the corner. My throat constricted when Cade's arm shifted from her shoulders to the small of her back. I balled my fist, juice from the orange seeping onto my fingers.

My glare softened as I looked at her, my cock twitching as I drank her in.

Fuck me, what was she wearing?

I had never seen her wear anything like this before. Her ribcage was exposed under the lace, and the thought of anyone else seeing that part of her made the orange mush in my hand. The dress hugged her hips and ass, and another man's hand was above it. And those boots. They were wrapped around her

thighs right where I should've been — deep, deep between her thighs.

Fuck. If I had an ounce less of self-control, I would have been up and to her.

When Mira pulled her into a hug, I felt her stare at me and met her eyes. Her lips were red, and I nearly came undone, shifting in my chair at the sight of her.

Fuck, I wanted her. I needed her back.

When she noticed Jeanine sitting next to me, I winced. I didn't think about how this might look after she told me to go back to Jeanine, and when she looked back at me, there was nothing but contempt.

Love me again, I begged her silently.

She felt so cold. I didn't sense any of her raging blood. Something thicker was moving through her, and it didn't seem like she wanted it.

As curiosity got the best of me, I first pushed into Cade's mind to watch his memories from last night. The last one was of her in his arms as he fell asleep.

Goddamnit, Raven, I told you not to let him touch you.

She quickly felt me each time I was in her head, but I risked it and entered her mind.

Cocking my head, I watched as she stood from the bed and moved to the bench at the end, staring at the door as she fell asleep. Waiting for me, I realized. She hadn't slept with him. She wanted me.

A sliver of relief pulsed through me. I still had a chance.

As I spoke to her mind and pushed forth memories of us from the banquet, she didn't flinch, and there was a warmth trying to push through. Her eyes flickered as she watched the memory — how I bowed to her, came up from behind her, and told her how gorgeous she looked.

It was the night that I knew I would do anything to keep her safe. It was the night I decided to sacrifice my happiness if

it meant she could find her own.

It was the night I decided to ruin everything.

And I wanted to tell her that when Mira drew her from her thoughts, which shoved me out.

I sighed. She was already drinking too much and extremely uncomfortable with how the servants acted whenever she showed gratitude. It was because they weren't used to it. Mira had never been one to show thankfulness for anything.

I couldn't stop staring at her red mouth as she spoke, only snapping out of it when I heard her say that she wanted to go into town. I needed to go with her. She couldn't go alone. When she offered up Cade, I glared. I was sick of them spending time together.

No.

She flinched slightly at the tone of my voice but refused to look at me. I cleared my throat and looked at John, who rolled his eyes before telling her it needed to be me.

Come on, baby.

Her resolution to be the most stubbornly beautiful witch prevailed as she declared she would go alone — and she looked smug about it. Irritation swelled in my chest, coupled with panic.

When I glanced over at Jeanine, she gave me a subtle nod. We would follow her. Our town was enormous, and it would take both of us to keep up with her. I learned yesterday that she could get into quite a bit of trouble independently.

She leaned back against her chair, and my eyes moved down her body, resting on the skin exposed underneath the lace. I bet she would look delectable in nothing *but* lace. I was frantic for her. She was a tonic that I desperately needed to fuel my addiction to her. I wanted to know how she felt underneath it. I wanted to lick over her ribs, make her writhe underneath me. That soft skin of hers...

Jeanine kicked me under the table as I gripped the arms of my chair. I needed to calm down, but she looked too damn good. I'd never seen her hair curled like this. It was wavy and falling over her breasts that the dress accentuated with how tight it was — I was suppressing a groan when Jeanine kicked me again. I shot her a glare. She mouthed at me to stop, but I couldn't.

There would not be a day that I didn't lust after Raven.

I wanted to tell Jeanine precisely that, but then I heard Raven's soft voice asking about her mother, and my heart fell. She was heartbroken, longing for the woman she'd never meet — the one who haunted her dreams.

And when she asked how old she was when Leonidas took her, I couldn't stop myself. "Ten days. You were taken a day after I met you."

Cade's head whipped toward me. He looked sick — like all the color had drained from him. I had a connection with Raven that he never would; I had met her first, and she was mine first.

And when he asked me to confirm what he already knew, Raven answered for me. "He knew everything."

Her broken whisper was like a dagger twisting in my heart. I should have said something. Anything. I should have done more than just sit here, but then...

I felt something dwelling inside her as her head rolled back and tasted something similar to tar flooding her. "Raven," I snapped a little too hastily.

She seemed to snap out of a trance when I said her name and blinked as she lowered her head to stare at Mira, finishing her fourth glass of wine and telling Mira goodbye.

As she walked away, I suddenly felt thirsty and lifted my mug of wine to my lips, drinking the remainder in one swallow. I wanted to chase after her, but I couldn't just yet. I couldn't let Mira see how desperate I was for her. It would be another thing she would use to control me, and nothing could

make a man go savage like the threat of losing the woman he loved.

Grabbing another orange, I leaned back in my chair with the full intention of eating this one. “Mira, I really would advise she not wander into the village alone. What if everyone crowds her? She looks just like Celestina. They’ll know who she is.”

“As they should,” Mira snapped. “They’ve been waiting as long as we have for their lost princess to return.”

“She’ll shift,” Cade said. I’d forgotten he was still here.

Mira seemed irritated as she looked at him, seemingly having forgotten it, too. “Shift?”

She didn’t yet know how deep Raven’s magic went.

Cade nodded. “No one will know it’s her.” He wasn’t giving out any more information, and I was grateful for that. The less Mira knew, the safer it would be for Raven.

Mira asked, “Does she do that often?”

I resisted the urge to laugh.

Cade nodded again, taking a bite of his eggs. “Any time she’s in an unfamiliar place. She knows how to take care of herself.”

Was he not there yesterday when she came out of the forest bloodied? She could take care of herself unless severely outnumbered by a group of men who wanted her all at once.

When I clenched my fists, Jeanine kicked me. Again. I contemplated chopping her foot off.

“That’s a relief,” Mira said. “How are you two acquainted?”

We all stared at Cade. If he told Mira what the two of them were to one another, it would jeopardize everything. Mira knew that Cade and Raven were close. She had informed me about him before I left for Seolia and only asked to ensure I followed through on making Raven fall in love with me. If he

were to tell her of their relationship, she would know I lied and continue not to allow me to see my family.

“Cade is on her court as one of her advisers,” John said in an attempt to protect me, which was surprising. Maybe he was doing it for Raven.

Cade shifted in his chair, smirking. “We’ve been best friends for fifteen years, only recently...”

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea for her to go alone,” I interrupted, not allowing Cade to finish that sentence. He glared at me, but I didn’t give a fuck. I wouldn’t mind punching him again. He shouldn’t even be allowed in this goddamn castle for what he did to her.

Mira released an exasperated sigh. “It is not up to you, Ezekiel. Raven is free to do as she wishes. It’s her kingdom.”

Cade tensed at that. Raven wanted nothing to do with Reales. I sensed it on her last night in the throne room. She wanted to return home, but her curiosity about Mira and her mother would be what kept her here. It was my responsibility to keep her safe while she was.

I said nothing else. Arguing with Mira was pointless. She always won. She had control over too much, and if she could win Raven to her side, she would have control over all four kingdoms.

I wasn’t sure how long Raven would take to change and go to the village, but I couldn’t rush out.

I finished an apple since I kept squishing all the oranges and another glass of wine before I nodded at Jeanine. “I’m going hunting. I’ll be gone for the afternoon.”

Mira looked up from her plate and nodded. John gave me an amused grin. Even though he’d been out of my life for quite some time, he could still tell when I was lying. “Bring us back something to eat,” Mira said.

My thoughts went to Raven, and I cleared my throat, dipping my chin slightly as I took my leave from the table. Now I would have to come back with meat. The only dish I wanted was probably already in town, realizing what I had

been trying to warn her about this entire time — Reales wasn't Seolia.



STANDING outside the dining room as Jeanine excused herself only moments later, I wasn't entirely in agreement with her confidence that we would find her. Raven had spent years perfecting how to move without being caught. If she knew me at all, and she did, she most likely anticipated that I would come looking for her and put extra effort into evading me.

"I'll take the west side, and you go east. We'll find her," Jeanine said as we exited the castle. "Meet me in the center of town in an hour if you haven't found her, and we'll devise a new plan." She shoved my arm. "And get ahold of yourself when we're all in the same room. You looked like you were about to eat her alive."

"I wanted to," I grumbled, thinking again of how her hips swayed in that dress — how her blood tasted each time I bit her, how I wanted to do that to her ribs. I stuck my hands in the pockets of my pants to adjust myself. It had only been a day, but it felt like a lifetime since I last touched her.

"The more obvious you are, the more at risk we'll all be."

"Does she suspect anything?"

She shook her head. "No, but she will if you don't calm down when you see her."

"Did you *see* her?"

She snorted. "I was drooling a little bit, but I have self-control."

I would never have self-control around that woman. My heart beat rapidly every time she was near me, and she had to feel it, too. Our heartbeats were the same. I may combust if I didn't have her again soon. I may never have her again.

I was frowning when Jeanine nudged me. "We will find her."

“How was your reunion with Mira?”

Her frown mirrored mine as she cast her eyes down to the ground. “I feel like I’m living a lie. She’s distant, and I feel like there are still things she’s not telling me. And I know I betrayed her, but I feel she betrayed me long ago.”

I gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We made a mistake, but it doesn’t make you a lesser person. We were hurting. It’s not an excuse, but what she’s doing to Raven is much worse. If you want to leave her and live elsewhere, I will not think any less of you. I will make sure you’re protected.”

I could sense her guilt as she looked at me. “Honestly, I thought about it. But, the more time I spent with Raven and in her kingdom, I realized that if I go anywhere, it’s there. I want to be her friend, even if she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” I sighed. “I don’t think Raven knows how to hate anyone. She thinks we fucked last night.”

She visibly recoiled. “Gods, why? I can’t believe we ever did. It’s gross now.”

“Thanks,” I muttered with a laugh. That was the boost of confidence I needed.

“I don’t know much about magic and even less about twin flames or mates, but what I remember from my little schooling on the subject is that when you find yours, your scents merge. And it’s a deterrent to everyone else, or should be. Might not be since no one here believes in it anymore.”

She had piqued my interest. “Merge?”

She shrugged, making a face like she was trying to think of how to explain it — because how could you explain anything banned from your kingdom, especially as it was suddenly starting to reappear? I felt none of us could prepare for what was slowly making its way back.

“Somehow, your scent and hers... they combine and form their own; if anyone is around you — me, for example — I can smell it. It would be like if you two had bathed together.”

I grinned at the thought, and she shoved my arm to refocus my attention on her. “I don’t know if others can tell, but I can since I’ve been around both of you and believe that magic exists. It’s very apparent that you two are fated to be together. I didn’t believe in that until I saw you two together at her ball. The pull you have to one another, it’s almost like you can see it.”

My heart swelled in my chest.

“I think that’s why Cade hurt her and is desperate to make it seem like they’re more than what they are.”

I frowned. “But she forgave him. He lied to her and hurt her. Why don’t I get that?”

The look she gave me was a mixture of annoyance and amusement. “Do you truly not know why?” The look of confusion on my face had her elaborating further, “She’s in love with you. It’s easier to forgive the person who doesn’t hold your heart in the palm of their hand.”

My lips parted at her explanation.

“Imagine this: she expects you to keep her heart pumping with even squeezes, but the weight of the secrets you hold feels more like you are crushing her most vital organ between your fingers.”

I was speechless. I wanted to protect her heart, not destroy it.

“You two will be okay,” she said gently. “It may take time, but you’ll find a way through.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, overcome with gratitude. But then I smiled. “Do we smell good?”

She wrinkled her nose as she shook her head. I laughed loudly, nudging her shoulder.

CHAPTER FOUR



ZEKE

We paused once we reached the stone street that led into town. Before Rudolf became ill, this street was flooded with vendors daily — just like Seolia was during the Festival of Dreams. Now, everyone was too afraid of having their goods stolen. The grass was growing over the road, and the once plentiful town looked abandoned, except for the rows of gray and black buildings ahead.

Throwing my hood over my head, I raised a thin piece of fabric over my mouth and nose while Jeanine did the same. We were both easily recognized, and I didn't want to be approached by anyone. I couldn't fix their problems, even with my title. All that responsibility fell to Mira, who didn't want anything fixed. She wanted to maintain control over her army of heathens while our town suffered for it.

“One hour,” Jeanine repeated.

I nodded as we split apart. I hadn't been here since I left for Seolia over three months ago, and what I saw would have broken my heart if it wasn't already. More shops had boarded up since I left, and the ones that had remained open had steel bars on the windows. Townsfolk were walking around, but no one was smiling or laughing. I missed the sounds of Seolia. I missed Raven's giggles.

The roofs of the buildings were decaying and cracking, which meant there would be leaks from storms causing severe

damage in the places brave enough to remain open. It was ironic that Raven felt nothing like a leader, yet Seolia was maintained and loved by its queen.

She made me want to be better. Maybe it was possible to send a crew to fix our buildings without Mira finding out. I had enough bodies in the army to do so.

Peeking into a bookstore, I hoped maybe she was perusing but saw no sign of her. I saw no sign of her anywhere. She was in none of the buildings, nowhere on the streets. Raven never sought out material things for herself, which didn't leave many places for her to wander into here.

Where'd you go, baby?



AFTER HALF AN HOUR of searching for her, I grew more panicked. There weren't many places to explore.

Explore. She wanted to explore.

Making a sharp right turn, I jogged down a road that had been left long ago. She had a love for abandoned things like I did. The road was filtered with people who were there because of Mira. They all sneered at me as I jogged past, but I ignored them and kept my eyes open for any place she'd want to search.

And then it hit me.

I turned down a small alleyway and ran between two buildings overrun with moss, freezing as I spotted her across the road. She was shifted into Frost and in that devastating jumpsuit of hers, staring up at our abandoned orphanage.

It was a large building with a rotting porch and a small balcony that jutted out from the middle floor's window. Rudolf had it built and opened not long after Leonidas took her. Raven didn't even belong to him, but I had a sinking feeling that he was hopeful she'd cross the threshold one day. It was closed once Mira declared herself queen before he had even passed. She left it to fall apart and did nothing to fix it.

Raven took a step closer. I wanted to stop her. I didn't know who may be lurking inside, but I owed it to her to let her explore where she came from.

The boarded-up doors frustrated her, and she clenched her fists at her sides as she ascended the rickety porch. I cocked my head as she looked around, watching as she shifted into Blaze and practically panting at the sight of her. She burned through the wood on the door with her hands until it was nothing but ashes at her feet and shifted back into Frost. I was grateful she respected my plea not to walk around as Blaze. That made me hopeful that she still cared about how I felt.

After waiting for her to disappear inside, I jogged across the street and quietly up the porch. Peering inside just as she walked up a set of stairs, I smiled as her fingertips gently glided along the railing. She was so soft, so delicate, even in her current state of devastation.

I waited until I heard her footsteps on the floor above me before taking the steps two at a time until I could kneel on the top step. She disappeared into one of the nurseries as I leaned over to look around the wall.

I used to come here as a kid to deliver milk to the children. There weren't many, but I would play with them while my mother talked to the nurses. She always wanted to provide anything they may have needed.

Just like my love did for everyone she came across.

Following her down the hall, I stood beside the door while she slowly walked toward a cradle. It reached her waist, and she had to lift her toes to bend over it. I couldn't help but smile. We talked about having tiny little demons of our own just days ago. It was an odd and unfamiliar feeling, but I desperately wanted that for us. I wanted to claim her in every way, even if it meant coating her womb to create new life — after I talked her into forgiving me and kissing away the pain I had created for her.

I felt I might be on my knees for a while.

Not that I minded.

When she straightened, she was staring at a blanket in her hands. My brow wrinkled as I watched her, pushing into her mind. She was recalling a memory of staring at a similar blanket in her room at Isla's cottage. It looked like the blanket from the basket she was left in.

Her blanket had been from Reales, and she never knew.

When I pulled out of her mind, her head snapped up. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Maybe I could become invisible like this.

“What happened to them?”

I sighed and moved from behind the wall, leaning against the doorframe. “I'm not sure.”

Her shoulders sagged. That wasn't the answer she wanted. She turned to face me, her fingers gripping the edge of the cradle. “Why did it close?”

How could I answer that without giving all of it away? “It wasn't high on Mira's list of priorities.” I gave her a slight shrug. “I know that's not what you want to hear.”

Her arms crossed over her chest after she dropped the blanket back into the cradle. “You have a title. Why didn't you do anything?”

I had no answer that would please her. “It's complicated.” I could have fought harder instead of letting our town fall apart, but Mira dangled my family in front of me. I didn't have the strength to test that.

“Complicated,” she repeated in a mutter, rolling her eyes. “Is anything about you not complicated?”

She pushed past me, and I wrapped my fingers around her wrist. She froze but didn't turn. “Baby, please talk to me,” I pleaded with her gently.

“I have nothing to say,” she whispered.

I nodded, slowly pulling her closer to me. “Then let me touch you, please. Just for a moment.”

She didn't stop me as I finished closing the space between us. I feared spooking her, so I kept my touches on her light.

Placing my hands on her arms, I leaned down and rested my forehead against hers. "I love you," I whispered, closing my eyes as I drew in the breath she released. "I am so in love with you, Raven. Be angry, but please know that."

Her eyes closed; her body was completely still. I would stand here all day with her if she'd let me. But she still felt cold, and her emotions were buried. I couldn't tell what she was feeling.

She sighed into me and relaxed just enough to allow me to brush my lips against hers. Energy skyrocketed through me, bringing me back to life. And she let me do it again, lingering there for a second longer.

Let me back in, I begged silently.

A flicker of warmth. Like a match trying to light a candle.

She was trying to come back to me.

I cradled her neck with my hand and deepened the kiss slightly, savoring the seconds she gave, but even her skin was cold. It was unsettling after spending months craving her warmth.

Stay with me, Raven.

And then, as quick as she came, she was gone.

Jerking her head back, she shook free of my grip. "I can't do this," she cried softly.

I watched as she disappeared down the stairs, my hands and lips tingling from where she'd just been. I missed her rage. I would have taken anything over the deadened state she had put herself in.

I glanced once more at the empty nursery before I followed her down the stairs, but as I looked around each room, she was nowhere. Fuck, how had she done that so fast?

Walking out to the porch, I looked around. All that surrounded us were empty buildings. She could have ducked

into any of them. “Where are you, little mouse?” I descended the porch and looked both ways down the road before heading back in the direction I came. “I want to devour you.”

As I came upon a burning barrel, two people advanced on it quickly and stuck their hands over the fire to warm them. Down another alleyway was a second burning barrel and then a third. She was lighting them to keep people from freezing.

Which meant she was...

Fuck. Blaze.

Hair on the back of my neck stood, spotting her talking to a group of people, drawing the attention of multiple men who gawked at her. She was bent down, talking to a small child. I took anxiety-filled steps closer to her, straining my ears to hear what they were saying.

Raven reached down into her boot and produced a small coin pouch, dumping its contents into the little child’s hands. My love. My heart swelled so large that I worried it might burst. She always cared for people, even though she felt that no one ever cared for her.

The small child and her mother hugged Raven, and for the first time since yesterday morning, I saw her smile — though it wasn’t the warm one she usually had when interacting with people. This one was sorrowful.

And as she stood, two men decided to approach her bravely. She took a small step backward, politely declining whatever they were saying to her. I didn’t give it enough time to care before I was next to her and shoving her behind me. One man rolled his neck while the other cracked his knuckles, looking back at her behind me. “Leave,” I said lowly, shaking my head.

“You look familiar,” one of them drawled, cocking his head. “Take off your mask.”

I looked familiar because I had entered their minds at one point, but I had done it to so many men that I couldn’t recall what these two were afraid of losing, which left me with nothing to threaten them with.

“He said leave,” Raven spoke up behind me, causing me to sigh. “Look at him. He can kick your ass.”

Goddamnit, Raven. I was not in the mood for a brawl right now.

“Come with us,” one of them replied, looking at her again. “I bet we can make that pretty little mouth of yours say our names and forget all about him.”

Raven snorted. “Doubtful. Again, look at him.”

I grinned. “Lady said ‘no’, fellas. Walk away.”

Only seconds passed by before Raven came up from behind me and lit her palms, causing them to stumble back, one of them falling to the ground. “He said walk away.”

She extinguished her palms and disappeared behind me again as I watched them dart down the opposite road, shaking my head. “I told you not to walk around as Blaze.”

When she didn’t answer, I turned just in time to see her duck into another building.

Sighing, I followed her in. I knew every single one of these buildings inside and out. This particular one was once one of my favorite taverns, and it still bothered me that it closed down. “My love,” I shouted, slowly walking room to room. “Hunting is what I do.” Her footsteps were quiet, but she was close. “And you are my favorite thing to catch.”

“I am not a lost little doe,” she replied, and I chased her voice around a corner. “I don’t need saving.”

I growled at the empty room. “You think I want to save you, little mouse?” I turned the corner into another one. “When I catch you, you’ll be screaming.”

“You’re going the wrong way,” she taunted.

“Raven,” I bit out, stepping into a back room that held overstock liquor. I could smell her. A movement of blonde hair had me turning another corner quickly to see that she was climbing a steel ladder. Where did she think she was going to go from the roof?

I charged after her and climbed up, skipping every other step and reaching the roof right as she jumped to another. My jaw fell open as I watched her leap across, not having time to worry about her falling before she landed squarely on her feet. She ran across that roof and jumped again.

I stood still, gawking at her.

She was now two buildings over and barely spared me a glance over her shoulder before descending another ladder down the side of the building and disappearing between the two.

This woman was made for me.

I practically slid down the ladder and quickly made my way through the tavern, jogging to the alleyway where I saw her drop and groaning that she was already gone.

She was spritely — like an elf.

It had been way over an hour since I started looking for her. She was going to run me ragged, but I couldn't leave her here alone.

Running toward the center of town, I cocked an eyebrow as Jeanine waved her arms like a maniac. "What?"

She pointed to the palace. "She just passed by here. I was about to follow her when I saw you."

"I've been following her for an hour. She ditched me." She flirted with me, leaving me standing there like the obsessed man I was. I was a little proud of her but also wanted to punish her in the dirtiest way possible. "Let's go then."



JOHN CAME out from behind one of the smaller stone walls as we approached the palace and waved us down. I wasn't in the mood for a conversation, but his concern had me stopping. "Where is she?"

He tilted his head toward the wall between us and the forest.

Goddamnit, Raven.

He called my name as I stepped toward the wall, garnering a frustrated growl from me as I turned. “I need to go to her.”

“You’re underestimating her,” he said.

An impatient sigh. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know her well enough—”

My snarl was low.

“*Yet*,” he sighed, irritated with me already. “To realize that she will stop at nothing to know who she is — all she’s done her entire life is attempt to figure out where she came from.”

I looked at the wall and back to John. “The forest will give her no answers.”

“Being here is what she has been seeking. She won’t stop searching until she’s satisfied. She’s desperate to know her mother, Zeke.”

I motioned toward the wall, my voice raising the more frustrated I grew. “Nothing about Celestina is in there!”

“She follows her instincts,” John argued. “This is the second time she’s disappeared in there. There has to be a reason.”

Jeanine disappeared inside one of our smaller armories, reappearing with two bows and two quivers full of arrows. She tossed me my set, and we strapped them to our bodies.

“Cade ran in after her,” John sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I tried to stop him.”

“Fuck,” I spat. “Does he ever leave her alone?” He gave me an amused grin, and I rolled my eyes. “She doesn’t want me to leave her alone, despite what she says. She wanted space away from him.”

“I’ll worry about Cade. You find her,” Jeanine said.

I nodded as we walked to the wall. “Remember to get out by nightfall, whether you have him or not.”

She pushed through one of our hidden doors to cross the border into the forest.

“I won’t leave until I find her. You have to make Cade leave if you find him without her.”

“He’s not going to.”

She was right. He almost lost her yesterday and wouldn’t want to leave without her. “Try. I’ll go south, and you check east. She went west yesterday, and I don’t think she’ll go the same way twice. Cade is unarmed, and though I want him out of her life, she doesn’t. Find him quickly.”

She didn’t acknowledge me as she split off, heading east. I was grateful for the days she had insisted on training with me and my soldiers. She’d picked up invaluable lessons, and I would’ve had to leave Cade to fend for himself if it wasn’t for her willingness to help. Not that I would’ve minded leaving him out here to wander alone. It would’ve eliminated one of my problems.

Snapping twigs under my feet gave me hope of heading in the right direction. I never had trouble tracking someone in my life, but Raven was a different story. She was proving to be quite wily and the perfect match for me.

Though, annoyance was nestling inside at the back of my neck. Traipsing alone through the village was one thing, but I thought yesterday would’ve been a big enough lesson for her that this forest was dangerous. Most of my soldiers were men found within these trees who’d traveled here from other countries. A few didn’t want to cause trouble, and I allowed them to move into our town, but most were those who’d heard that Reales no longer had rules and came here looking for a fight.

I would always be more than happy to oblige, except for when it came to Raven’s life.

The sun hit the trees, signaling afternoon. Leaves were attempting to sprout from branches to bring in spring, but even the earth refused to flourish here anymore.

What was she hoping to find here? I spent many nights walking through this forest to satisfy my thirst for life. All this forest contained were trees overgrown by moss and cliffs along the water's edge, surrounded by jagged rocks.

There was nothing here for her.



MILES INTO THE TREES, and she would have to be jogging for me not to have found her yet. My strides were double the length of hers. And to avoid drawing attention, I couldn't shout for her.

Not that she would answer if I did. Stubborn little witch.

In the distance, the horridly black and threatening cliffs stood erect. Sharp edges of rock jutted out, creating tiny ledges that would sometimes break off if you tried to climb, nearly welcoming death.

When I couldn't find anyone to kill at night, climbing each cliff brought me surges of adrenaline and a sense of invincibility.

I had dodged death many times.

The choppy waves of the sea behind the cliffs were loud and jarring. The ocean breeze was the only welcoming force, and as I drew closer, that was when I felt her. She had followed the draft here, or maybe, the breeze had brought me to her.

A deep tug in my gut had goosebumps rising across my skin. That, and water as it started to fall from the sky. Excellent — rain was what I didn't need while searching for her.

My eyes roved over the length of the cliffs, and I heard uneven little breaths right as I was about to head west. And my heart stopped. Surely she wasn't attempting to climb these mass stones of death.

But John was right — I underestimated her desperation to find *something*.

Like a mist cloaked in shadow, blending well into the dark depths of the rock, she was climbing.

I stood underneath her and blinked as the raindrops hit my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. Leaning my shoulder against the cliff, I shouted to her, “Where are you going, baby?”

It was impressive how far she had reached in such a short time. She had shifted back into herself, and her long hair blew wildly in the breeze. She didn’t spare me a glance, or a glare, as she took another step, the wind blowing the raindrops enough to not wholly soak her.

When she didn’t answer, I sighed. “You know I’m going to come up there, right?”

She laughed, but it was one of annoyance, and called back with a bite in her tone, “Didn’t I tell you to leave me alone?”

I grinned. Fuck, I loved her. “Didn’t *I* tell you not to come in here?” I stepped back and grabbed one of the small ledges above me. “You’re not going to find anything up there. I’ve climbed all of these cliffs.” She remained silent and was getting farther away from me. “Baby, please come down. I’m tired.”

“It’s not my fault you’re so fucking old,” she snapped.

I chuckled as I stepped on the rock and began to scale with her. She groaned as she glanced down at me closing in on her. I was more practiced at this than her — not that the rain was helping.

When she disappeared over the top, I muttered a curse word.

“What the fuck are you doing? It’s raining.”

“No shit,” I muttered, glancing down as I paused my climb. Jeanine had found Cade, and they were both staring at me. “Our dear Raven has decided that she must climb a cliff,” I shouted back to her while resuming my climb.

Sweat beaded on my temple. Maybe I was getting too old for this shit. Or perhaps it was because Raven had boundless energy, which was fine when it came to sating our desire for one another, but not when I had to chase her ass across my kingdom.

“Raven!” Cade shouted.

I rolled my eyes. If she didn’t listen to me, she wouldn’t listen to him. I halted my climb when he tried it again and glared down at him. “Could you not do that? I’d rather not draw attention. Go back to the castle.”

“Like hell,” he responded.

“So well-spoken,” I mumbled, turning my attention back to the cliff. “It’s a wonder she chose me.” Focusing my energy, I quickly scaled the last ten feet and groaned as I hoisted myself over the edge.

Raven stood at the opposite edge, looking down into the water below.

“Raven, don’t do what I know you’re thinking of doing.” I took a step toward her. “There’s nothing down there, baby. It’s just water.”

Another step toward her, and her fists clenched at her sides. My heart rate picked up as she took a small step closer to the edge. “Look at me, Raven. That’s all I ask.”

Hesitation, but then she turned slowly. As her eyes met mine, my stomach tightened at her deadened, dark stare. Her eyes were empty and bloodshot. The idea of death no longer frightened her. She was so cold, so distant. “Please don’t jump, baby. You’re not going to find what you’re looking for down there.”

“You have no idea what I’m looking for.” Even her voice seemed unrecognizable.

“You’re right,” I told her gently, taking another step. “But I know that if you jump, I will have to follow you over.” I sensed absolutely no emotion in her. The events of the last three months had wrecked her. She was a shell of herself. “I love you,” I whispered, but there was still nothing brimming at

her surface. Not a flicker. I felt as if I were dying with her. “Baby,” I said in the low voice I knew she loved. “Let me take you home.”

I realized I had said the wrong thing as soon as her eyes narrowed on mine. Nowhere felt like home to her, and I just reminded her of that.

She whipped around, and I shook my head, advancing on her quickly. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as she bent.

And jumped.

CHAPTER FIVE



RAVEN

I made it half a foot off the ground before his arms wrapped around my waist. Instead of falling forward, I fell backward. The breath knocked out of me as we landed on the cliff, and I coughed as I rolled out of his arms, exerting a frustrated scream.

Standing quickly, I stomped a few paces away from him before I spun around. He was still on the ground and leaning back on his palms while his chest heaved, breathless from catching me.

“Why can’t you take a hint?!” I shouted.

All he did was tilt his head back toward the sky, inhaling sharp breaths.

“Why are you here?”

He started to laugh, and I swore I would kill him one day.

Shaking his head, he dipped his chin back down to me. “Why am I here?”

I threw my arms up in the air, waiting for an answer.

“I’m here,” he began, standing and closing the space between us. “Because you, you infuriating little witch, have completely unraveled me.” He ran a hand through his hair as rain pelted down on us. “I am here because I am so wildly in love with you that I am willing to risk my own life to make

sure you don't do something idiotic like jump off a fucking cliff, Raven."

I scoffed, furiously shaking my head. "I did not ask you to be my knight in fucking armor. I asked you to leave me alone. I told you I was done. Why was it so easy to get rid of you three months ago, but now you follow me around like a lost child?"

"Because I *am* without you," he shouted back at me. "I am lost; I am in a clouded state knowing that you hate me, Raven." He cursed loudly as the rain fell harder, thoroughly soaking us. "What did you expect to find down there, huh?"

I rolled my eyes, turning away from him.

"There's nothing but rock. We both would have died. If you missed the rock, there's no land around for miles. You would have drowned."

"Then I would have drowned!" I yelled, turning back around and shoving at his chest. "You don't get to control what I do anymore!"

He tried to reach for me, but I shoved his hands away. He glowered at me. "You have an entire goddamn kingdom waiting for you, and you're willing to risk your life for what? What are you so desperately seeking?" He looked livid but worried. "Tell me, Raven. Tell me what you need, and I'll give it to you."

My laugh was one of ire. "You have no idea, do you? You have no clue what it's like living your entire life in secret, hidden in the shadows in fear that you'll be murdered for what you are. You haven't spent twenty-five fucking years wanting to know who you are, where you came from, but I have."

I couldn't tell if it was raindrops or tears falling down my cheeks. "And then you come along and finally give my mind a break from my constant need for answers. And then you fucking disappear and pop back up like a daisy with these wild claims of love and all my life's answers, and I'm supposed to forgive you?! You buried yourself so deep in every part of me just to be like everyone else."

His mouth thinned into a hard line. “You have no fucking idea what you’re talking about, Raven.”

“I needed you!” I cried in agony. “I needed you, but you wouldn’t tell me anything. I have no fucking clue about anything because no one ever does. You all look at me like a fragile, broken human when I could kill all of you with a snap of my fingers.” Except for him, because the universe decided to punish me with the man I wanted nothing more than to be with but couldn’t be. “I needed you,” I repeated, peeling hair from my face as the wind and rain whipped it around. “I begged you to let me in.”

“Raven, you have me.” He took a step closer. “You have me. Mind, body, soul, whatever the fuck you want from me, I am here. I am yours.”

“I needed you,” I repeated in a whisper. “You promised me, Zeke. You promised you would never leave, and you walked away. You left me, and I had to walk into that room alone.”

“Raven.” He looked heartsick. “I wish I could take it back; you have no idea how much I hate myself for leaving you.”

I shrugged. “Which time? Which time do you regret leaving me? Because there’s a few.”

“Raven,” he growled.

“I want you to realize that I am finished with you. We’re done.”

“No,” he replied bluntly.

I glared. “No?”

Shaking his head, he wrapped his arms tightly around my waist while looking down at me. Fuck me; why did he have to look like this in the rain? “No. You will not shake me off. You can say all these things to me and make me feel like you don’t love me anymore, which is bullshit, but I am not going anywhere. We are going to have our future, Raven. Our tiny little demons.” Fisting my hair in his hand, he tugged my chin back. “Fight me all you want, but this is exactly how it will end.”

Somewhere deep in my heart, that tugged on something, but it was replaced by the darkness quickly. “I hate you,” I seethed.

“Fucking hate me then,” he snarled, his voice coarse and thick.

The rain was cold, but when chills rattled my bones, it was purely because of how he spoke to me — and when his lips crashed against mine, I parted mine for his tongue to push through.

Let him in, Raven, I pleaded with myself.

Instead, my fingers wrapped around one of the arrows in his quiver, and when I had one, I shoved him off and dragged the arrowhead across my palm. My flesh ripped apart, and he snatched the arrow from me, staring at me like I was insane. But then he looked down at my hand and noticed my deep red blood mixing with something thick. Black.

His eyes widened as he slowly brought them back up to mine.

“That nightmare I had when we crossed this godforsaken place has done this to me. It’s becoming me. Or I’m becoming it.” My voice was low as I watched the black muck pour out of my hand, so thick that even the raindrops couldn’t wash it away. “The girl you fell in love with is disappearing. I feel nothing.” I curled my fingers over the cut. “For anything or anyone.”

I walked to the cliff’s edge and lowered, rolling to my stomach and beginning a slippery descent down the ridge.

Cade came to me first, noticing my hand and looking at me. I said nothing about it, even as Jeanine stared at me. “You have my permission to fuck him to make him forget about me,” I mumbled.

I left them standing there as I walked back through the forest toward the castle. Cade remained quiet behind me, and I offered him no words of my own. Neither of us was armed, but I didn’t care anymore. Between the two of us, we would be fine. But then I heard footsteps behind me and knew Jeanine

and Zeke had caught up. I didn't need an entire brigade following me around the kingdom every time I decided to go out. Maybe I could tell Mira, and she would make them stop.

Feeling for the hidden door on the wall, I pushed it open and walked through. Zeke called out to me, but I didn't look back and kept walking until I entered the back of the castle.

He wanted something from me that I couldn't give him. I felt nothing but desolation. I was empty. He needed to be with someone like Jeanine who could love him. Satisfy him. Give him what he deserved, which wasn't me and my deep-rooted issues. It wasn't the responsibility of figuring out what this magic was inside of me. I couldn't risk hurting him if it got out of control. He needed someone deserving of his dedication, his love.

That wasn't me anymore.



CLIMBING stairs leading to my hallway, I wondered how much Cade had heard from my shouting at the top of the cliff. I'd guessed by now he had figured out that Zeke and I were more than... whatever we were to one another before the revelations.

After he followed me inside the room, I turned around. We needed to talk about it, sever the expectation he still had of me eventually returning to him. But instead, his hands immediately cupped around my neck, and he kissed me. Shoving him off, I started to shake my head, but his lips were quickly on mine again, begging me to change my mind. "Cade," I mumbled, jerking my head back. "I can't."

His eyes darkened on me unkindly, and it was a look I had hoped never to see again. "Because of him?"

"Because of me."

Sighing through his nose, he kissed me again and pushed me backward toward the bed. My palms found his chest to try and stop him, but he wouldn't relent. I wished to feel

something. Lust. Guilt. I would have taken a combination of the two, but there was nothing. And if I was being frank, had I ever been lustful for Cade? After meeting Zeke, any time Cade touched me, I wanted another man. I couldn't continue lying to myself or him.

From the first moment I saw Zeke, I belonged to him.

As his hand moved to the back of my head to keep me pressed against him, panic seized my gut. I didn't want this. I didn't want him. And I certainly did not want him to die if Zeke were to bust in here.

Zeke would not be able to control his urges any longer.

Would I ever make anyone's life easy?

Would mine ever be?

Heat flared inside of me, and I shoved at him again, trying to prevent myself from burning him.

He held me tightly against him. "I've been patient, Raven."

I tried to wriggle free of his grip. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"You wanted space. I gave you space." He kissed me again and took my bottom lip between his teeth.

"Thefuck," I managed to get out, attempting to pry my lip away.

You know you have the ability to burn people, I remembered Zeke saying to me at the dock in Seolia.

I brought heat to one hand and stuck it against Cade's throat, only warming it enough to startle him. He jerked his head back and stared at me. "Did you just... try to burn me?"

"Let me go, Cade."

"You just tried to burn me," he repeated, shock all over him.

"I didn't try to burn you. I needed your attention."

He grinned, leaning in again slowly. “You have my attention.”

I turned my head, and he let out a frustrated sigh, releasing me. I typically would have given into him so he wouldn't feel any pain, but I couldn't anymore. And I would not be forced to try.

“Raven, I want you.”

That's too damn bad, was what I wanted to say, but instead, I slightly shook my head.

He gave me a hard stare in return. “I can't stay with you.”

My expression was a mixture of disbelief and disgust. “You can't stay with me because I won't fuck you?”

“I can't stay with you because I'm in love with you, Raven.”

I stared at him. This seemed like the opposite of love.

“And you're torn between him and me.”

I wasn't torn. It took a week away from Cade to realize that our relationship had reached a point of no return — that his obsession with me had turned into something more dangerous. The only danger I wanted was my unattainable passion for another man, who I couldn't stand being around right now.

“I'm going to return home. There's a ship leaving for Seolia tonight.”

He would be disappointed if he was waiting for me to beg him to stay. More than anything, I was disgusted by what had just transpired between us. I had thought that maybe after he bruised me in Seolia, he had realized that we were an unhealthy addiction. Perhaps, we could return to being best friends because it was where we were most potent. I certainly did not think he would try and force himself on me.

Wrapping his arms around my body, he frowned as I didn't return the embrace. I was shocked that he would leave me here after promising for years to protect me. “I promise I won't find

anyone else.” Like I cared about that. “I think you just need time.”

Time for what? I didn’t feel anything. It was only going to add to my emptiness.

“I love you. I always will.”

“I love you,” I replied dryly. And maybe somewhere in my lifeless heart, I still did. Perhaps I would come to regret letting him go.

Tilting my chin up to look at him, he brushed his lips softly against mine. I wondered if I could light my lips on fire. It was something I hadn’t tried before. “Our soldiers will stay here, though I don’t feel you’ll need them. You have John, and Mira seems delighted that you’re here. I doubt she’d let any harm come to you.”

All I did was nod. My tongue felt heavy from his decision to abandon me here.

Pressing his forehead against mine, he kissed the tip of my nose. “Come home and be mine again.” I wanted him to release me. “Say something. Please.”

I gave him a slight shrug and shook free of his grip. “Have a safe trip.” I walked to the door and pulled it open, standing to the side and gesturing for him to leave. He sighed, but I couldn’t look at him. I couldn’t meet his eyes. Between this and finding out that he’d held my identity a secret for fifteen years, a new wave of betrayal was fresh between us.

When he kissed my temple, I turned my head away. He hesitated for a moment before he walked out the door. I shut the door behind him before leaning against the wall and burying my face in my hands. For the first time since I took the throne, I no longer had Cade by my side.

I needed to get out of this soaked jumpsuit. The leather was making it nearly impossible to move. I dragged it over my body, trying to dry my dampened skin with one of the pink quilts on my bed.

He left me. He left me here, and it was disappointing that I wasn’t shocked. He had proven not to be the person I thought

he was for most of my life.

I grumbled gibberish and pulled a shirt over my head as I thought of the damage this would cause to our friendship before there was a knock on my door. I hopped across the room as I slid my legs into a pair of leather tights, wondering if he had changed his mind.

Mira was standing on the other side of the door, smiling at me. “I just passed Cade.”

I nodded, looking behind her down the hallway. “He’s returning to Seolia. We’re planning on building more cottages this spring, and he needs to help Luisa. She’s my other adviser.”

It wasn’t a lie. We planned to build more since people kept seeking refuge in my tiny kingdom.

She held out her hand. “I would like to show you something.”

I glanced down at my way-too-comfortable clothes.

She clicked her tongue. “You’re dressed perfectly for where I’m taking you.”

I lifted an eyebrow as I quickly slid my feet into canvas boots and took her hand, allowing her to pull me out into the hallway.

“I want to show you one of the responsibilities Ezekiel has.”

I glanced at her, not particularly in the mood to see him. And I was partially worried that Jeanine had taken me up on my offer to seduce him.

“You don’t have to marry for love, Raven. I can tell there’s tension between the two of you.”

“I do love him,” I blurted without thinking, catching myself off-guard. I wasn’t sure what compelled me to say that.

Clearing my throat, I met her gaze with a sad smile. “I do love him. I’m just upset with him right now. He didn’t tell me who I was or that he knew me.”

“In his defense, because I am quite fond of our dear Ezekiel, he didn’t know who you were before leaving. John wanted it to be a surprise.” She squeezed my hand. “I do hope you can forgive him. You two are quite handsome together.”

I sighed softly, my eyes falling to the floor as I remembered everything Zeke had told me on the ship. I was a mission. He was sent to Seolia to bring me back to Reales. I didn’t want to jeopardize him if Mira were to believe he didn’t complete his task. He got me here, but I seemingly hated him, and maybe we were supposed to be in love. Despite my irritation toward him, I needed to keep him safe.

I plastered on a big smile. “I’m sure I will. He’s very charming.”

Nothing further was said about it, and a silence drew out between us as we walked down the dark corridors until finally, and with a tiny voice, I asked, “Why did you wait so long to find me?”

She frowned, staring straight ahead. “I didn’t want there to be any pushback from my father. And he was so ill that I didn’t want his heart to break to know that you were right across the channel, and he never knew. He loved our mother very much. He spent every day hoping you’d return.”

I nodded, though I didn’t understand why there would have been any pushback. “Did he know that I wasn’t his?”

“No,” she replied quietly. “I do regret it.” She looked at me. “I would have loved to know you. You were a beautiful baby. Rarely cried, and if you did, you would stop as soon as I picked you up. We could have been great friends.” Her smile seemed genuine, so I returned it with one of my own.



WHEN WE EXITED THE CASTLE, she led me toward a high tower. I tilted my head backward as it seemed to stretch higher the closer we got. “Where are you taking me?”

She squeezed my hand. “Ezekiel loves his kingdom very much and is desperate to protect it.” She pulled open a large steel door. Were all the buildings here so heavily guarded? “Any time we have crime come through, we are quick to eliminate it.”

I smiled. I was, too.

We entered a large, unsettling room. It was brown, which made me blink. I had become so used to the gray palette of this place that seeing another color besides pink was jarring.

Nothing but a chair sat in the middle, and a sword perched against a wall. I waved a hand in front of my face as dirt from the floor surrounded us from our steps.

When I heard someone come in behind us, I turned my head. Zeke was frozen in place as he stared at me. He had changed since chasing me up the cliff and was in loose black pants and a fitted black shirt, the garment slack on his chest but clinging to his arms. He looked... different.

Deadly, almost.

The room seemed to mold around him, everything around him appearing smaller and dull in comparison. This was not the man I had fallen in love with — this was the one he had warned me about.

“Ezekiel, I want to show Raven how well we take care of our kingdom and how you eliminate any threats that come through.”

Zeke’s eyes never left mine, which seemed to turn black the longer he stared.

His shadows, I realized. And he looked absolutely sick.

“Come, Ezekiel.”

He released a deep sigh from his nose while walking around us and to a door on the far side of this lifeless room, banging his fist against it once. It rattled and echoed off the emptiness.

Mira dropped my hand, and I hurried back until my back hit the wall. It was textured and rough, adding to my

discomfort of being here. My fear was causing my fury to try and push through the bleakness.

He looked at me. *You're safe.*

My eyes snapped to his.

Baby, I will not let anything hurt you.

Why was he telling me this? The hairs on the back of my neck stood, the unfamiliar tug in my stomach swirling. He took a step toward me, sensing my unease. My heart was racing, and instead of turning and leaving, I stepped toward the safest place I'd ever known.

Him.

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me to him and blocked me from whatever I was about to witness. *I love you.* He glanced over his shoulder at me. *Even as my little raggedy doll.*

I caught myself grinning, pulling at my baggy shirt. His voice in my head was doing wonders to calm me — much more than I was willing to admit to him yet.

Did you purposely wear my shirt to tease me? Because it's working.

I looked down at the shirt I had grabbed in haste and realized that the one he had worn on the ship somehow ended up in my trunk. My grin widened as I caught his gaze, shrugging once. He didn't seem to care that Mira was in the room or that we were still in a fight as he turned around and ran his hand down my hair. "Raven," he whispered.

I jumped at the sound of the door opening, my grin faltering. I peeked around him as he turned again, watching as a guard yanked someone with him through the door with a bag over their head. When the steeled monster dropped the person in the chair and pulled the bag off, my eyes settled on the face of a man whose eyes were closed, his skin darkened by bruises and cuts.

I looked up at Zeke again, who seemed distressed. It was apparent that he didn't want me here. As I opened my mouth to say something, it felt dry, and I choked it back.

Mira's fingers crossed and folded over her waist. "Rolen, you have been charged with treason and stated it was untrue."

Rolen nodded to Mira's statement as his eyes fluttered open. I stayed hidden in Zeke's shadow as she beckoned him forward with her finger. I didn't know what possessed me to do it, but I gripped his shirt between my fingers to prevent him from going to her.

He glanced back at me and kissed the top of my head, gently uncurling my fingers from his shirt. "I love you," he whispered against my hair, just loud enough for me to hear.

I grabbed his wrist. "No," I whispered, my teeth clenched.

Mira was watching us with her head tilted slightly.

Zeke turned to face me fully then and placed his palm on my cheek. "I love you," he repeated. "Let me go, Raven."

My lips parted at his request. That wasn't something I had ever expected to hear from him, and hot tears flooded my eyes. And even through my anger and confusion about him, I never wanted him to say that to me.

He frowned, sensing my shock, and was about to say something else when Mira spoke up. "Little Bird, he needs to protect our kingdom."

Releasing his wrist, I took a step away from him, wrapping my arms around my waist and averting my eyes from his. After a few seconds of staring at me, he sighed and turned away.

As he came into the light, Rolen's eyes widened, and he straightened in his chair, shaking his head.

This man was severely frightened of Zeke.

Rolen's eyes squeezed shut as Zeke shuffled through his memories. "Conspiring against the crown," Zeke said with a strained voice.

Mira clicked her tongue and shook her head as Rolen began to cry, tears falling across the cuts in his skin. "That's such a shame, Rolen."

I didn't want to watch. I knew what would happen, yet I couldn't look away. Mira nodded at Zeke, and I braced, backing away again until I was against the wall. I grasped at the stone behind me as Zeke grabbed the sword from the wall, avoiding my gaze.

His knuckles were white around the grip of his sword, his veins contracting as he lifted it with ease. Rolen's face twisted as Zeke returned to him, spinning the blade in his hand.

Like art unfolding in real time, Zeke lifted the heavy blade and dragged it through the air in a fluid, swift moment, severing Rolen's head from his body.

Exhaling a breath on impact, I blinked rapidly as guards returned to carry the body away. Mira kicked the head left behind toward the door.

Zeke's chest was heaving while he stared at the blood coating his sword. I knew what he was feeling.

I understood it.

Alive. Powerful. Hungry. His darkness had been fed.

And as he slowly turned his head toward me, his eyes boring into mine, it was almost as if we could see our shadowed souls crawling to one another.

I heard someone else dragged in, but I couldn't look anywhere but at him.

"You were charged with disturbing the peace," Mira said.

Zeke's eyes remained on mine while he searched the prisoner's mind. I was watching this devastating man perform his craft, and I was hooked. I wanted to see him relish his prowess. I was envious of the blood on his hands — of the blood dripping down the blade of his sword.

And he knew it.

"He beat his wife. Left her for dead." Zeke's tone was deadly, his eyes traveling down to my shoulders. Throwing his sword to the ground, he broke our stare and turned to the man whose face I still hadn't looked at yet. Zeke rolled his neck before wrapping his fingers around the man's throat.

I listened as he grappled for air, his fingers clawing at Zeke's hands, but to no avail. His thumbs only kneaded harder into the man's windpipe, cutting off his air supply.

I inhaled deeply when I heard his last breath, wanting it for myself.

As the body slumped in the chair, Zeke flexed his fingers. I was absolutely starved for him. As his tongue darted out to lick across his lips, I stepped in his direction, but Mira's voice halted me. "One more. In Raven's honor."

Zeke wrapped his fingers around my elbow and yanked me over to him while the guards came in and removed the corpse from the chair.

Taking advantage of my sudden thirst for him, he leaned down and kissed my temple, whispering how much he loved me in my ear over and over. His fingers slipped underneath my shirt and dragged across my stomach, making me gasp as he pulled the memory from the night we met. He'd done this same thing, and it was the moment I felt I had known him before but couldn't figure out how or why. "Let me back in," he breathed into my ear.

I didn't even notice the guards dragging in the last man and throwing him down on the chair as I stared at Zeke, searching his eyes. There were so many answers I needed still, so many questions I had for him, but I worried he might never let *me* in.

"You were charged with theft and murder," Mira said.

Reluctantly tearing my eyes away from Zeke, I focused on the face of the prisoner, and there was nothing but evil staring back at me. "The lost princess," he sneered. His voice sounded like worn leather. "You look just like Celestina."

"*Queen Celestina*," Mira snapped, beckoning me forward.

I took a step closer to him and then another. Tentative but curious.

"My, what a pretty thing you are." His eyes fell down my body and climbed back up. "There's a lot I'd like to do with that mouth of yours."

Men and their fascination with my mouth.

Zeke growled as he returned right behind me. A warning.

“Ah, the prince has already claimed you. The traito—”

Zeke cut him off, brushing his fingers against mine. “He robbed a cottage and murdered the parents, leaving behind two children who are now orphaned.”

I was sure the color from my face had drained as a cold bitterness swept across me. Mira had known. She had known what this man had done and that I would want to seek retribution.

Closing my eyes, I sighed as I shifted into Blaze, pushing down the cold darkness that had occupied my heart. She deserved to be right up front for this next act.

As I opened my bloodred eyes, the man jerked back, his chair nearly toppling over. Zeke caught the leg of the chair with his foot and guided it back down to the ground, running a hand down my red hair before he took a step back to allow me the space to do as I wished.

“You’re a damned witch like your mother!” the man shouted in disgust.

I laughed softly, bringing heat to my hands and slowly circling him, dragging my fingertips across the outer layer of the flesh of his throat. I relished the burning of his skin as he groaned in pain. “Funny thing about flames,” I sighed, pushing my fingers deeper into his skin. “They burn. They turn things to ash. Yet, I’m always thirsty for blood.”

I stopped once I was facing him again and leaned down as he tried to cover his charred throat with his hands. Obnoxious cries tried to break through, further annoying me. I shifted into Frost and held my hand to the side, forming an icicle in my palm. “Your blood,” I whispered, beaming at him as I cocked my head. “Your blood is what I want.”

I twisted the icicle in my fingers and stabbed the sharp end of it into his jugular. His body convulsed as blood shot out of the wound, spraying me. My head rolled back in ecstasy as I felt his life seep away by my hand. And as the guards came

back to dispose of the body, I shifted back to Blaze and snapped my fingers, turning it to ash. “No need to burden the ground with his corpse.” I looked at my fingers and touched my cheeks.

His blood coated me like a trophy.

A sated smile spread across my face as I turned to face Mira, who was staring at the pile of ash on the chair. When she looked at me, she stared like I was somehow familiar to her. “I’ll see you at dinner,” she said with a small smile, dipping her chin before she left out the way we came.

What a gift she’d given me.

My eyes flickered to Zeke. I wanted him. My entire body lit up at the idea of taking him in this room where we had just committed the most unforgivable sin together.

He closed the small space between us and grabbed my chin roughly between his finger and thumb. But as he leaned down to take my mouth with his, I bit his bottom lip and pinched until I felt his blood on my tongue. He groaned as he pulled back, lust oozing out of his every surface.

“I love when you look at me like that.” My voice was low, seductive. “Like you’re starving, and I’m the only thing that can satisfy your hunger.” Leaning up, I sucked the blood from his lip like he’d done to me so many times.

He sighed into me. Desperate.

Backing me against the wall, he pinned me. “You are, Raven.”

I ran a finger down his chest. I could forgive him. Maybe I could live with secrets between us if it meant I could have him.

And then, like an ice storm, the bleakness returned heavily, blurring my trail of thoughts. My eyes rolled back, shivers skating down my spine.

“Goddamnit,” he snapped, grabbing my chin again. “Look at me, Raven.”

“You told me to let you go,” I whispered, turning my head away from him.

“Look at me,” he repeated. “I am right here.”

“You can’t have a bite yet.” I slid out from underneath his arms and walked away, leaving him to stand alone, drowning in our sea of despair without me.

CHAPTER SIX



RAVEN

*L*et me go, Raven.

Frowning as I walked through the open courtyard behind the castle, I replayed those words repeatedly. He had been begging for me since last night and then told me to let him go. He knew I was concerned for him and didn't want him to leave me, but he pushed that aside and demanded that I release him. It felt like a constant tug and pull between us, and as I was about to give in, he did something else to push me away. Maybe it was something he felt he couldn't walk away from, which was also upsetting.

If he didn't want to be there, did he not have the freedom to leave with me?

It was intoxicating to watch him take life, and both men seemed to fear him.

I stared at my fingers while I walked, missing the feeling of someone else's life drenching them.

Earlier, I'd washed the blood off of me in the bath and was again wearing the black dress from Mira. It was only moments until I needed to be in the dining hall for dinner, but I needed time to clear my head.

Mira wanted to eliminate crime from Reales as I did from Seolia, and Zeke helped her to do that. What had she been doing for the three months he was gone? Maybe that was why

the forest was overrun with so many men the day I arrived here. Zeke said he had killed many people there, though the ones from the tower seemed to have been from town.

Nothing about Reales was making sense to me so far.

I needed to eat. I'd been surviving off Zeke and my hatred, and only one of those was currently available. Though, I wanted him. And he seemed to want me still. I could imagine him in his lush bed, tangled up in his black and green quilts, his hand fisted in my hair while I sucked him...

I cursed as I stumbled over a step and caught myself on my palms. "Fuck," I muttered, rubbing the sting out of one of them while I looked around. I'd gotten farther from the castle than planned and was sitting on the steps of a large cathedral.

Raising an eyebrow, I stood and tilted my chin back to look at it. Cathedrals were abandoned long ago, most being abolished or refurbished into something new. It was odd to see one here, seemingly untouched and well-managed.

Shaped like an octagon, it had two tall towers with gargoyles. I giggled, scrunching my nose up at them. I had never seen them in person, only from literature I'd read, and they looked ironically funny as they tried to appear menacing.

"Hello, beasties," I greeted them while approaching.

Unlike every steel door in Reales, this entrance was wooden with steel locks and handles. There was a window on each side of the door, but I didn't even attempt to look through them as I wasn't tall enough. But I was desperate to look inside.

And, like always, curiosity won me over.

Tiptoeing, I expected the door to be locked, but it opened right up, the creaking of it echoing in the empty room. The draft was chilly as it hit me, lifting my hair from my shoulders as the door closed behind me.

Beliefs in our realm were banished long ago, when magic was banned, which set off a motion of all sorts of things dying — like pairings, worshipping, mingling of the other kingdoms.

We all kept to ourselves, and even the people who pledged allegiance to their rulers would hardly leave.

We were a realm but an antisocial one.

The desecration of souls led all to believe that gods had abandoned us. I couldn't blame them if they had. Pure souls like Theodore, Grace, and Arthur were hard to find. It seemed like the majority of people I surrounded myself with all had secrets and pasts of their own.

But maybe since I was paired with Zeke, the gods hadn't given up on us yet.

My boots echoed loudly against the floor as I walked to the middle of the room, admiring the stained glass windows. Like the throne room in the castle, windows crafted in every color imaginable reached the ceiling, with portraits of gods in each one.

Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo.

"Typical," I muttered. "Stroke the male egos. Never mind that some of the most powerful creatures were witches and goddesses." I was mumbling as I climbed the wooden steps of the dais. On each side were doors, and I hummed a song as I pointed back and forth between the two, choosing the one on the right first.

Shaking the knob, I cursed again because it was locked. Another place that I wasn't allowed to explore. Maybe I could convince Zeke to bring me back here or at least give me the history of it.

"Lost?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin, spinning and stumbling back into the locked door as I covered my mouth with one hand.

Standing before me was a man, or I assumed it was a man, but an intricate steel mask covered his face. He was wearing a fitted black suit, and his hands relaxed behind his back as he tilted his covered head at me. I could see none of his face or his hair. All that remained visible was the slight tint of green eyes behind the mask.

“I’m... so sorry,” I stammered, unable to stop staring. “The door was unlocked.”

The masked man nodded once. “My mistake.”

“Do you...” I looked around, unsure of what to ask. “Do you live in here?”

Where was Zeke and his obsession with stalking me when I needed him?

He leaned against one of the stone columns near the entrance and nodded toward the door I was blocking. “In there,” he replied with a muffled voice, and I wondered if that was why he kept his answers short. That, or he was displeased that I had busted into his place of residence.

“Oh,” I replied, clearing my throat and stepping away from the door. “Again, I apologize. I have a habit of wandering into places I shouldn’t,” I rambled, taking hurried steps down the dais. “And now I am late for dinner.”

I finally tore my eyes away as I walked past him toward the exit, but his voice stopped me again. “The lost princess.”

I winced at the title, running a hand through my hair. “The Queen of Seolia,” I corrected him gently. “I am the Princess of Reales, but I have a kingdom of my own.”

I could tell by his stature and the sound of his voice that he was young, maybe close to my age. He was taller than me and thin yet put together. He’d been taken care of, at least. His suit was clean and tailored, his shoes freshly waxed. And upon closer inspection, his mask was detailed with what looked like waves.

“Do you enjoy the water?”

He brought his hands out from behind his back to cross his arms over his chest. “Do you?”

I gave him a small smile. “My island is surrounded by it. It’s always fascinated me.” I took a small step in his direction. “It was always where I’d go when I needed a break from royal life.” He seemed to be studying me from behind the mask, and I felt exposed without one. “Why do you wear that?”

“We all wear masks.” He straightened from the column. “It’s the soul you need to wonder about.” He walked to the door and pulled it open. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t share that you saw me.”

I would appreciate an explanation, but I nodded once and respected his wish, leaving out the door and not turning around when I heard it shut and lock behind me.

My steps were hastened as I made my way back to the back entrance of the castle.

A masked man in an abandoned cathedral. Was Zeke aware of him being in there? He asked me not to say anything, but Zeke could search my memories. Even if I didn’t tell him, he would find out. Zeke hadn’t exactly been forthcoming with me about anything, but surely he would have brought up that there was a man who lived in their old cathedral who sported a rather beautiful disguise.

And why was he disguised?

I didn’t have long to think about it before I passed through the entryway of the dining room. I was the last one in again. Zeke looked behind me for Cade and then back to me; curiosity was clearly written across his face. Jeanine sat next to him again, but it no longer surprised me. Neither one of them looked flushed. I figured with my constant rejection, they would have fucked by now.

Maybe, like Cade, he would give up on me eventually.

John pulled my chair out for me to sit, the rest sitting back down as I did. Mira grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Did you have a fun day exploring, Little Bird?”

Fun. That was a word for it.

Exchanging a grin with her, I nodded. “I did. I plan on doing it some more.”

Like perhaps returning to the masked stranger.

As my glass was filled with the delicious sweet wine again, I barely waited for the servant to finish pouring before I gulped it down. He didn’t leave the table before he had to refill

it. "I saw the orphanage," I said. There were two new orphans somewhere in her town that may need a place to live. "Why did it close down?"

Mira cleared her throat and took a sip from her glass. "We ran out of funds."

That didn't seem like a good reason to close something down that could help many kids.

After downing my second glass of wine, I wondered if Zeke had somehow passed along his drinking problem to me. "That's a shame. I would be happy to invest." I looked at John across the table. "We could do that, right?" I was somewhat aware of our financials, but Cade kept me out of things like that.

John nodded. "We can. We have a budget for any projects you want to take on."

I scratched the tip of my nose while trying to hide the reddening of my cheeks. I wasn't aware of that. My project had always been ensuring my people were well cared for. Maybe it was a responsibility of a queen to take on more.

"Seolia seems like it's flourishing," Jeanine said.

"It is," John replied. "Raven has done an outstanding job of ensuring it stays that way."

I gave him a small smile. Mira touched my cheek and requested my attention. "That's so kind of you, Little Bird. I will discuss it with my advisers and tell them of your generous offer."

After she dropped her hand, I leaned back in my chair, still dissatisfied with her answer. The servant came to refill my glass, and I looked up to thank him when he finished. His eyes landed on my face, and there was a slight grin on his lips. He was attractive and looked to be a little older than me. His hair was a beautiful shade of brown, almost like dark chocolate and his eyes matched. He was pale because the sun seemed to avoid Reales like the plague, but I liked how he looked at me.

I returned his grin, which stayed on my face as I brought the glass to my lips. When I glanced over at Zeke, his eyes

narrowed on me.

This could be fun.

I took a full inhale of the food brought out and set on the table. The attractive servant filled my plate with food, like turkey legs and slices of bread. I wouldn't have been able to eat this much food, but my cheeks were blooming red, and I sank a little lower in my chair, peering up at him. "What's your name?"

Everyone's eyes were on us.

His grin broadened as he bent into a slight bow. "Matthew, Your Majesty."

"Matthew," I repeated.

He nodded, chewing on his bottom lip.

I made him nervous, which I found endearing. "Thank you, Matthew."

He bowed again, and Zeke cleared his throat, sending him scurrying out of the room. I caught Mira's stare and shrugged. "I'm friends with all of my servants."

"It's true, Mira," John agreed, starting to laugh. "She knows all of them."

Mira nodded. "I think that's wonderful." But something in her tone told me that she didn't honestly.

Jeanine snickered as Zeke shot her looks that could kill. He needed to get over his jealousy issues. Like I had told him on the ship, he was the only one I wanted. I would be content to live alone if I couldn't have him. Not that I felt like reminding him of any of that at this moment.

I took a bite of bread, fisting my glass in my other hand and rotating between the two until I emptied my glass. I would look over at Zeke, and he would stare at me with the same intensity he always had, coupled with longing.

I feared the look I was giving him mirrored his.

"Little Bird, I forgot to inform you that we are planning an engagement party for you and Ezekiel."

I choked on my bite of bread, and Jeanine leaned over, rubbing my back. “Our what?” I needed more wine. I sat up and looked around for Matthew.

“We need to have an engagement celebration. It will give everyone in the village a chance to welcome home their lost princess.”

I wanted her to stop calling me that, and I wasn’t even sure I was going to marry him. I opened my mouth to object, but Mira continued before I could, “We’ve already ordered the most beautiful dress for you. It will be quite the affair.”

I sank back down in my chair. I didn’t want to ruin her plans if she had already ordered things, so I nodded, grateful when Matthew returned to refill my glass. He wouldn’t stop smiling at me, and I couldn’t help but return it. There was something light about him. Gleeful — which had been severely lacking in this place since I arrived. His youthfulness reminded me of Grace. “Do you have any libraries here?”

Mira nodded enthusiastically. It was the most emotion I’d seen from her. “We do, Little Bird. It’s one library but takes up the entire top floor.” Wow, Grace would never leave. “Thousands of texts, and they should all be sorted properly.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” I replied as the servants brought desserts. Darling Matthew put a giant piece of pie on my plate, making me giggle.

Mira laughed with me. “Why didn’t you just offer her the entire pie?”

Matthew blushed, and I grinned, patting his hand. His cheeks somehow became redder. “It’s okay, Matthew. I love pie. What flavor is this?”

“Chocolate,” Zeke answered, grinning.

Of course, it was. He requested that on purpose.

Wrinkling my nose, I gave Matthew a bright smile. “I love chocolate, thank you.”

When he returned my smile, a knife clanked loudly against Zeke’s plate. Both my head and Mira’s turned toward him.

“Ezekiel, are you all right this evening? You seem like you’re having a fit.”

I raised my eyebrows with an amused grin.

“I’m fine, Mira,” Zeke answered in a clipped tone.

John shook his head, clearly exasperated with his son. I took a bite of my pie and licked the chocolate from my lips while Zeke glared at me. “He doesn’t like chocolate,” I told Mira between bites.

Jeanine snorted. “Then why would you request it?” Knowing full well that it was a lie.

Zeke’s glare moved to her.

“Ezekiel, we have other pies. There’s no reason for you to get bent out of shape,” Mira said.

Jeanine bit her lip to keep from laughing while I took another bite of my pie, enjoying making him suffer. His eyes were dark on me as he watched my tongue skate across my top lip, cleaning off the chocolate.

“See?” Mira continued, rolling her eyes at Zeke. “Matthew is bringing you apple pie.”

“Darling Matthew, I need more wine when you have a chance.” I waved my glass around.

Matthew dropped Zeke’s pie on his plate and came to me, refilling my glass.

“Sister, can we make sure Matthew is at every meal? He’s so good to me.”

Mira nodded and squeezed my hand. “Of course, Little Bird. I will be sure of it.” She looked back at Zeke. “Weren’t you supposed to bring back some meat from hunting in the forest? Did you not catch anything?”

Zeke chuckled. “Oh, I caught something. But it was rotten.”

My eyes narrowed into slits, and he returned the glare.

“That’s too bad,” Mira said. “Little Bird, tell me about Seolia.”

Taking another bite as I leaned back in my chair, I frowned slightly. “It’s much smaller than here.” I closed my eyes and tried to tug at memories, but they were sloshing around in my brain. “It has a forest like yours and a village, but it’s surrounded by water and rolling mountains. People keep moving in, and I’m not sure where I will put all of them.”

“It’s a great problem to have,” John said.

My emptiness returned as I thought of Seolia and the throne I sat upon. The throne of a murderer.

Mira squeezed my hand, and I looked at her with saddened eyes. “I know, Little Bird.” And she did. If anyone at this table could understand what I was going through, it was her.

“I just want to understand,” I whispered, fighting back the tears. “Why would he kill her but not me?”

“Oh, Raven,” John said. He paused as if meticulously combing through his words. “You were very dear to him.”

“Dear to him?” A tear rolled down my cheek. “If I were so dear to him, why didn’t he ever try and talk to me? Why didn’t he want me?”

“These are questions we will never know the answer to,” Mira answered, looking at John. “You are upsetting her. We do not need to speak of Leonidas and how he abandoned our princess.”

“Raven,” Zeke said softly, waiting until I looked at him. “You are wanted. You always have been.”

I shook my head slightly, pushing away the tears in my eyes with the tips of my fingers. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, looking back at Mira. “I didn’t mean to make it about me. Seolia is lovely. I have wonderful villagers. A little girl, Eva, has become so important to me.”

I stared at the leftover pie on my plate. “And Grace. She’s my librarian and so full of life. She would love to see your

library.” If any good came from my reign, it had to be the people I’d met. “I would love for you to meet them, Mira.”

Mira watched me, something unreadable behind her eyes.

In my heart’s dark, black vessel, a small pool of memories were gently pulled from the abyss. Theodore dancing with me. Arthur and John laughing at me the night I’d snuck out. Isla hugging me goodbye. Warmth crept across my skin as my elements tried to fight through the fog.

Everyone around me was quiet. My eyes were unfocused as Matthew came back to refill my glass. “Matthew, how long have you worked here?”

He held the carafe of wine against his chest and flicked his eyes up to the ceiling. “A year or so.”

I nodded, feeling as if I weren’t here. The wine made me feel light as a feather, and perhaps I could float away from the unknown and heartbreak.

I took another bite of pie before licking the remainder off the prongs of my fork. “And how do you like it?”

He stared at me a beat too long until he finally cleared his throat, averting his gaze. “A lot more today.”

Even Mira and John laughed at that. I snickered, digging my fork into another piece of pie, and gave him a sweet smile. “Do you promise to be at breakfast tomorrow?”

He stared at me again until Zeke muttered the word ‘ow.’ I looked over there, and he glared at Jeanine, his fists clenched on the table.

I looked back at Matthew, who nodded in response to my question. Reaching up, I squeezed his wrist. “Good.” I released him and looked at Mira next, who had an amused grin on her lips. “I want to see your library.” I took another sip of wine, knowing I needed to stop, but I was drunk and did not care. If I were dead set on spending another night without Zeke, it would help numb the pain.

“Of course, Little Bird. Would you like someone to escort you?”

I tilted back, savoring every last drop of this sweet poison I had discovered. When I brought the glass down, I shook my head. Someone probably should escort me. That was the logical part of my brain attempting to shove through. “I can find it.” I stood from my chair and balanced against the table to keep from tumbling forward. “Thank you for the lovely dinner.” I leaned over to hug Mira.

She returned it and kissed the side of my head. Matthew held his arm out for me to grab, assisting me in sliding out. I kissed his cheek. “And thank you for keeping me supplied with wine and chocolate pie.”

He blushed before bowing to me.

I didn’t bid farewell to anyone else as I walked out of the room, leaning against a wall in the dark hallway. I missed my people, but I didn’t know if I could return to Seolia and look at it the same ever again. It was tainted now.

Using the wall to guide me, I walked down the dimly lit corridors, realizing I had no idea how to reach the top floor. When an arm linked through mine, I rolled my head and fell back against the wall. “What are you doing here?” I slurred.

Jeanine sighed and pulled me up from the wall. “I am helping you get to the library.”

“I can find it on my own,” I snapped.

She turned us down a different hallway. “You’re going the wrong way.”

I muttered a curse word.

“Raven, where’s Cade?”

I laughed, throwing my head back and nearly falling. “He left because I wouldn’t fuck him. Already on his way back to See-lolia.”

She put her arm around me and held me upright as we slowly walked up a flight of stairs. “Are you okay?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. Was I okay? My best friend of fifteen years couldn’t stand to be around me because I wouldn’t fuck him. The man I loved knew who I was and

didn't tell me. I had a sister who creeped me out a little. I wasn't sure if I could ever return to Seolia. I felt no connection to Reales, which meant I had no home. And now, I was kind of friends with a girl who had slept with Zeke and tried to fuck Cade. "No," I answered dryly as we climbed another set of stairs. "Who puts the library on the top floor?"

"A man who doesn't appreciate a drunk woman."

At that, I laughed, and so did she.

"Why do you want to see the library?"

I shrugged. "I read books when I can't understand anything around me."

She was quiet, but then, "He nearly killed Matthew tonight."

I snorted and shook my head. "I need him to hate me."

"Raven." She pulled me up another flight of stairs. "He is never going to hate you."

I sighed. "Can't you sleep with him again? Distract him?"

The thought made me ill, and I wasn't sure why I kept suggesting it.

Masochist, maybe.

"Even if I wanted to, which I don't, he wouldn't. He's too in love with you."

I scoffed. "You look like you fell from the heavens." I made a dramatic wave of my hand over her body. "I bet you've never heard the word 'no.'"

"I did from him."

I glanced over at her.

"I tried. After arriving in Seolia, I tried multiple times, but he'd already met you. He wouldn't even let me touch his arm without having a fit. He said he never wanted another woman to touch him."

"But he wanted me to sleep with Cade."

She sighed as she led me through the open library doors. “He thought he was doing what was best for you. He wanted to keep you from falling in love with him. He needed you to be able to walk away, but he couldn’t help himself, Raven. I watched him die a little every day you were apart, and I have to watch it all over again.”

“Jeanine, he lied to me. He withheld vital information.”

I could tell by the look on her face that there was something she wanted to say. I nudged her gently with my elbow, arching a brow. Taking a breath, she gave me a slight shrug. “There are still things that you don’t know.” I opened my mouth, but she shook her head. “I can’t tell you. It’s something you need to learn for yourself.”

Why did people keep saying that to me?

Passing through the library’s entry caused me to gasp and my jaw to drop. It had to be the castle’s entire length with shelves stretched to the ceiling. I spun around, looking at the thousands of books. Spines of every color stared back at me, begging to be read.

Like the dining hall, there were floor-to-ceiling windows on the far wall, and I could see the moon shimmering on the water by the dock in the black of night. During the day, this had to be the brightest place in the castle. Multiple tables were sitting in the middle of the room with at least six chairs per table, meaning that once upon a time, people frequently used it.

But, like the dining hall, the tables and chairs were littered with dust. The ceiling was high and painted with faded sketches from old folktales. Some I recognized, but others were so old that where they could have originated from was a mystery.

“I would never leave here,” I said while walking to a shelf and brushing the spines with my fingertips. “Does anyone ever use it?”

Jeanine sat down on top of a table. “Rarely. Mira keeps us busy.”

I paused my examinations of the books to look at her. “With what?”

“Did you know Zeke is the commander of our army?”

I shook my head slowly. He hadn’t ever mentioned anything about an army.

“He has hundreds of men under his command. Before we left for Seolia, he was in the training yard daily.”

That explained that body of his. I ran my tongue along the roof of my mouth as I thought about the hard planes of his stomach. “Hundreds?” We didn’t even have fifty, and they didn’t train every day. Most of them stood at our gates, watching me sneak in and out. We didn’t even guard the castle that closely. I’d always allowed my people to walk in and out as they pleased. “Why do you need so many?”

She didn’t respond, but she did stare like I should know the answer already. I drank too much because something wasn’t clicking. “I wouldn’t even call ours an army.” Turning my attention back to the shelves, I squealed as I recognized a title. The spine was a dark magenta and excessively worn; the pages yellow and coarse. I bounced on my toes over to Jeanine and handed her the book. “This was one of my favorites as a girl, but I burnt it one day before I learned how to control Blaze.”

“Blaze?”

“My fire. They all have names.”

“Did you name them?”

I wrinkled my nose. I had never been asked that before, and as I thought about it, my head tilted slightly. “I don’t... know. I’ve just always known their names.”

Nodding, she handed the book back to me. “What’s it about?”

As I opened the front cover, it seemed to stretch like it hadn’t moved in years, welcoming us in with a soft yawn as the spine made the most soothing *pop*. I flipped to the first page, showing her faded sketches. “It is about a princess who

was crying in the woods. A frog hopped up to her and asked why she was so upset.”

Flipping the pages, I pointed to a picture of the frog in a pond. “The princess dropped her golden ball into a pond and was very upset. In exchange for the frog retrieving the ball, she offered to let him sleep on her pillow.” Jeanine smiled as I flipped forward. “But the frog was a prince, and she broke his spell after she threw him against a wall.”

She started to laugh. “She threw the frog against a wall?”

I giggled with her, nodding. “But, the princess found her prince. And the prince had a loyal servant named Harry. Harry had three iron bands around his heart to prevent it from breaking when the prince was placed under a spell. When the prince became human again, Harry’s happiness caused all three bands to break, freeing his heart from its bond.”

“It had a happy ending,” she said softly.

I nodded, setting the book beside me on the table. “It had a happy ending.”

She grabbed my hand while I rested my head on her shoulder. She dipped hers against mine. “I want a happy ending,” I breathed.

Her voice was gentle yet determined as she said, “You’ll have it, Raven. We all will.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



RAVEN

We stayed in the library for another hour while I sobered up, reminiscing on stories we used to read as children. I could tell the library hadn't been stocked in a very long time. There were none of the newer fairy tales that I'd heard about. Even the books on the history of our realm were outdated, and maybe Mira had given up on keeping up to date with the other kingdoms after the passing of her father.

All of those books looked so lonely. Why have a giant library if you never use it? I would love to bring them back with me. My libraries were much smaller, but Grace would find a use for all of them. Maybe I could even find room somewhere on the island to build one extensive library for everyone to visit.

We were in a comfortable silence as Jeanine walked me back to my room. When we reached the door, I turned and leaned on the doorknob with my hand. She gave me a genuine smile, and I returned it. "I've never really had a friend, except for Cade."

"Me either."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "I'd like to think we could be. Friends."

She nodded with glistening eyes. "I would love that."

I gave her a bashful dip of my chin. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She waved goodbye, and I waited until she disappeared down my corridor before I turned back to my door, smiling as I entered my room. Becoming friends with her was unexpected, but we got along quite well.

I was still grinning at the floor when I looked up and nearly jumped out of my skin for the second time today. “The fuck!” I shouted, placing my palm over my heart as it beat rapidly inside my chest.

Zeke was sitting on the edge of the bed, his elbows perched on his spread knees. He slowly lifted his head to look at me, his jaw tight.

“What are you doing in here?” I inhaled a deep breath, trying to calm my heart.

“Do you enjoy driving me crazy?” His voice was heavy with irritation.

I rolled my eyes as I removed my tiara. “What are you going on about now?”

He clenched his fists like he was trying to stay calm. “You. Flirting with Matthew.”

I snorted, leaning against the edge of the table. “I wasn’t flirting.”

He laughed, but it was full of ire. “You wanted him. I sensed lust all over you every time he smiled at you. And it was pouring out of him all night.”

I didn’t want him. I liked how he stared at me, but the only man I wanted was the infuriating one glaring at me. “He’s cute. It’s not like I would bring him back and bed him.” He cocked a skeptical brow, so I kept going, “At least, not yet.”

He stood from the bed and sauntered over to me slowly, palming the table on either side of me. His eyes lingered on my mouth before they rose to mine. “Are you going to?”

No, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of a truthful answer. His proximity to me was doing nothing to calm my

raging heart, and I was having trouble remembering why I was so upset with him.

I shrugged again, my exterior cool, but my insides heated under his gaze. Why was he the only one who could bring this out in me? I tried to wash away my warmth with ice so he wouldn't sense what he was doing to me. "I'll see him at breakfast tomorrow and let you know. And every meal from now until I leave. Maybe he would like to see Seolia."

A devilish grin spread across his lips as he leaned closer to me, his breath tickling my eyelashes and causing them to flutter. "Maybe you could give him a tour."

As my heat betrayed me and my entire body flushed, his grin became smug, and his lips brushed my cheek before he pulled up to walk out of the room coolly.

I didn't breathe until I heard the click of the door, and then I began to pant, my chest rising and falling quickly from him leaving me heavy with want. He'd been pleading with me to forgive him, and now he would walk away after he piqued my interest?

Stomping to the door, I threw it open. He leaned against my doorframe with his forearms, grinning like a satisfied cat. "I hate you," I growled, turning from him.

He grabbed my wrist and spun me back. "Show me."

There was no hesitation from me as I grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him down simultaneously as I leaned up, colliding our mouths together.

Everything in me lit up — came back to life.

He pushed me backward into my room and slammed the door behind us, walking with me until I was against the table, lifting me until I sat on top.

I untucked his shirt, and he pulled it off quickly, dropping it to the floor. His stomach. It was even better than I remembered. "I've been fantasizing about you," I whispered, leaning forward and licking over the dips of his abs.

“Why fantasize when you can have me?” he growled, reaching for the bottom of my dress and quickly shoving it over my legs and hips.

I suddenly didn't care how much I loved this dress as I raised my arms, allowing him to yank it off and discard it somewhere below. He stared at me, his eyes moving down my body, which was covered only with my thigh-hugging boots and black panties. His erection was wildly obvious as it pushed against his pants.

My mouth watered. I craved his touch on me.

Leaning back on my palms, I allowed him to see as much as he wanted, causing him to grin as he slowly lowered to his knees. My skin heated at the sight of him kneeling before me.

He would always be the most delicious sight.

He didn't remove my boots as he spread my legs apart, one of his fingers moving the fabric of my panties aside just enough to slip into me. I moaned softly, my head rolling back as my familiar daze fell over me. He brought me up so high, only to slow his movements, and back down I fell.

He would take his time — punish me for holding out on him.

I lifted my head when I heard the tearing of fabric and glanced down as he shredded my panties with his fingers. “Do you enjoy ruining my clothes?”

His chuckle was raspy, and I nearly cried as I realized how much I'd missed it.

“I enjoy ruining you,” was his only response before his tongue dipped into my core. I tangled my fingers in his hair and laid back down, my back arching off the table. My eyes squeezed shut as his lips wrapped around my clit to suck, his tongue continuing its tortuously pleasant assault. I was dizzy with ecstasy, and he groaned against me from my taste on his tongue.

And when he pulled out, it was only to drag me closer to the edge of the table. “Ruining you for all others,” he said, wrapping his fingers around my hips and lifting them off the

table. He nibbled along the inside of my thigh. “Your smell is mine; your taste is mine.”

“Stop talking,” I whined, trying to shove his head back down.

He kissed the inside of my other thigh and dragged the tip of his tongue down my clit. “You’ve been cruel to me, Raven.”

“If you’re expecting an apology....”

He bit down on the flesh of my thigh, and I cried out, narrowing my eyes on him as I lifted my head. His grin was pompous, kissing the bite softly. “I expect you to stop walking away from me.” He lifted my hips to brush his nose against my clit, shuddering in pleasure. “I expect you to stop flirting.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” I snapped, my teeth clenched. “Would you please just—”

He didn’t let me finish before diving back in with his tongue, devouring me again. I could feel my hips bruising from his fingers while he enjoyed me so vehemently. He was constantly groaning, and it wasn’t only his tongue that made me come; it was his sounds.

He didn’t stop sucking and licking until nothing was left, allowing me to ride through the lengthy high of my climax. I was breathless as my grip on his strands loosened, every thought in my head a jumbled mess. I was still upset with him but wanted nothing more than him.

And with a mouth like his, what was a girl to do?

One by one, he slid my boots off and snaked his arm under my arched back to pull me up, kissing me roughly. I whimpered at my taste all over his lips, hooking my legs around his waist as he lifted me and carried me to the bed.

I had expected gentleness, but when he dropped me to the bed, I had to keep from grinning as I realized he was still upset with me. I pushed up on my palms to peer up at him. “Come here.”

His eyes were dark on me as he smoothly unbuckled his pants, his swollen length springing free as they fell to the floor.

He wrapped his hand around it as he slowly stroked himself, his gaze irritated and hungry.

He was teasing me, and I ached for him between my legs.

Pushing up to my knees, I threw my arms around his neck and started pulling him down. “I hate you,” I whispered, pulling his bottom lip between my teeth and biting down hard, not stopping until I could drink from him.

He put his hand around my throat, shoved me off, and climbed on top of me. His voice was hoarse as he asked, “Do you enjoy making me furious?”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and nodded, leaning up to try and kiss him, but his hand around my throat prevented me from it. “Do you like when I want to kill someone for looking at you?”

I nodded again, feeling the tip of his shaft at my entrance. I bucked against him impatiently, and he laughed darkly. He was already winning, and the cocky bastard knew it. “Tell me, baby. Did you miss me?”

My jaw clenched, stubbornly refusing to answer him. When he made no move to give me what I wanted, I growled and bucked up against him again. “Fuck me.”

“My little demon,” he breathed.

I blinked, shifting into Blaze. A low, guttural snarl came from the back of his throat, and he filled me with one thrust. I cried out from the sudden rush of welcomed pain.

Each thrust was starved. Aching. Like we had been apart for years. “You,” he growled against my ear. “You are mine.”

I whimpered, unable to think straight while he claimed me so fiercely.

“Say it, baby. Tell me you’re mine.”

When I pushed my tongue into his mouth, he responded greedily by deepening our kiss until I felt I couldn’t take any more of him. He was trying to crawl back into me and never let me go again. And I didn’t want him to. For the first time

since we crossed into Reales, I felt something trying to push through the darkness.

He broke our kiss to look at me, pressing his forehead against mine. “Stay with me,” he whispered. “Stay with me, baby.”

A tear slid down my cheek. “I love you.”

“Oh, Raven.” He kissed me softer this time, his fingers wrapping gently around my thigh as his thrusts slowed. Pulling back, he kissed the tip of my nose. “Give me my love.”

Another tear slipped by as I blinked and shifted back into myself. He looked at me with so much love and desire that I could have died here, happily in his arms. He whispered my name over and over as he filled me with his warmth, and I sighed into his mouth as I followed him over.

He breathed new life into me. Whatever new magic was coursing through me was screaming — the love I had for this man was pushing it down.

His movements into me stilled, and I felt the thunderous beat of his pulse against mine, matched in their twinning rhythm. “Say it again,” he begged.

“I love you, I love you,” I promised.

CHAPTER EIGHT



RAVEN

With his forehead buried against my neck and my limbs coiled around him, I wanted to stay like this — let him keep the monsters away. I lasted two days without him, but it felt much longer. With him right here against me, I felt at home. My anger was justified, and I had a right to be furious at him for withholding information from me, and maybe I should have held out longer, but I didn't want to. I was tired of standing in the way of my happiness, which was what he made me.

Unbelievably happy. Giddy with love.

I felt like we could take on the world together. I would rather work on forgiving him than continue to feel nothing at all. My hatred had been overcoming every inch of me, and I was drowning. I couldn't kick to the surface alone — not with how strong this magic was.

I kissed the top of his head, grateful for the persistence of my heart. He promised he wouldn't stop trying, and I felt that I could have continued to hold out on him and he still would have ended up at my door every night, begging me to let him back in. Even if I hadn't met Matthew, he still would have found an excuse to be waiting for me.

When I giggled, he lifted his head to look at me. "Were you truly going to kill him?"

He nodded with a tight jaw. “You think I’m joking.”

I raised a doubtful brow.

“Raven, he wanted you. Badly. I’m surprised he didn’t try and take you right there at the table.”

I grinned. “What would you have done?”

He shook his head. “You don’t want to know. Jeanine kicked me under the table multiple times because I started to stand every time you two interacted.” He scowled at my amused smile. “You think this is funny?”

I nodded. “I do. You can’t kill everyone who wants to fuck me.”

“I can, especially if you flirt with them.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” I argued.

He nipped at my nose.

“Okay, I was, but only a little. I knew what it was doing to you, and I enjoyed it.”

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t have to risk someone’s life to get a reaction out of me. All you have to do is look at someone, and I want to wrap my hands around their throat.”

“You weren’t this possessive in Seolia.”

“Because there are about ten people who live on your island.”

I laughed, shoving his shoulder.

“I didn’t like Arthur putting his arm around you the first night we went to Duck’s together. And he’s old. I was always possessive, baby, but I couldn’t show you.”

I gasped. “Do not hurt Arthur. That will be an unforgivable act.” I shifted, and he squeezed me tighter against him. The lack of oxygen was worth it. “I did miss you.”

His expression was sorrowful. “You were so lost, Raven. I couldn’t find you, couldn’t feel you.”

I frowned. “I don’t know what this is, but it’s deep. I don’t recognize it.”

“We’re going to figure it out, baby. I won’t let you disappear.”

Tears pushed at my eyelids, and I closed them.

He kissed me softly. “Look at me, Raven.”

I sniffled and opened them again, staring into those gray eyes.

“I promise you that I will not let you slip away. I am not going anywhere.”

“I am so madly in love with you,” I whispered.

He swallowed before he dipped his head, kissing the space between my breasts. “I was worried I would never hear you say that again.”

I bit my lip and gently moved out from underneath him, rolling on my side to face him. Placing my palm against his cheek, I wiped his tear with my thumb. “I am still hurt by what you did, but I know there’s a reason. Jeanine wouldn’t tell me, but there’s something else you’re hiding from me.”

He nodded once.

“I will figure it out. I’m a little drunk now, but I’m determined.”

“Are you so drunk that you will regret this in the morning?”

“I will never regret you,” I answered honestly.

He kissed me tenderly, making me want to melt into him again. “Stay with me,” he pleaded.

Without needing to think about it, I nodded. “Only for your bed, and because this room is too fucking pink.”

He pinched my side, causing me to giggle. But then he searched my eyes, and when I felt him push into my mind, I jerked my head back. He gave me an apologetic grin. “Just ask me.”

He didn’t seem like he wanted to. “Did Cade touch you?”

I grimaced, and he groaned. “Not like you have. He kissed me, but that was it.”

His fingers pressed deeply into the skin of my waist.

“But then he left because I wouldn’t give into him. He actually tried....” I clamped my mouth shut.

“Raven,” he bit out, squeezing my hip. And then he pushed into my mind again and was gone a few seconds later, throwing the quilt off and standing. “I’ll fucking kill him.”

I sat up to my knees quickly and lunged for him. He grunted as he barely caught me, toppling back on the bed. “I handled it,” I said hurriedly. “Nothing happened. I declared celibacy.”

That broke through his rage and made him laugh. He pushed me until I was on my back again and brushed my hair behind my ear. “Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head. “No, my love. He didn’t harm me.”

Exhaling through his nose, he twisted until I rested on his chest and stroked my hair. I placed my ear against his heart, dragging my toe up and down his leg, sighing in complete contentment. “I told Jeanine to fuck you,” I said through a laugh. “I told her twice.”

“I know. She told me. We didn’t.”

When a whisper of doubt crept in, he wrapped his hands under my shoulders and dragged me up until our faces smushed together. “Baby, I will never touch anyone but you.”

I sighed softly but nodded as well as I could against him. “She told me she doesn’t want to.”

His jaw dropped open, but then he smiled. It made me grin. “You’re damaged goods, baby. And I think we’re friends.”

“Plus, she thinks we smell.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Maybe we’re not as close as I thought.”

He laughed loudly, tickling my sides. “It’s hard to explain, but it has to do with us being flames. It’s supposed to deter people, but clearly, your scent is broken.”

I bit the tip of his nose, and he pushed my face away. “What is this about?” I raised my left hand and put it between our faces, wiggling my fingers. “How am I supposed to decide?”

“Do you want our kingdoms bound? Any tiny little demons will be heirs to both.”

I brought my hand down and thought about his question. Could there be negative ramifications to it? Could there be a positive? “I don’t know.”

He gave me a slight shrug. “It will always be up to you. It would help if you could figure out what I’m not telling you.”

“Does it have to do with the masked man living in your cathedral?”

He arched an eyebrow. “The what?”

I mirrored him with my own raised eyebrow. “The... man with the mask. The one who lives in the cathedral in the courtyard.”

He sat up, pulling me with him until I straddled his waist. “Raven, what are you talking about?”

I closed my eyes. “This man.”

He entered my mind again and watched the memory of me in the cathedral, talking to the masked stranger. Without saying anything, he rewatched it repeatedly; so many times, I was growing bored and impatient. I shook my head a little to see if that would get him out, but he stayed right where he was, even as I opened my eyes. “Did you not know he was there?”

“I have no fucking idea who that is.” He lifted me from his lap and stood, grabbing his pants off the ground and standing. “Stay here.”

“Um, no.” I stood with him and grabbed his shirt, sliding it on. “I’m going with you.”

He picked me up and threw me back on the bed like a rag doll. “I’ll be right back, Raven. I don’t know who that could be. I’m not risking you.”

I stood again and grabbed a pair of pants from my trunk, ignoring his sighs. “He had a chance to harm me already and didn’t. I’m going with you. I’m literally a weapon, and you seem to forget that. I burned Cade. I can burn him.”

He grabbed my wrist and brought me back to him. “You burned Cade?”

“Burned may be too strong of a word.” I warmed my hand and put it against his chest. “It was only warm enough to get him off of me.”

He cradled my face in his hands. “If I tell you to leave, you leave. Understand?”

“I don’t want to lie to you.”

“Raven,” he sighed. “Can you listen to me for once?”

“The quicker we leave, the quicker you can fuck me again.”

He couldn’t control his grin. “Unfair.”



IT WAS dark and quiet outside, only the sounds of the waves in the distance. Whenever I tried to speak, he would silence me with either his finger or mouth. And when I tried again, he put his entire hand over my mouth and walked me sideways until we were against the castle wall. Removing his hand, he replaced it with his lips, attempting to kiss me into silent submission.

“You know,” I said against his lips. “For wanting me back so badly, you have a funny way of showing it.”

He pinned me to the wall with his hips against mine. “You think this is me not wanting you?”

“You won’t let me speak,” I huffed.

“I am protecting you,” he argued, trying to kiss me and sighing when I turned my head. “I don’t want whoever this is to hear that we’re coming. There’s a lot you don’t know yet about this kingdom, Raven.”

“Then tell me,” I demanded, throwing my arms around his neck. “Let me be your partner. Let me in on all of your secrets.”

“You are my partner.” He slid his hands around my waist and into my pants until he could squeeze my ass. I had a feeling that if we stayed against this wall for much longer, he would forget all about the masked man completely and take me right here. “You are my partner for life, Raven. But there are things I can’t tell you. Not yet. I want to, but I have a couple of things to figure out first.”

“But what does that mean? Will those things mean we can’t be together?”

He shook his head. “There is nothing in this world that could keep us apart. I will always find you, always hold on to you.” He kissed down the column of my throat. “Always want you.”

“But I want *all* of you, Zeke.” I tilted my head for him to trail his lips across my collarbone. “Not just this. I need you, every piece.”

“You have me.” He lifted his head to stare into my eyes. “Fuck, Raven, you have me. There are no words for the hold you have on me. You own all of me, but I do have to protect you. Protect your heart. Give me time to sort things out. Please?” He pushed out his bottom lip.

I had never seen him pout before, and my smile was wide. “For you, I will give you time. A little.”

“I love you.” He rested his forehead against mine. “And I’m going to say it so much that you will get sick of it.” He squeezed my ass once more before removing his hands and grabbing mine, pulling me back into a walk. “And I promise to let you speak as much as you want when we’re back inside.”

I grinned. “Would you let me read you the biggest book in the library?”

“I would let you read every book if you promise to let me kiss you between each one.”

I snaked my arm around his waist and his arm wrapped around my shoulders. I couldn't stop smiling as I stayed quiet per his request, and it would grow so vast every time he kissed the top of my head that I thought my cheeks might rip apart.

But as we approached the intimidatingly large cathedral, my smile faltered a bit. It didn't seem as welcoming in the black of night, and those gargoyles did, in fact, seem menacing.

He removed his arm from my shoulders and led me up the small steps, pushing me gently against the wall next to the door while peeking through a small window on either side. “And he said he lived in here?”

I nodded, looking around. I felt spooked, though it seemed like only the two of us out here. “Yes,” I answered in a whisper. “And he knew who I was.”

“That's not surprising if he's from here. You look just like Celestina. Recognizing you is easy.”

“Like that prisoner did.” I touched his bare stomach. “Why was he going to call you a traitor?”

“Nothing gets past you,” he muttered, walking to the other side of me to wiggle the locked doorknob. “I need you to burn through the wood.”

I scoffed. “No. This place is over a century old. I am not ruining that door. The gods may smite me.”

I could hardly see him, but I was almost sure he looked at me like I was crazy. “Smite you?”

“This place was once used to worship them. What if Zeus strikes me with a lightning bolt?”

His body was shaking, and I realized it was because he was covering his mouth with his fist to keep from laughing out

loud. I slapped his stomach with the back of my hand. “Stop it. You’ll miss me if I get zapped.”

He cleared his throat to keep his voice steady. “I will fight Zeus with my bare hands if he gets anywhere near you. Now, can you please burn through the door?”

I clicked my tongue. “You’re awfully confident but fine.” I shifted into Blaze and lit my hands. The thick door required me to spread the fire to my wrists.

“Can you spread the fire across your entire body?”

I shrugged a shoulder as the wood around the doorknob started to crack and pop under my hands. “I’ve never had to try. I imagine I’d have to be very pissed off, so another day with you should test that theory.”

He spanked me, making me giggle. “Shh, you’re going to wake the masked man.”

He reached out and waved a hand through my flames. They would turn purple whenever his skin made contact with them, which had me raising an eyebrow. “That’s... different.” I put a palm against his stomach, watching as the purple flame flickered between it and his skin. When I removed my hand, the orange returned. “I’ve never had purple flames before.”

“Something we’ll have to explore later,” he said, removing my hand from the door and slipping his own through the hole I’d made in the wood. Unlocking it from the other side, he drew his hand back out and opened the door. “I guess I can’t talk you into staying out here?”

I shook my head. “Partners.”

Nodding, he threaded his fingers through mine and kept me a pace behind him as we walked inside. It was nearly pitch black, which made it impossible to see anything. Before I could offer to light my fingertips, he put a finger against my lips, anticipating it.

I kissed his finger to promise my silence.

He took my hand and put it around his stomach, feeling around for my other and repeating it until I was wrapped

around him, my cheek pressing against his back while he led us through the dark cathedral. I could feel his arms moving to touch each bench as we passed by them like he was counting. I was desperate to know the history and how he seemed to know so much about it.

He didn't seem like the worshipping type unless it was to me.

When we reached the steps to the dais, he moved me to stand in front of him and picked me up, holding me against him as he climbed the steps. With his mouth next to my ear, he whispered, "Which side?"

I moved my head to the other side of his and bit down on his right earlobe, nearly laughing as he sucked in a sharp breath. He set me down to my feet and grabbed a chunk of my hair, locating my mouth with his other hand and leaning down to kiss me. I put my arms around his waist again and flattened my palms against his back, squeezing him tightly against me.

Partners, who absolutely sucked at spying together.

After a moment of being locked in a passionate embrace, he pulled back suddenly, seeming to remember that we were here for a reason. But he kissed me again and again until I smiled, making him grin against my lips.

Being in love was going to get us into trouble.

He untangled my arms from around him and dragged me over to the dais's right side, looking around for the doorknob. Unlike when I tried earlier, it was unlocked.

He squeezed my hand once before he twisted the knob slowly, opening the door inch by inch and tilting his head to look inside. Like the room we were in, it was completely black.

Sighing, he pulled me inside and quietly shut the door behind us. "Light them," he whispered.

I held out a hand and lit my fingertips, illuminating enough space to give us a clear path forward. "Have you been in here before?"

“Not since I was a kid.” He felt along the wall as we walked. “This is a long hallway that leads into a room. I’m guessing for priests before beliefs died.”

“What’s inside the other door?”

“A storage closet that held candles. They used them before cathedrals were abolished.”

I spread the fire to my hand to bring more light. “Why wasn’t this one?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Rudolf liked to come here sometimes, especially at the beginning of his illness. He was cremated and requested his ashes be scattered around the outside of it.”

“Were they?”

A sad smile. “By me.”

I brought his hand to my lips and kissed it. “Was John here to see his brother pass?”

He frowned and shook his head. “He would visit him, but he was in Seolia when he died. He came shortly after, but I didn’t see him. I left a couple of weeks later and found you.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, returning his hand to my lips. “I had no idea about anything you’d been through. I never would’ve... with Cade, or being so angry at you....”

He stopped and pulled me to him. “Raven, don’t ever apologize to me. We’re the ones who owe you apologies. We went about everything the wrong way. And now, I’ve made an even bigger mess...” he trailed off, sighing. “Stories for another time. Come on; we’re almost there.”

I cared more about his stories than I did about finding this mysterious man, but I went silent again as he pulled me the rest of the way down the hall and opened another door.

Grabbing the wrist of my lit hand, he brought it down to some candles on a small table beside the door. The wicks came to life, and he grabbed a candle, holding it out in front of him. The masked man wasn’t in here, but it definitely wasn’t an

empty room — a bed big enough for two, plush blankets, books on a small night table, and a basket full of food.

“He’s been here for a while,” I said, walking to the night table and grabbing a book from the top. I flipped through the pages to check for any markings, but there were none. Only earmarked pages.

Zeke kneeled in front of the food basket, inspecting some of the fruit. “This is fresh — a couple of days old, if that.”

I dropped the book and walked to the opposite side of the room, pulling open the doors of a small wardrobe. Inside were two more fitted suits like the one he wore earlier and casual clothes. “These are nice. Really nice.” I took the fabric between my fingers. “This texture is rich. It didn’t come from a village.”

Zeke came to stand beside me and held out one of the suits. “This was mine.” He shuffled through the rest of the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of black boots, similar to the ones he owned now. “All of this was mine before I started training.”

“But... but how?”

He ran a hand through his hair as he inspected the boots, turning them over and looking at the bottom. “I don’t know. They’re clean. None of this makes any sense. Whoever this is has been taken care of.”

“Or he stole all of this,” I suggested. “He could work inside the castle. It could be why he wears a mask. He doesn’t want to be caught.”

“And the bed? The wardrobe?”

I shrugged. “Maybe he has help. Do you need to tell Mira?”

Zeke sighed, putting the boots back in the wardrobe. “Not yet. Nothing has been reported as missing. I don’t want to involve her until I get more information.”

“Would she force you to kill him?”

He slowly closed the wardrobe doors. “What makes you think she forces me?”

I ran a hand down his back, noticing how tense he was. “You didn’t seem to want to be there earlier. Or want me there, at least.”

He turned and leaned against the wardrobe, taking my hand between his. “I was more fearful of your opinion about me changing once you saw how much I enjoyed it.”

I gave him a reassuring smile. “Nothing could change my opinion about you.”

“Mm, nothing?”

I shook my head, stepping into his arms. “I love your shadows.”

“These shadows you speak of...” — he drew his hands down my ribs underneath my shirt, caressing my skin between his fingers — “...they make me a monster.”

My eyebrows drew in at that statement. “You are not a monster.” I stroked the back of my hand down his cheek. “Do not speak about the man I love like that.”

“There’s not a lot that I wish for, Raven. Not a lot that I’ve longed for in my life, but I will always wonder where we would be if you hadn’t been taken.” He kissed my forehead. “If maybe, things would be different. If maybe, I would have been a better man for you.”

It was painful to hear him say that he could believe I would ever want a different version of him. “Zeke,” I said softly, putting my hands on his cheeks. “Who you are is exactly who I need.” I rose to kiss him. “It’s essential to me that you believe that.”

He took my bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger. The look on his face was tortured as he stared at me, pinching the soft flesh gently. “Let me take you back and show how much I want you.”

I wanted to reach a point with him where he would stop avoiding the hard conversations — where he would fully let

me in and not hide part of himself. Where he would answer me with words before body, not that I would ever deny him, but if I genuinely owned him, I wanted all of him.

But I promised him time.

So, instead of pushing him, I nodded once, and he dropped his hand, kissing me. “I’m going to love you even when the sun sets for the final time in this universe,” he whispered against my lips before he took my hand and led me back to the castle, where he showed me exactly how much he wanted me until the sun rose once again.



AS WE WALKED hand-in-hand to the dining room the following day, I couldn’t stop smiling like a lovesick fool, and he was doing the same, staring down at me. Heat flooded my cheeks from embarrassment and desire as I caught his gaze. That was all it took for him to push me against the wall and kiss me feverishly. He groaned into the kiss, palming the nape of my neck and putting so much passion into it that it felt like he was kissing me for the first time. Like he hadn’t stayed up all night, kissing me precisely like this and whispering my name until it was all I heard.

I was practically climbing him, and he obliged me, lifting me and steadying me against the wall. Breathless as he broke, he bared his teeth for a second while his eyes searched my face. He was always looking for some answer when he looked at me like this, and I somehow managed to respond exactly the way he wanted without saying a word. “You. I need,” was all he said before he kissed me again and growled against my lips, “Fuck breakfast.”

“Fuck me,” I begged.

I didn’t care that we were in a hallway. I needed him right this second. He looked around as he unfastened his pants with one hand and shoved them down, but all I could see was him — this beautiful man who seemed unreal, even as he held me.

“Ah,” I cried out as he filled me quickly, moaning into his mouth as he hurriedly covered mine. My body was sore from making love all night, but I wanted more.

I wanted to bleed for him.

His drive was tight and quick, and he wouldn't stop groaning into my mouth. I couldn't move from being pinned to the wall, but I could lick the shell of his ear, which had him shuddering as he held me. Tightening my legs around his waist, I whispered how much I loved him over and over against his lips. He was pulsing inside of me, but I'd learned by now to know he wouldn't come until I did.

Selfish was not a word you could ever use to describe Zeke.

“Come for me, Raven,” he demanded, breathing heavily through his thrusts.

I shook my head, gasping as I tried to pull in air. “No, no, no...” I didn't want this to end.

His laugh was breathy as he leaned in and bit down on my collarbone, sending me a fresh wave of pleasure. I slammed the back of my head against the wall to try and distract myself from coming undone, but when he bit it harder, I cried his name — probably too loudly for being in an open hallway — and shattered around him.

“Fuck,” he groaned, resting his forehead against my shoulder to look between our bodies. “I fucked you all night, and you're still so wet for me.”

I tugged on the hair sticking to the back of his neck, and he lifted his head to mine, his thrusts slowing ever so slightly. “Give me you,” I murmured before attacking his mouth with mine, moaning as I felt his warm release filling me.

When he slowed and stilled, he held me there, whispering my name — always saying my name like it was the only one he would say for the rest of time.

I was dizzy with desire, with exhaustion. But I kissed him again, and he returned the passion, gently pulling out of me. I whined, and he chuckled, straightening my dress over my legs

as he lowered me before he pulled his pants back up. “You stubborn little witch,” he said, trying to draw in a deep breath.

Sweat covered his forehead, and I drew the back of my hand down his cheek. “I love you,” I replied earnestly.

“You love me? I love you.” One of his hands wrapped around my throat, squeezing as he leaned down and kissed me.

Our tongues linked, and I was seconds away from coercing him into another round when I heard dishes banging around. I jerked back and looked around, my eyes widening as right down the hall, servants were walking back and forth with platters in their hands. “Zeke,” I squeaked. “Did you know we were this close to the kitchen?”

He grinned, grabbing my chin and bringing my attention back to him. “I told you that you belong to me here. I’ll have you wherever I want you.” Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, he pulled me to the last set of stairs that I now knew were right by the kitchen.

I wrinkled my nose as we passed by. “Why is the kitchen on the second floor?” I had no idea if the servants had heard us, but I successfully didn’t make eye contact with any of them, even as I felt their eyes on us. I was suddenly grateful for these dark hallways. “This is a mysterious castle, by the way. Library on the top floor, kitchen on the second...”

“That’s only one of the kitchens. We utilize it because it’s closest to the dining room.” Once we leveled out on the bottom floor, he cocked his head to the left. “We have another one on the opposite side of the castle next to the grand rooms for events.” We passed by a window, and he stopped me, standing behind me as he pointed toward one of the many stone walls. “Behind that wall is another tower, which houses another kitchen for outdoor events, like garden parties and other shit like that.”

I snorted at his explanation. “Other shit like that, huh? Sounds romantic.”

He spun me to face him. “And I will romantically fuck you in all of them.”

I bit my lip to keep from smiling but failed.



HIS WALK into the dining room was cocky. As we entered, he kissed the top of my head; his arm draped over my shoulders again. With him around, no one would ever mistake to whom I belonged.

Mira clapped her hands together as she saw us. “You two are like a dream!”

I hadn’t stopped blushing all morning and wondered if being in love would always be like this — me being a complete fool.

He kissed the tip of my nose and released me to pull out my chair. Once I was seated, he settled into the chair next to mine and grabbed my hand.

I smiled. As royalty in our realm and especially in his kingdom, he should be at the end of the table where he had been this entire trip, but with me, he didn’t seem to care about his title. And since I outranked him, my place was next to the kingdom’s queen, but he blatantly scooted my chair farther away from Mira and closer to him. Mira said nothing about it, only continuing to smile at us together.

I felt we were one breath away from him forgoing the chair altogether and pulling me into his lap.

When Matthew came to my side to fill my glass with wine, Zeke squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. “Matthew,” he said, looking at me with a wicked grin. “Did you know that I’m engaged to this enchanting creature?”

My eyes widened. I hadn’t agreed to the proposal, and here he was, declaring it. And then my eyes narrowed on him as I turned to Matthew. “He’s rather presumptuous, darling Matthew.”

“I can’t blame him,” Matthew said with a smile, bowing. “Good morning, Queen Raven.”

“Just Raven, darling. It’s what all of my friends call me.”

Mira looked at me, her lips slightly parted in surprise.

I gave her a slight shrug. “I insist.”

“Raven,” Matthew repeated.

I nodded and worried my fingers might be breaking. Matthew departed from my side and moved to Zeke, filling his glass with wine. He was brooding, refusing to look at me as I tugged on his hand. Leaning over, I kissed his cheek softly. His body relaxed, and his hold on my hand loosened. “You possessive, beautiful man. Play nice.”

A grin lifted on his cheek, and he turned to me, staring at my lips. “Never.”

I wanted him again, and he knew it. I could practically taste his smugness.

“You’re both glaringly obvious and obnoxious.”

I twisted in my chair to see Jeanine walk around the table, sitting across from me. “Well, mostly Zeke. Raven is tolerable.”

I snorted while Jeanine and Zeke stuck their tongues out at each other.

“I am sitting with children,” Mira sighed.

Smiling, I fixated my attention on her. “How are you this morning, sister?” After we’d left the cathedral last night, I again asked Zeke if Mira needed to be informed of the man living there, but he simply shook his head and gave me no further information about why he wouldn’t want to tell his queen.

He responded that his only queen was me.

“I am well, Little Bird. Busy, busy day. Your party is coming along wonderfully.”

“I am looking forward to it.” Despite his public declaration, I still hadn’t made up my mind. I loved him, but I had a kingdom full of people I needed to think about. Binding us to Reales may be frowned upon by the other kingdoms.

“Did you have a chance to speak with your advisers yet about my offer?”

She gave me a smile that didn't reach her eyes. “I haven't yet, but I promise to today.”

I grabbed her hand and held her gaze. “I would love for us to have this project together. I would love to have many projects together like this once our kingdoms are tied.” I was trying to gauge her reactions, but she remained stoic. Collected.

She patted my hand. “We are owed that time together, aren't we?”

I gave her a sweet smile and nodded, releasing her to take another sip of my wine. Jeanine and Zeke exchanged a look. I would go crazy not being let in on this secret. “Where is John this morning?”

“Meeting with someone,” Mira replied.

Zeke's fingers loosened around mine. “Is that so? And who would that be?”

I looked between the two of them. Their tension was evident when I was around them, but Zeke seemed to genuinely dislike my sister, even though she said she was fond of him.

“The whereabouts of Raven's adviser is not your concern,” Mira replied. “And what are your plans today, Ezekiel? Going to the training yard?”

He stiffened. I didn't look at him. I was highly on guard, knowing there was something they were waiting for me to figure out. And I was curious about where John went, but their tension made the air so thick that it felt sticky around us, making me uncomfortable.

“If you'd like me to,” he answered. “Raven asked me to escort her into the village if that can wait until tomorrow.”

I hadn't asked him that, but I did want to spend the day with him. I didn't want him to go to the training yard, whatever that was. I was only here for a few days and wanted

every second of the trip to be spent with him. And then I realized I wasn't sure when I would see him again after I left.

He looked at me as I frowned, sensing my sorrow.

"Of course, it can," Mira said. "What our Raven wants, she gets."

"I'll make a list then," I joked.

Mira laughed. "Whatever you need, Ezekiel will make it happen."

"She knows that," he spoke up defensively and hurriedly.

I blew out a breath and met Jeanine's eyes. She raised her eyebrows slightly, her eyes flaring as she could also feel the tension in the room.

"He's done nothing but exactly that." I pulled my hand from his and placed it on his cheek. He tilted his head into my touch. How was this man mine? "You put me in the very best hands." I brushed the pad of my thumb over his cheekbone before dropping my hand to his again.

Mira grinned as she watched us, but it wasn't kind — it was satisfied. My eyes slowly moved to Jeanine again, and she gave me a subtle nod. I was a mission. The words replayed in my head from what Zeke had told me in Seolia. A mission. A mission for what?

I desperately tried to connect the dots, staring into Jeanine's eyes as she tried to tell me mentally. If only I had Zeke's ability and could shift through memories.

Zeke held up a pear in front of my face, and I smiled, grabbing it from his hand and taking a bite. I put it to his lips, and he took a bite, grinning at me as he chewed.

He held my entire heart in his hands.

When he nodded toward the door, my skin tightened at the mere thought of being alone with him. I turned to Mira as she spoke with Jeanine about something, stopping when she noticed me staring at her. "We're going to begin our excursion." I stood from my chair and leaned over to kiss the top of her head. "We'll see you at dinner?"

“Of course, Little Bird.”

I looked at Jeanine next and realized I hoped to see her today, too. “Find us in the village if you want to join us for lunch.”

She smiled warmly before Zeke grabbed my hand and tugged me to the door.

“Goodbye to you, too, Ezekiel,” Mira called out.

He raised his hand in a small wave without looking back. Jeanine laughed as he pulled me out in the hallway and pressed me against the wall to kiss me, his lips traveling across my jaw and down my neck. I sighed into him and tilted my head for him to skim across my collarbone. “Where are you actually taking me?”

“Our bed.”

I laughed, trying to shove him off of me. “We spent all night in your bed.”

“Our bed,” he corrected me, pushing his hips against mine and caging me with his arms. “We didn’t properly break it in.”

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t even count how many times we broke it in. Still not enough for you?”

He shook his head with a sly grin.

“What will it take to break it in properly?”

“I need twenty-four, no, seventy-two hours of being locked in a room with you. No breaks.”

I laughed again, throwing my arms around his neck. “I wouldn’t be able to walk. I can barely stand now without my legs shaking.”

He groaned, kissing my neck again. “I don’t want you to walk. I want you to rely solely on me for everything. What I want,” — he lifted his head again — “is to be inside of you.”

As he resumed his kisses down my throat, I looked around. We were still outside the dining room, and I was hyper-aware of that. The dark hallway was not the same as an open area like this. “You weren’t joking about taking me anywhere.”

“Baby, I would go back in that room and have you for my breakfast.”

His words sent shivers down my spine, and he grinned against my skin. “You like that, don’t you?” He raised his head to meet my eyes. “You want people to watch us.”

“I like when they can see what you do to me,” I whispered shyly.

His gaze on me turned predatory. “Looks like we’ll be spending our day in public.”

CHAPTER NINE



RAVEN

*H*is arm was around my waist as we left the castle. We'd changed in his room and had to stay on opposite sides because the temptation to fall back into bed was too great, though I regretted it immensely.

He looked downright villainous in black pants cut to show off his muscles, tucked into his canvas boots. His black shirt was untucked and hung off of him, exposing part of his clavicle. He had a charcoal-colored jacket that matched his eyes with his hood flipped up, his black hair peeking out from the edges.

And he was making it nearly impossible to resist him.

I had tucked my fitted leather pants into matching boots and wore a plain long-sleeve black tunic with a leather jacket over it. I had shifted into Frost, and he had braided my blonde hair before we left. The short braid left wisps of hair sticking out from my hood, framing my face.

We were quite a pair of *despair* in our black ensembles and twisted souls.

He grinned at me while I very obviously checked him out, and even through my ice, heat bloomed. That only made his smirk widen. I shoved at his side, and he chuckled, fully aware of how much I was aching for him. "I love you," he murmured. "Are you tired of hearing that yet?"

I looked at him, the darkness inside me scattering at his words. “I love you more.”

He turned me to face him, wrapped his hands around my waist, lifting me until my legs were hooked around his middle, and continued walking with me stuck to him. I pulled his hood down and tangled my hands in his hair as I began to kiss him. He sighed into my mouth, his arm sliding underneath me to rest my weight against it. His other hand cupped the side of my neck, and I tilted my head into it, opening my mouth for him to tangle his tongue with mine.

Starved for him — I was utterly starved for him as heat spread across every inch of my body, threatening to overtake the ice. We wouldn’t make it into town if we kept this up.

Pulling back just enough to look around, I noticed we were on the empty road that led into town. “Is this public enough?”

He smiled and shook his head, kissing away my pout. “Put your flames away, my love.”

I blinked, trying to shove down the flames in my irises that were melting the snowflakes. “Stop flirting with me then.”

He lowered me to my feet. “That’s never going to happen.” He pulled a thin piece of fabric over his mouth. It was the one he’d worn when he followed me around yesterday.

“Why do you wear that?”

“Why did you disguise yourself in your village?”

I snorted at the ah-ha moment. “I don’t need you answering my questions with logic.”

“Where do you want to go first, smart-ass?”

“You owe me a favor for declaring celibacy.”

He glanced at me. “Are you sure? It’s permanent.”

“*Really?*” I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“It might hurt.”

I shrugged. “I rarely feel physical pain. Only when you nearly broke my fingers at breakfast.”

“It was either your fingers or his neck.” He grabbed my hand and kissed my fingers. “I apologize for hurting you.” He bit down gently on the tip of my middle finger. “Forgive me?”

“You didn’t hurt me,” I assured him. “I promise.”

He kissed my fingers once more, and I smiled, though it fell into a frown at the gloomy demeanor of everyone walking around. “Why does everyone seem so unhappy?”

He sighed. “I’ve tried to warn you, Raven. It’s different here.”

“Why don’t you like Mira? She said she’s fond of you...”

He interrupted me by laughing loudly, looking at me as if I were lying. “She did not.”

“She did. Yesterday, whenever she tried to figure out if I would ever forgive you.”

He shook his head slightly. “She’s something.”

“Are you ever going to tell me anything?”

“Yes.” He kissed the top of my head. “I promise. Time, remember?”

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “Yes, yes. Time.”

The more people we encountered, the more I noticed staring at us. His arm was around my shoulders, and it was dominant. Possessive. But I didn’t believe I was the one they were staring at. As I followed eyes, I realized that it was him they weren’t only staring at but gaping at, even with his face partially covered.

I wrapped an arm around his waist, hooking my fingers into the waistband of his pants. Usually, when my envy flared, flames were brought out. But now, my hand started to burn uncomfortably with something different as blood coated my tongue.

Blood I wanted to draw.

I flexed my fingers, focusing on one woman in particular who was smiling shyly at him. Cocking my head, that unfamiliar pool of hatred surged through me, and he tugged on my braid, drawing my chin back until I was looking at him. “Down, girl.” He searched my face. “Whatever that is, it’s deep. It overcomes your senses.” He dragged me to the sidewalk and pulled the fabric down his mouth. “You feel like a different person. Cold, but not Frost. Something else.”

“Dead,” I whispered, looking behind him to search for anyone else who could be looking at him. “I need life.”

“Need life,” he repeated, dipping down until he could catch my gaze. “You have life. I’m yours. Breathe. Stay with me.”

Movement caught in the corner of my eye, and I narrowed them as a woman slowly approached us from the side. Zeke raised an eyebrow and turned his head to follow my gaze, muttering a curse word. He pulled the fabric over his mouth and brought me in front of him, putting his hands on my shoulders. “Please stay calm,” he mumbled.

Putting my frostbitten hand behind my back, I drew in deep breaths quickly through my nose — so quickly that I was becoming lightheaded.

“Zeke,” the woman greeted him bashfully. She was beautiful, with long auburn hair and freckles speckled perfectly across her nose. She was taller than me and had long legs covered with a beautiful skirt full of floral embellishments in grays and silvers. I couldn’t tell if I was jealous of her or the skirt. “I heard you returned. I was expecting you to swing by the shop. We received the requested shipments of soaps, and I’ve been saving yours so I could give them to you personally.”

I clenched my jaw so tightly that I worried it might break. He squeezed my shoulders, kneading his thumbs into my skin.

Distracting me with pain, I realized.

“Thank you, Thia. I will send for them. My fiancée may want to request some, too.” He tugged the hood off my head

and kissed my temple. “My love, Thia’s father owns a shop down the road that sells novelties like scented soaps and candles. They get them in from surrounding countries.”

“Fiancée,” Thia repeated, disappointment painted all over her face. “I thought that was only a rumor.”

The burning in my hand was slowly spreading up my wrist, and I tried to shake it out behind my back. Since I didn’t know what this was, I couldn’t control it, and it seemed desperate to be freed. I had to keep telling myself that I didn’t harm the innocent, and she committed no crime by falling for Zeke’s charms. Yet, the dull screaming inside me was working hard to dispute that logic.

“Not a rumor,” Zeke replied, reaching between us to grab my hand to stop my fidgeting. “Do you want anything, my love?”

“Mm,” I hummed, turning my head to rest my cheek against his chest as I stared at him. “Surprise me. Whatever you choose, you can bathe me in it tonight.”

He smirked at me and shook his head slightly as he leaned down and brushed his lips across mine. I didn’t have to look at Thia to feel her eyes burning into us. “Our natural scent is my favorite,” he said, looking at Thia again. “But let’s order lavender, citrus, and lilies.”

Violet, orange, white. The colors of my elements.

“Fine,” Thia responded with a snap. “They’ll be ready to pick up in an hour.”

Zeke nodded. “Thank you.”

After she had turned to walk away, I stepped out of his grasp and flipped my hood back up, placing my hands on my hips as I glared at him. “Is that the real reason you wear this disguise of yours? Fucked too many women?” Goddamn, my hand was burning. I curled and uncurled my fingers, trying to push it down.

“Raven,” he said gently, reaching for me. “Come here.”

I shook my head, and the look on his face changed as he stared into my eyes. “You’re slipping. Whatever you’re feeling, you can’t feed it.”

As I went to take another step away, he grabbed me and smashed his lips against mine, cradling the back of my head in his hand. I tried to fight him at first, pushing his chest with my fist, but he only held me tighter against him, and his kiss went from desperate to tender, slowly bringing me back to him.

The only thing that seemed to keep this from entirely overtaking me was the love of this devastating man.

“Raven,” he whispered softly against my lips. “I love you, I love you. I am completely devoted to you.”

“You called me your fiancée,” I mumbled in reply. “That’s twice today.”

He opened his eyes to look at me. “I’m sorry; does that bother you? Mira has told everyone we’re engaged.”

The idea of marrying him didn’t bother me, but I didn’t feel we had a proper proposal. He only did it because he needed to get me back to Reales. He hadn’t even answered my question on if he wanted to marry me; he always deviated it to me.

Was this being forced upon him, too?

“Why haven’t I seen what you have? The flashes of our lives before.”

He frowned. “I don’t know.” Gloom seemed to settle on him as he stared at me, his eyes searching over every inch of my face. “I don’t think your heart and mind have synced,” he continued. “And my life here probably isn’t doing anything to help that.”

I sighed, turning my head to look down the road where Thia had disappeared. “You have a past. So do I.” I looked at him again. “And while I’d rather not meet every person you have a past with, it doesn’t change my love for you, but I will not be so reserved next time if she flirts with you again.”

He grinned. “I wouldn’t mind seeing that.”



AFTER CONVINCING him that I still wanted the favor he owed me, he brought me to the tattoo parlor on the outskirts of town, close to the abandoned part. I stared at the gray-stone shop with iron bars on the windows, frowning. What were they trying to protect against?

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

That had to be the hundredth time he’d asked. “Yes,” I answered, exasperated.

Leading me inside, he removed the cover from his mouth. It was a quaint shop with only one station and empty walls, smelling thickly of cigars and whiskey. A heavily tattooed man looked up from his seat at our arrival, laughing loudly when he noticed Zeke. “If it isn’t the prince himself.”

That still sounded so strange to hear.

Zeke reached his hand out. “Lunden.”

Lunden took it, giving it a big shake. “Here for a tattoo?”

He nodded down to me. “After her.”

Baffled, I looked up at him. He hadn’t told me that he was getting another one.

When Lunden bristled, he drew my attention back to him. Zeke’s hand tightened around mine. I assumed Lunden wanted me, too, and I could only hope Zeke wouldn’t kill him before I got what I came here for.

Two possessive, envious people were in love, and it seemed no one was safe.

“She’s too good for you.”

When I turned my body into Zeke’s, his arm wrapped around my shoulders to keep me close to him. Steam would be the only word I could use to describe him at this moment. Irritation was so heavily coming from him that even I could taste it as Lunden continued to stare at me.

“She is,” Zeke finally replied, his voice becoming more profound. “But she’s also mine.”

His. Not the queen. Not a witch. His.

He’d said it many times in private, but this was a public declaration. I belonged to him.

“Keep that in mind when your hands are on her.” He was every inch a leader. His authority quickly overpowered anyone in his way. Even if he weren’t the prince, people would bow at his feet, if only because he commanded respect whenever he entered a room.

Lunden held his palms up to Zeke and nodded once. “What are you wanting to get?” He spoke with a little more hesitancy in how he addressed me.

I looked up at Zeke, who shook his head as I nodded. “Wait outside.”

“Raven,” he growled, his fists clenched.

I stuck out my bottom lip. “Please?”

He expelled a deep breath through his nose but leaned down and kissed me gently before sending Lunden another threatening stare and pushing out the door. I rolled my eyes as he began to pace outside, squinting his eyes to see me through the window.

“A bit overprotective.”

I grinned. “Understatement of the year.”



I’D BARELY MADE it outside before Zeke rushed me, looking me up and down to try and figure out where I put it. I rocked back and forth on my heels, feigning innocence with my eyes. “What?”

“Raven,” he whined.

I couldn’t help but smile at his desperation. Relenting, I lifted my shirt and gently peeled back the white cloth taped to

my skin. Like his tattoo, on my ribcage, right below my heart, sat an outline of a ship with two sails and a shooting star gliding past a crescent moon. His eyes glazed as he carefully brushed over it with his fingertips. “It’s our perfect world,” I murmured.

He stared at the fresh black ink on my skin.

Those monstrous shadows he was so ashamed of clouded behind the tears, bringing dark-gray thunderstorms. How he could believe something so beautiful should be hidden was beyond me — every part of him mattered, and every piece of him was good and lovely and right.

“Maybe my heart and mind aren’t synced up, but I wished for you. Every night, Zeke. I wished you’d love me and come back every night we were apart. I wished we’d find our way back to this, to our dream. Tiny little demons and all.”

His fingers left my skin, and my shirt fell back down as he stared at me silently. I wondered if he liked it, but then he leaned and kissed me so softly that my heart leapt.

He touched the tip of my nose with his. “Never in my life, Raven... never in my life did I ever imagine it was possible to love someone the way I love you.”

I threw my arms around his neck, and he kissed me again, peppering feathery ones along my jawline. “What are you going to get?”

He sucked the corner of my jaw, and I whimpered, tugging at the hair behind his neck. “Come with me,” he whispered against my ear, taking my arms from his neck and putting them around his waist as we walked back inside.

Lunden was still at his station, and Zeke dragged me over with him, sitting down in the chair and pulling me into his lap. He kept one arm around my waist but placed his other hand on the small table. “Her name.” He nodded down at his hand. “One letter per knuckle. Raven.”

I puckered out my bottom lip and shook my head. “You don’t have to do this. Everyone will be able to see that, and it’s forever....”

“You are forever,” he interrupted, putting a finger against my mouth. “You.” He returned his hand to the table, nodding for Lunden to start.

I watched as, one by one, Lunden drew a letter from my name on his knuckles. This was more than a public declaration. This was permanent. He was loudly shouting that he belonged to me. He wanted to quiet my doubts and show the world that he was only mine.

I traced his jaw with my finger. “I love you.”

Without moving his hand, he shifted me closer to him and palmed the back of my neck, drawing my face closer to his. We kept our foreheads pressed together, breathing each other in.

How could any part of me be out of sync about how I felt about him?

“Finished,” Lunden said.

Zeke picked up his hand and studied his knuckles. My name was in heavy, black block letters and loudly evident. “You spelled my name wrong,” I sighed.

Zeke grinned as Lunden’s eyes widened, grabbing Zeke’s hand to double-check.

“Just kidding,” I said through a giggle.

Lunden glared at me and dropped Zeke’s hand. I slid mine on the table and pointed to the flesh between my thumb and forefinger. “Give me a ‘Z.’”

“Raven,” Zeke said, his voice heavy with emotion.

When I looked at him, his head was rolled back as he stared at the ceiling. He dipped his chin and cupped my face in his hands, bringing my lips to his to kiss me passionately, one of his hands dropping to graze along the inside of my thigh. I jerked from the contact, laughing through our kiss as Lunden snapped at me to be still. Zeke smiled and nipped at my nose before releasing me.

I brought his hand to my lips and kissed each knuckle. With a mischievous grin, he slid one of his fingers into my

mouth. I bit down gently before sucking the tip of it while circling my tongue. His grin disappeared, quickly replaced by pure hunger. Glancing down at my hand, he smacked the side of my hip to get me to stand once it was finished.

I smiled at my hand as he paid Lunden. Even with his previous irritation, he tipped him generously.

Taking my hand, he pulled me out of the parlor and didn't utter a word as he weaved us through the people scattered along the street. There seemed to be more the later it became and the thought of him taking me somewhere between them made a surge of thrill and unease rush me.

His walk was hurried but cool. Meanwhile, I felt like everyone who stared at us knew where we were going and what we were about to do.

He pulled me into a tavern, and we were met with a sudden increase in volume as voices around us boomed loudly. I swallowed nervously at the number of people in there. How was this going to work? Was he going to drag me into the middle of everyone and take me there? Set me on a table?

I opened my mouth to ask, but he pulled me until we were sitting in a booth tucked in a dark corner, covered with an ivory tablecloth that skimmed the floor. I arched an eyebrow as he slid across from me just as an overwhelmed server came to our table to ask what we wanted.

Even with the cloth over his mouth, she was practically drooling as he told her we wanted coffee and eggs, also ordering me a mixed drink with orange juice and wine.

I hoped it was my favorite wine.

As the server disappeared back into the bustling crowd, he leered at me with a grin.

"I'm not hungry for food," I mumbled.

"Neither am I. Keep your hands on the table."

Before he stealthily ducked underneath the tablecloth, I didn't have time to ask why. I felt his hands on my thighs and looked around. No one was looking at us, which I hoped

meant no one noticed him disappearing. His hands pulled at my thighs, scooting me to the edge of the bench.

Maybe I had been a bit too brave.

I cleared my throat, sitting taller while he spread my legs farther apart. My entire body was abuzz with nervous energy, and he wasn't giving me any time to doubt myself before he tugged at the waistband of my pants and dragged them over my hips, exposing me from the waist down. I fumbled for the hem of my tunic to cover the sudden batch of naked skin.

When he kissed the inside of my bare thighs, I jumped at the contact, feeling the vibration of his laugh against my skin and nearly crying out when his tongue shoved right into my core. With nothing around for me to grab, I looked around frantically while his tongue stabbed relentlessly into me.

The server returned to our table to find me alone, cocking her eyebrow as she stared at the empty seat across from me while setting down our coffee and juice. I curled my fingers into a fist, piercing my skin. "He'll be right back," I choked out with a dry mouth.

All the while, he wouldn't let up, and I barely noticed the server walking away as my hand gripped tightly around the glass of orange juice and tried not to pant as his lips closed around my clit, sucking. I had no idea where to look, what to do, or how to react as heat blossomed in my belly, taking me higher. I started to build, but then he jerked back quickly, and I hit the table with my fist. His raspy chuckle sounded off underneath me, and when I reached under the table to bring him back, he swatted my hand away.

"I told you to keep your hands on the table," he said from underneath, making my eyes widen as I looked around to see if anyone had heard him. "Now I have to make this harder for you."

He put his hands underneath my tunic and grabbed my hips, sliding me until I was practically hanging off the seat and awkwardly leaning against the back of the booth. Running his nose down my clit, he groaned my name, causing me to curse at him as people's eyes snapped to our booth.

One simple instruction. I couldn't follow one simple instruction.

His tongue returned to torture me, making me gasp. I was sure people were thinking I was having some kind of fit. I couldn't stop fidgeting, raising my shaky glass to my lips as I tried to take a sip. He built me up again so quickly that my hands were clammy, sweat beading around my temple. And as my walls clenched around his tongue, he groaned once more.

I bit down hard on my bottom lip to keep from moaning, the force of my climax making me tremble. And since I was his favorite flavor, he remained on his knees under the table until he drank everything he could, nearly causing me to come again.

But when I felt a piece of fabric slide down my clit and dip into my core, I raised an eyebrow. "The fuck," I mumbled. "Are you... cleaning me?" I laughed out loud as I said it, causing him to laugh with me as I grabbed the waistband of my pants and wiggled my hips just enough to slip them back up.

He appeared at my side with my release shining all over his mouth, tying the cloth he'd been wearing all morning back around his neck. "I wasn't *cleaning* you. I want to smell you every time I wear this."

I had no response other than grabbing his chin between my fingers and pulling him down, crashing my lips against his. His hands fisted my hair, and we were practically sideways, heavily locked in a deep kiss, when I heard plates set down in front of us. Breathless, I pulled back from him.

"You two enjoy," the server mumbled as she walked away.

I smiled as adrenaline pumped through my veins at what we had just pulled off.

"I told you I'd have you for my breakfast," he said, taking my glass of wine and drinking the remainder.

I stroked his length under the table over the top of his pants. He was bulging and swollen for me but shook his head and wrapped his fingers around my hand to still me. "We're

not done yet. I am not coming until I'm buried deep inside of you." He didn't lower his voice as he said it and caught the attention of a group of men standing close to our table. They were watching us, their eyebrows raised in interest. He didn't need to turn to sense them and grinned at me. "You have your audience."

I took it.

Grabbing his neck, I pulled him to me again and thrust my tongue into his mouth. He opened for me, greedily tangling his with mine. It was thrilling to know that people were watching us, wanting to be us. The amount of passion we shared for one another seemed rare, and I wanted to show it off. I never wanted to stop. I would let him have me anywhere he wanted, just so long as he was mine.

His arms were around my waist, and I was in his lap, my senses overwhelmed by how much I needed him. It was blossoming deep within my stomach and spreading like wildfire, awakening even the most deadened pieces of my heart. I broke from him, our mouths less than an inch apart, my chest heaving in tune with his as we stared at each other.

"I need you," I breathed. And I meant so much more than physically. I needed this man to breathe, to exist. I never wanted to go back to feeling nothing again if it meant erasing this feeling. I would take the pain if it kept him at my side. "I need you," I repeated, feeling the weight of those words everywhere. "Take me somewhere."

CHAPTER TEN



ZEKE

I stared at my girl, as desperate for her as she seemed to be for me. Looking at me, I could see her mind at work, trying to line up with her heart. She loved me, but something in her hadn't fully surrendered to me yet. She was still searching for something she couldn't understand, but she wanted to and would get there. I just needed to remain patient — but that didn't mean she had to be.

She wanted me, and I needed her.

Grabbing her hand, I tugged her out of the booth with me. I couldn't believe she had been so bold with me, letting me eat her in a pub full of onlookers. I felt her heat from underneath the table and was shocked that no one else could.

We weaved our way out until we were back on the street. I looked around, deciding quickly to take her back to where we had been yesterday in the abandoned part of town. The castle was too far away. She wanted it to be public, but I wanted to hear her screams for me. We had plenty of time to test more boundaries, but at this moment, I wanted to be inside of her.

She was quiet behind me, drowning in her thoughts. Whatever was taking over her was strong, and I could only keep it down for so long before it filled her up again. Her fury had always been simple to sate, and I loved bringing it to the surface, but this new one didn't satisfy me as it did her — if it even did. I loved her anger because it felt just as good for me

as it did for her, but this new one only wanted her. It was doing everything it could to keep me away from her, threatening to take every part of her until she did nothing but hate.

Though, this morning, she seemed to channel it with her envy.

Despite her beliefs, the disguise was not because of the women I may have fucked. It was because of people like our prisoner yesterday who believed me to be a traitor — as they should. I'd done nothing to help them, help my kingdom. To them, I was no better than Mira.

I hadn't expected her yesterday when I walked into the tower to see her standing with Mira, waiting for me. I kept underestimating Mira and her desperation to bring Raven to our side. Her side. My side would always be with Raven. But now, she believed that Mira wanted to protect Reales the same way she tried to protect Seolia when it was the opposite.

If Raven hadn't been there, we would have tried to bring those men into our ranks, not killed them outright. She had many more men waiting for me in the dungeons below the castle. But, it was refreshing to see Raven's fury push through when she killed him. And seeing blood on her fingers made me thirst for her, especially as she stabbed him with her ice. It was twisted and vile, and I loved every second of it. Watching her was like seeing myself, both of us hungry to steal something that didn't belong to us.

Like the masked stranger living in our cathedral.

It should have been torn down long ago once the gods abandoned our realm. There was nothing left to believe in, but Rudolf made a point to visit every day until he couldn't any longer. Sometimes, I would wait outside to help him back to his chambers when he was sick, unable to go in because my soul had been damned long ago. And maybe that was why we had a straggler living there — to seek refuge, to provide a better life for himself than the royals of his kingdom could.

But Raven still saw good in me. Somehow.

Not once did I ever believe that my black soul would find its match, becoming a light to someone else, but it had to her. We complemented each other. And now she had marked herself permanently with reminders of me — of our perfect world we created. She wished for that. She wished for me.

And she claimed to love me more, but she would never understand the depths of my love for her — how I was forever bound to her, pledging to stay by her side even if she allowed this darkness to take her from me. It would never be enough to keep me away.

Partners. We were a team.

I wanted to tell her everything — to answer all of her questions. However, she was still heavy with the hope that she had finally found her family, and Mira was playing the role perfectly of doting big sister, keeping Raven in the dark just enough for her to struggle to see my secret. If I told her, and if Mira were to find out that I had, it could mean death for all of us. It wasn't a risk I was willing to take yet.

I needed to devise a solution that would keep all of us safe.

I glanced back at Raven, and she smiled as she recognized where I was leading her. All of this had been worth it to become close to her. If only fate hadn't cursed us with such a cruel beginning. I could only hope that I could secure us a happy ending.

The road seemed emptier than yesterday, and as I looked down one of the alleyways, a group of people surrounded the barrel Raven lit yesterday. It was still burning brightly with her flames. She gave me a slight shrug. "It burns until I decide otherwise."

She was incredible.

I had to keep her safe from Celestina's bitterness. From Mira. I hated Mira more for making Raven believe she had a family here. Raven's family was in Seolia, and it was one she had built for herself. That tiny island ended up being her saving grace. If Leonidas hadn't taken her when he did, Raven might have ended up like Mira, thirsting for power. Or maybe

she would have been the same alluring, kind creature and could have turned her mother away from her desire to rule the four kingdoms.

It was a choice that Leonidas had stolen away from her. And as I stared at this ravishing creature that was trusting me with her heart, I decided not to be that man for her. I would find a solution for us. I would find a way to end this before Mira could hurt her. I would give her the answers she wanted as soon as I could guarantee her safety. I wouldn't take away her choices. If my happiness needed to be sacrificed for her to keep her own, I would do it.

Either way, she would always be mine — even if we couldn't be together in the end. Even if it broke my heart, I would keep her safe.



WHEN I PULLED her into the tavern, she started to laugh, making me smile. As soon as we were through the door, I closed it behind her, and she was climbing me. I lifted her, and there was now a familiarity in how she always wrapped herself around me, fitting perfectly. I wanted to carry her like this everywhere, somehow sew us together so she could remain on me every second.

I backed her into a wall, and she whimpered from the pressure. I was throbbing from the noises she always made whenever we were intimate. And as she resumed our passionate kiss, all I could think about was how deep in love with her I was. So deep in love that I worried it might drive me to madness.

I would be the mad prince, entirely consumed by the dark queen, and I would never have enough.

I couldn't imagine ever tiring of this. All I wanted to do every second was feel her, bury myself deep inside her, and make her scream until she had no voice left.

I wanted her to depend on me when her position overwhelmed her. I wanted her to be the queen she wanted to

be, but use me to fill in every space it may leave her with. I would hand over my crown and title if it meant being her jester because I was a fool for her.

Without breaking our kiss, I guided us along the wall with my hand until I found the storeroom, liquor bottles falling to the ground and shattering as I knocked us into shelves. She giggled into my mouth; all I wanted to do in this lifetime was make her happy.

Sitting her on the steel ladder, she immediately stood and pushed her pants down hastily while I did the same, trying to work them off quickly, but not quick enough for her as she lunged for me again before they had even fallen. She was just as needy for me as I was for her, and that realization had me fully sheathed in her in a single thrust, savoring her moan and fuck, wanting to come already.

Stamina was damned when it came to her.

I refused to take my pleasure until she found hers, but she never made it easy.

Her hands wrapped around the bars of the ladder, and she held herself up while I pounded into her relentlessly. I would draw out to the tip and slam in again, over and over, until her head was rolling back, until she was begging me with her whimpers and words.

Leaning forward, I bit the flesh between her neck and shoulder. She gasped, her raging fury shooting through her from the pain. Heat cloaked me, and I clamped my teeth down until I felt the tiniest trickle of her blood on my lips.

I couldn't understand why her blood was like drinking nectar every time it touched my tongue.

She was breathing heavily at the multiple sensations I was giving to her, my lips never stopping until I kissed every inch of her exposed skin. I whispered her name repeatedly, still unable to believe that she was mine — that I was the one chosen to be fated to this enchantress out of every person in this universe.

And fuck me if her soaked pussy wasn't the best thing I'd ever felt.

Her head dipped, and I met her eyes, grinning as red flickered behind her green, begging to be freed. I loved her as my little demon, but I only wanted to be fucking Raven right now.

I caught her lips with mine and kissed her tenderly, trying to keep her anger at bay. She cried softly into my mouth, and I returned it with a groan.

Her head rolled back again as she tightened around my swollen cock, her release cascading over me as she screamed my name. Wrapping a hand around her throat, I squeezed and felt the vibration of her high against my palm. The raspiness of her voice while she yelled my name again was strangled and raw, triggering my release as my entire body numbed from the force of how hard I coated her.

Releasing her throat and listening to how she struggled for that first breath, my thrusts slowed, and I watched her eyes come back into focus. The last bit of my cum was buried so deep inside of her that anyone who passed us on the street would be able to scent my claim on her.

Her hands shakily slid down the bars as her body weight sank onto me, her forehead resting against my shoulder. I kissed her neck, ear, and temple while I tried to catch my breath, still hard inside of her. All my body wanted was to stay like this with her wrapped tightly around me.

“Insatiable,” she whispered.

The corner of my mouth tilted up.

“I will never have enough of this.” She lifted her head and kissed me again, sucking my bottom lip between hers.

I thrust up into her out of instinct, and fuck, that whimper. I could quickly come again. One day, I would come from only her noises and make her watch. Let her see how anything she does drives me crazy.

When she pushed her hips against mine, I thrust again. She met my eyes and bit her bottom lip as I did it again, tasting the

lust filling her. She began to grind her hips against mine, and I grinned wickedly, matching her with tight, slow thrusts.

She wanted to come again, and I always gave her what she wanted.

I pushed her shirt up and pressed my lips against the fresh ink on her ribcage.

“Zeke,” she whispered heavily. “Touch me everywhere.”

I took a nipple between my lips, sucking while the tip of my tongue circled it. Kneading her other tit with my fingers, I brushed my thumb over the point of her nipple while flicking my tongue over her other. Every part of her was perfect — down to the perkiness of her nipples and how she moaned every time I touched one.

Moaning only for me. I would make goddamn sure of it.

I looked at her as she watched me, thrusting into her once more. She cried my name, coating my cock again with her release. At this point, I’d lost count of how many times I’d made her come today.

All it took was her threading her fingers through my hair and yanking my head back to lick up the column of my throat for me to unleash, moaning her name as we mixed again.

Fuck, I had never done that before. I had never wanted anyone enough to go back-to-back.

Love and leaving them had always been my forte, but I never wanted to leave her.

Her laugh was scratchy as she released me. I was still in a Raven-drunken stupor, utterly enamored by her effect on me. And when she looked at me with those deep-green irises, I wanted to fuck her again.

“We can’t be trusted in taverns,” she stated matter-of-factly.

I laughed loudly and nipped at her nose. She wrinkled it, and I kissed the corner of her mouth, slowly and unenthusiastically pulling out of her. She stood on the step and bent, pulling her pants up. I did the same, tying the strings of

my waist. She watched my fingers with darkened eyes, and I couldn't help but feel smug. It would get me in trouble one day — how cocky she made me.

“Tell me I'm the only one you've brought here,” she whispered unevenly.

I felt that unfamiliar tug in her, and when I didn't respond right away, she believed she had her answer, and her envy flared again, threatening to pull her down. Grabbing her face in my hands, I nodded. “You are, Raven. I only came here to drink.”

Her body released the tension that was building. “I just want to make you forget everyone else.” A deep gloom was sticking to her that felt like tar on my skin.

Being her flame was my most incredible honor, but it was times like this when I didn't wish to feel what she could. It broke my heart every time. Anyone I had ever fucked, except for Jeanine since I saw her every day, was a blur in my mind. I couldn't have picked them out of a lineup. I couldn't even remember when I was with Thia, only that I had been once.

How could she ever believe that I ever thought of anyone but her?

She'd become so used to everyone leaving that she was desperate to keep what was hers.

And I was.

I pressed my lips to hers. “Baby, you are the only one I think about. You consume me.”

She kissed me again, trying to shove down the hatred building. It adhered to her self-doubt, using it as a clutch to grow. She would have to learn to let people love her if she wanted it to stop.

When I broke from her, she immediately reached for me again. “Hey, little demon.”

Her eyes fluttered open.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“I feel like I’m failing you,” she cracked out, tears starting to fall.

I frowned and brought her to me, squeezing her tightly and shaking her gently to look at me. She looked so broken as she crumbled into me. “You are not failing me.” She wouldn’t lift her head as tears soaked through my shirt. “Raven, you are not failing me.”

She sniffled. “But I can’t figure it out. I know it has to do with Mira, but I can’t, I don’t…” she stammered.

“You will,” I said, shaking her again until she finally lifted her head. “You will get there. But you are not failing me. You are not letting me down. I don’t expect anything from you.”

“I want to keep you safe,” she cried.

I nearly broke with her. It was always about others with her — even as something twisted tried to overtake her, she was still more concerned about me. “I am safe, baby. I’m safe. No one is going to touch me.” Not physically, anyway.

She was still frowning, and it killed me to see her in pain.

“I mean, have you seen me?” I lifted my shirt and tightened my stomach, smiling as her eyes rolled. “No one is going to touch this.” I dropped my shirt and kissed her, nipping at her lips until I heard that sweet laugh as she tried to dodge me. “Not even my little demon can hurt me.”

Her teeth clamped down hard on my bottom lip. I yelped from the unexpected burst of pain, and she released me with a cocky grin on her face. “*Obviously*,” she retorted sarcastically.

I growled playfully at her, and when she reached to do it again, I placed a hand against her mouth. “I am very fragile, Raven.”

She giggled against my fingers. “Jeanine told me that you’re in charge of, like, a thousand men.”

I kissed her softly. “A thousand, huh? That’s quite a legion. You must think highly of me if you believe I can control that many men.”

“You underestimate your power over people.”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“You don’t see you as I do. People falter around you, just from a look.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she put her fingers against my mouth. “Dominance seeps out of you. I noticed it the night we met. I am not easy to control, but I followed you without a second thought.”

“That’s because you were heavy with lust for me.” My voice was muffled against her fingers, but she didn’t remove them.

Instead, she shook her head. “That’s because your confidence had me under a spell. You didn’t question yourself; you didn’t hesitate. I was heavy with lust, but I’ve lusted after men before without a second glance. I had to follow you simply because you were telling me to with a look.”

My heart warmed at her words, at her constant belief in me.

“You may think it’s only because of your abilities that people listen to you, that they’re frightened of you, but it’s not. It’s your very presence.”

I watched her mouth as she spoke, letting her words settle on my shoulders. In awe, in wonderment.

“Those men yesterday were terrified, and all you did was step out of the shadows. Lunden kept watching you out the window to ensure you weren’t coming in, and all you did was look at him.” She kissed the corner of my mouth. “That’s power, baby. And you have it.”



WE WERE ALMOST BACK to the castle and had maintained a comfortable silence since we left town. I kept dwelling on everything she’d said to me. Confidence. Power. Both of those words felt foreign. I was confident I could bring her pleasure and happiness. I could keep her safe. But was I confident in other areas of my life? Until I met her, I felt like the rest of my

life would be performing whatever Mira asked of me for mere moments with my mom and brother. That didn't exude confidence in my mind, but Raven believed in me. No one in town knew of my abilities, but they did seem to scatter when they saw me coming. And I never had a problem getting what I wanted from people.

Was that power?

Pulling her closer, I draped an arm over her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. Jeanine met us for lunch in town and left to shop, leaving us alone again. I was already itching to have her again. I wanted to marry this girl so bad I could taste it, but I refused to decide for her. And if her not marrying me kept Seolia safe, she may leave me again.

And I would have to let her go.

I would be content to stay like this with her even if she didn't figure out Mira's intentions. It would just mean that my current position of being Mira's lap dog would have to continue, and I could never entirely give my attention to Raven. I would hardly ever see her. I would need to travel back and forth between Reales and Seolia often, and that wouldn't be the kind of marriage she'd want. And if we had tiny little demons of our own... I stopped my thought process there. I didn't want to imagine a future with her until I knew it could be a real possibility.

She yawned. "I need a nap."

I laughed as she peered up at me. She was so beautiful. "Tired from today's activities, my love?"

She nodded with a satisfied grin.

Leaning down, I kissed her softly. "You can go rest. I'll find something to do."

She frowned and shook her head. "I'll stay with you."

She didn't want to lose a second with us, but I needed her to replenish her energy for when I planned to ravage her all night long again.

Turning her toward me, I wrapped my arms around her waist and hoisted her up. She laughed while coiling herself around me. “Why do you even bother letting me walk when it always ends like this?”

I kissed her once. Twice. “I contemplated having us sewn together.”

She wiggled. “You can’t bury yourself in me like this.”

“Having you right here would always be enough for me.”

There was passion clouding her eyes, and I kissed her softly.

“You put the stars in my sky,” she whispered as we broke apart.

I silently cursed our cruel fate.

And then her head perked up. We both turned our attention toward the back of the castle as a soft melody began to play.

Sliding down my body, she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the music. I hadn’t heard music in our kingdom in a very long time. Buried emotion swelled in me as memories of happier times lodged right at the forefront of my mind — running through the streets during festivals, dancing with my mother outside of our manor, swiping treats off tables with my brother, only for John to follow behind us and pay for everything.

Nestled deep within one of our only gardens that Mira kept maintained was a harpist. John was next to her, listening as she thrummed a soothing song on her grand and golden harp strings.

When he saw us approaching, he came over and smiled at Raven, who was bouncing on her toes excitedly, looking around him in a trance as she watched the harpist. “What is this for?”

“She will be playing at your engagement celebration. We were checking the acoustics of the garden. This is where it will be,” John explained. “Is it satisfying? If not, Mira will find someone else.”

Raven nodded. “Very satisfying. I want to bring her back with us to Seolia and have her play in the castle all day long.”

John laughed. “We will have to create a budget for that.”

“Is this who you were meeting with earlier?”

John swallowed and blinked a few times, probably trying to come up with a lie to tell her. “No, I was meeting with some old friends.”

Old friends. Our family.

“Oh, of course.” Raven smacked her forehead. “I forget you’re from here.” She looked at me then. “What do you think? Do you like it?”

I frowned. I didn’t even know if she’d marry me. This engagement celebration was pointless if I didn’t have her at the end of it. But for her, I nodded with the only grin I could manage. “Whatever you want, Raven.”

John stared at me because he knew. He knew what this was doing to me — knew that this was slowly breaking my heart.

But Raven beamed at me in her perfectly Raven way. Joyful and excited and enrapturing. “Dance with me?”

I wanted to tell her all of it right then. I wanted to end this ruse, this tangled web I had weaved for us. I wanted to say fuck it all, but I couldn’t. I had too many people relying on me and lives that I was responsible for.

Instead, I led her into the center of the garden and put my hands on her waist, laughing as she rose to the tips of her toes to throw her arms around my neck. She laughed with me, locking her fingers together behind my neck. “We’re so mismatched,” she said with a pout.

I shook my head in disagreement. “We’re not.” I snaked an arm around her waist and lifted her just enough to stand on the tops of my feet. “The universe made you small, so I could always bring you as close as possible.”

Her smile was warm, and she rested her cheek against my chest while I barely moved us around the garden. Stroking her

back with one hand, I gently tugged on the ends of her hair. “Why were you sad at breakfast this morning?”

It took her a moment to look at me, and the same sorrowful frown was on her mouth when she did. Whatever made her feel that way, I had just reminded her of it and suddenly regretted bringing it up. “Whatever it is, Raven, I’ll fix it.”

“I don’t know if you can,” she said with a sigh. “It’s selfish of me.”

Mirroring her frown, I kept her close as she tried to step away from me. “Tell me, baby.”

She dropped her hands around my neck and placed her palms against my chest, staring at her fingers like she was too embarrassed to look at me while she said it. “I want you to come back with me, but I know you can’t. I understand that you have responsibilities here.”

“I do,” I agreed quietly. “I wish I didn’t. I would enjoy nothing more than returning with you.”

She cleared her throat as she nodded, retreating a step as she palmed her eyes. “Fuck, I’m sorry. I think I’m just exhausted.”

“Raven...”

“No,” she said softly, shaking her head. “I’m not upset. I just need to sleep. I get like this when I’m tired. I can’t think straight, and it always makes me emotional. That burden shouldn’t be placed on you, and it was selfish of me to bring it up.”

“Raven, it’s not a burden for you to ask me to come back with you....”

“Can you walk me back to your room?” She forced a small laugh. “I tend to get lost in that castle.”

Before I could say anything else, she turned and walked away, passing by John, who then looked at me. I hung my hands loosely on my hips, watched as she walked away from me, and then met John’s stare.

His look was one of apologies and heartbreak for his queen.

For his son.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ZEKE

I loathed awkward silences.

Running a hand through my hair, I watched as she sat on my bed, unsure what to say or how to make this better for us. And honestly, uncertain of how our relationship would be able to withstand all of this pressure without one of us cracking. “Sleep,” I said gently. “I’ll be here when you wake, I promise.”

“I have nightmares without you,” she said quietly, lowering her eyes.

My forehead drew in as I crouched down to face her. “Why haven’t you told me that?”

She gave me a slight shrug. She was ashamed, and I worried she felt that way because of how much she wanted me. Not just physically but permanently in her life. And I wanted to promise her that I would never go anywhere, but she needed the option of leaving me once she discovered what kind of person Mira was. I didn’t want her to sit with guilt if it came to that.

“What kind of nightmares?”

She sighed and kicked off her boots, scooting back until she was leaning against the headboard and burying herself underneath the quilts. “I can’t remember them well,” she said through a yawn, blinking her eyes after she did it like she was

trying to keep them open, making me smile. “I’m always trapped somewhere and can’t get out.” Like she had been trapped in her nightmare on the ship the day we arrived. She was stuck in her subconscious, and I couldn’t reach her. “Maybe I’ll be fine now that I have you.”

Maybe. Until she had to return to Seolia alone.

“I didn’t have any last night,” she continued, trying to reassure me.

I smirked. “We didn’t sleep last night.”

Yawning again, she slipped lower into the quilts as sleep threatened to drag her under. “For the ten minutes we did.” Her voice was scratchy and heavy with slumber.

“Well.” Standing, I climbed in and pulled her to lie on my chest. “We’re not sleeping tonight, so you need to now. I’ll stay here until you fall asleep and ensure nothing traps you.”

“I love you,” she breathed with sadness, kissing the corner of my mouth before she snuggled back down on my chest. “Sometimes I wish,” — she whispered, resting an arm across my stomach — “Sometimes I wish you would have let us stay in our happy dream.”

Frowning, I had no reply as she drifted off into a deep sleep.

And when I slipped into her mind, something was trying to claw its way in. I shoved it back out and built mental blocks around her subconscious. It would only hold until she woke up, but it was enough to give her a peaceful sleep until I returned.

And sometimes, I wished that, too.



I WANDERED through the castle corridors to locate Mira. She was here somewhere since she rarely ever left. She refused to go into town, knowing what she had created. It was no longer

the pleasant place we grew up in, and it didn't seem to guilt her.

Knocking on her office door, I sighed as the knob twisted. Annoyance was blatantly apparent on her face when she saw me. "Ezekiel. What do you need?" She took a step back, allowing me to enter.

I strolled in coolly and leaned against a wall. The large office belonged to Rudolf, but she moved into it once his illness had completely taken over. Maps of our realm and portraits of royals from different generations filled the walls. A giant portrait of Celestina that Rudolf commissioned sat behind the cherry oak desk. I shivered as I stared at her. She'd been haunting my dreams with Raven for months.

Clearing my throat, I looked away from the former queen. "Let me see them." I tried to keep the desperation out of my voice, but it was evident in my eyes.

She closed the door, her mouth thinning in a straight line. I could see glimpses of Raven in her, but she was mostly made up of Rudolf's traits, and he wasn't known for his physical attributes. Mira's eyes were the same as Celestina's, but they were empty, and unlike the bright white of Raven's, hers were gray, and the green irises looked dull in comparison. She was taller than Raven, which made her appear more menacing and not as delicate as my love.

I looked toward the door like I could see out into the hallway, already missing her. Fuck, how were we going to live apart when I couldn't even be in a different hallway as her without wanting her?

"Not yet," she replied.

My fists clenched inside my jacket pockets. "She's here. I did what you asked."

She gave me one of the fake smiles that didn't reach her eyes. I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes at her faux attempt at sincerity. "She is. She's everything I need her to be. She's wildly mad about you. She told me yesterday that she's in love with you."

A slight grin tugged at the corner of my mouth. Raven was mad about me and it made me feel light as air every time she looked at me. “Is that when you fed her the bullshit about adoring me?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “And you’re just as mad about her.”

My grin hollowed back into a frown.

“I did not anticipate you falling in love with her, though I am not surprised.” She took a step away from me and turned, ambling to the window that overlooked the back courtyard of the palace.

I remained silent. Speechless, really. My palms were sweating at the thought of Mira using Raven as another bargaining chip against me. She was much more than just a chess piece at Mira’s disposal.

“You’ll see your mother and Luca when Raven agrees to my proposal.”

Hearing my brother’s name on her tongue had rage prickling my skin. “Which is?”

“I need her to agree to marry you. I need her to declare war on Perosan and Thoya if they refuse to recognize us as their leaders.”

I had figured that out long ago. “And if she refuses?” Because she would. She loved me, but she’d spent her entire reign maintaining the Circle of Peace and the free will of her people was not something she’d justify, even for me.

Mira sighed. I wondered what would happen if I killed her now, but she had told me in many different ways that there were orders to kill my family if I attempted anything against her.

“Is this necessary, Mira? You have your sister back. I’ve seen the memories of you two together as children. You should be celebrating, not plotting.”

She was quiet as she stared out the window. I wanted to believe that somewhere deep inside of her, she thought that

very thing. Raven and I could get married and tie our kingdoms together, and that could be enough to satisfy Mira. With the magic Raven held as the Queen of Seolia and the power behind our army, it would be a large enough show of strength to not only Perosan and Thoya but all surrounding countries.

“You weren’t there,” she finally said.

And though I felt like I was there, having seen all of Raven’s memories, I knew exactly what she was referencing — Leonidas killing their mother and stealing Raven.

“Avenging my mother by controlling the kingdom of the man who killed her is my only purpose.”

“But would Celestina want you to harm your sister in the process?” I took a step toward her, my voice low and soothing. “She loved Raven; you said so yourself.”

“And I love Little Bird.”

Little bird. I feared Mira loved the Raven from twenty-five years ago and not the one sleeping in my bed right now. She was living in the past.

“The two of you have always been promised to one another. Celestina and John were arranging it.”

I nodded because I knew that already.

“We’re fulfilling our kingdom’s purpose, Ezekiel.”

Mira was too far gone. I couldn’t change her mind. And that meant I was going to lose Raven again. I would never ask her to choose me over the well-being of our realm. I couldn’t steal her people’s free will — Arthur, the little girl Raven was so in love with, even the guard at the gate who hated me — I couldn’t do that to any of them.

“You didn’t answer my question, Mira.” I was too defensive and needed to calm down, but my entire future with Raven was at stake. “What will you do to Raven if she refuses your proposal to wage war?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the answer. “Will you kill her?” If the answer were yes, I would

die with her. Living in this world wouldn't be worth it anymore if she wasn't here with me.

“No.”

I released a breath.

“But I will make sure she never returns to Seolia. She will be trapped here until she agrees.”

For Raven, that would be a sentence worse than death. She couldn't stand being locked away. It would be a mercy to kill her instead, which meant I would have to get involved, death impending or not.

I couldn't say anything else. I didn't want Mira to suspect that Raven was figuring out something was amiss in our kingdom of heathens. “She's enjoying getting to know you,” I said, maintaining the soft tone. That wasn't a lie. Raven wanted to connect with Mira and feel part of something.

“She's exquisite,” she responded quietly. “You will have beautiful children, and our kingdoms will have a very long reign under my rule.”

I frowned. We would have beautiful children. Gorgeous ones. But I refused to force my offspring to keep up with this ruse and make them as power-hungry as Mira. If Raven did agree to this insane idea, which she wouldn't, we could never have children. I needed this to die with Mira.

The thought of not having a family with Raven had a fresh sadness clinging to me. I wanted to see her sassiness and smart-ass mouth in a miniature version of her, wrapping me as tight around her finger as Raven had me. “We will see you at dinner, Mira.”

She didn't turn from the window, simply waving a hand at her side once. I stepped away to take my leave, but her voice stopped me. “Ezekiel.”

I glanced over my shoulder.

“You have ten minutes.”

I swallowed and hated that I had to be grateful to her. “Thank you, Mira.” Closing the door, I practically sprinted

down the hallway. I had to find Jeanine. It was the only way the guards would let me in. Mira trusted Jeanine to keep up with my time, and the guards wouldn't allow me in alone.

She was still in town when we left her. I didn't want to run back, but I would if it meant seeing my family again. And I needed to get back to Raven before she woke up.

Luckily, Jeanine was coming up the road as I jogged outside. I waved my arms around manically. "I have ten minutes!" I shouted.

That put her into a sprint, running up the road and throwing down her bags from whatever she'd bought in town. I followed her back inside and down the multiple sets of stairs until we entered the castle's dark underground dungeon. Like everything else in Reales, it was oversized and contained more than the eight cells Raven had in hers. And each one was full of prisoners.

We walked past them, ignoring the begs and curses from the men inside until we were standing in front of a large steel door. There were always three guards in front of it. Mira took extra precautions to ensure I couldn't get to my family alone. I could probably take all three of them down alone, but it wasn't a risk I was willing to take if it left my family vulnerable.

"He has twenty minutes," Jeanine said to them.

I glanced over at her and touched her shoulder in gratitude for the extension of my time. As one of the guards pulled open the door, I nearly fell to my knees. Luca and my mother sat at their small table, splitting a loaf of bread between them. Jeanine peeked in and disappeared shortly after informing the guard that she would return.

When Luca noticed me, he dropped his bread and ran to me. I wrapped my arms around him and then my mother, squeezing them tightly against my chest. "I'm sorry it took so long," I said. "She wouldn't let me visit before today."

I didn't want to let them go, but they needed to eat. Luca used to be almost as big as me, but having a set amount of

food every week and no way to build muscle made him seem much smaller.

“We are just happy to see you, my boy,” my mother, Alice, said upon releasing me.

She and Luca returned to their table as I leaned against the wall, perfectly content to watch them eat and be in their presence. “Tell us about Seolia,” Alice said. “About Raven.”

I raised an eyebrow at her question. John must have told her that Raven was from Seolia during one of his visits. No one else knew that Raven was the lost princess — that was the impression I was put under.

I tilted my head when she glanced at me with a coy grin. I was clearly told a lie. “Why didn’t you tell me who she was before I left?”

She and Luca exchanged a look. This had obviously been discussed between the two of them.

Jeanine returned holding a basket in her arms and set it on the table between them. Luca sat up and peered in, his entire face brightening as he pulled out fruit and a bottle of Raven’s favorite wine.

“Thank you, Jeanine,” I said with a small smile. I knew she brought them extra things when she could, but I had never witnessed it. “Is there wine left? I know a certain witch who would be very upset if not.”

Jeanine laughed, tossing me a pear. “I wouldn’t have brought it otherwise.”

I chuckled and took a bite from the pear, closing my eyes while chewing.

Raven.

“Mother.”

She looked at me and shrugged a shoulder.

“She wants to help me. She may be the key to ending all of this. I could come up with a plan—”

“No,” Alice responded quickly.

“I could tell her, mom. This could all be over. She’s powerful. She wants to know what’s going on—”

“You will not do anything of the sort,” she interrupted again, her tone of voice making me wince. It reminded me of when I was a small boy in trouble for stealing Luca’s food. “You will not risk her or yourself. And you will certainly not risk three kingdoms to save us.”

Luca nodded in agreement. My fists clenched at my sides like a scorned child.

“Your father has been to see us,” she continued. “He’s told us all about Mira’s plan. We will not take part in it. Not if it comes at a risk to you, and not if it causes war within the four kingdoms.”

“War is inevitable,” Jeanine said. “With or without Raven, Mira won’t stop until she feels she’s avenged Celestina.”

“Raven wants to help us, mom. It’s making me sick keeping this secret from her. Why can’t I tell her?”

“Because we’re not her responsibility,” Luca spoke up. “She has a kingdom of her own to protect and fight for. She doesn’t need to worry about us.”

I looked around the small cell. They would rather stay here than let Raven help us get them out and fight against Mira.

“You have a chance for real happiness, son. John said it’s unlike anything he’s ever seen; the love you two share. I knew you’d need my ring.”

I stared at my mother in bewilderment.

“I tried to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” In the corner of the room, bolts of fabric sat on a table. I cocked my head as I recognized the black lace, immediately flashing back to Raven coming into the dining hall. “Have you been sewing something?” When I sensed guilt in her, I knew. “Mom...”

“I’m happy to do it, son. It gives me something to do with my hands.”

I shook my head and pushed off the wall. “You can’t help her trick Raven.”

“I am giving your Raven gifts because I may not be able to do so otherwise.”

My Raven.

Walking to the table, I kneeled before her. She smiled, patting my cheek gently. “It’s always been Raven.”

I searched her eyes for answers, not understanding how she could have known that.

She closed her eyes. “Look for yourself.”

I gently pushed into her mind.



LUCA TUGGED on my mother’s dress as she held a baby in her arms, wanting her attention for himself. He couldn’t have been older than two years old. My mother beckoned a young me forward with her finger, laughing as I stomped into the room, clearly unimpressed what whatever she was about to show me. But as I raised to my toes to see the bundle in my arms, I poked at the blanket. “*Who’s that?*”

“*This is the Princess of Reales,*” my mother responded, lowering enough to allow me to see the baby in her arms.

I laughed out loud at the disinterest in my face, wishing I could tell the small boy that the baby in my mother’s arms would change his life.

“*You two shall marry,*” a voice said behind me, and when my mother looked up, Celestina was sitting in a rocking chair, similar to the one from Raven’s memories.

My younger self stuck out his tongue in disgust at the idea of marriage. “*She’s a baby,*” I had argued, trying to pull the blanket from her face.

Everyone around me laughed while I shoved Luca off my mother’s dress, not wanting her to drop Raven. He whined and

waddled off to John in the background as I continued to peel the blanket back, my head jerking as tiny arms sprang free from the blanket, stretching after being wrapped up.

I grabbed her hand, and when her tiny fingers wrapped around one of mine, my eyes widened as I looked at her face. “*Her eyes are the colors of pine needles,*” I had whispered.

And then I saw it. It was a flicker, barely noticeable, but there was recognition that flitted across my young eyes. And my mother had seen it, too. It wasn’t something I could have ever understood at that age, but it was why I hadn’t stopped wondering about the baby with black hair and green eyes — the memory of her sometimes coming back to me over the last twenty-five years.

“*What’s her name?*” My voice was shrouded with awe.

“*Little Bird!*” I heard a young voice exclaim. Mira rushed over to take Raven from my mother’s arms. “*She’s our little bird.*” Mira cradled Raven in her arms, and her fingers let go of mine. I stared at my hand as Mira walked away with Raven.

When I turned back to face my mother, a sense of wonderment was in my eyes as the memory began to blur.



BLINKING as I pulled out of the memory, I focused on her face. She smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s always been Raven. You just didn’t know it yet.”

My chest felt as if it might cave in.

“You’ve always been searching for something, Zeke. After she was taken, a gloom came over you, and you’ve been trying to fill it ever since.” With other women, with killing men at night. “I didn’t tell you because you needed to see it yourself. And you were so young. And after John left...” she trailed off with a sigh. “I wanted you to mature before you found her.”

Jeanine rubbed my back. My mouth felt dry. Arthur had been right when he explained twin flames to me; one would be driven to madness without the other. After Raven was taken,

my entire outlook on life changed. I grew up angry and misplaced, unsure of why it always felt something was missing.

“You will not risk her,” Alice continued. “Not for us. And you will not tell her. If she figures it out, we’ll deal with that then. But for now, just love her. Let yourself be happy for once.” She wiped away a tear that slid down my cheek. “It’s always been Raven.”

All I could respond with was a nod because she was right. It had always been Raven. It would always be Raven. Only, ever Raven. “I can’t keep lying to her, mom.”

My mother’s smile was warm. “Fate and magic used to play a bigger part in our kingdoms. Pairings were rare, but they happened. But flames, Zeke. Flames did not, and what you have with her needs to be cherished and protected. If you put saving us on her shoulders, you will risk what the two of you have.”

“But she wants to help,” I whispered, again trying to argue. “She’s my partner.”

“Then you will let this be her choice. Do not steal from her as Mira stole from you.”

I lowered my head. She wouldn’t let me help them, making me feel helpless. “You knew about her — you knew who she was.”

“Yes,” my mother confirmed. “Many did. When a young girl with black hair and green eyes is chosen to a rule over a kingdom in your realm, it is not without question. But Rudolf refused to entertain the notion that a friend had stolen away his child. He was kind, but weak, even more so when Celestina died. He did not have it in him to wage war to bring her back.”

“He could’ve prevented all of this,” I whispered. “If he had...”

“If he had,” Alice interrupted. “Mira would’ve manipulated her much sooner. John kept Raven safe, kept her from people who wanted to question her right to the throne.”

“The channel,” I said. “That’s why Leonidas wanted to control who came and went to each kingdom.”

My mother nodded in confirmation. “He needed to keep his daughter safe. When he died, he gave your father strict instructions to not allow any other ruler from *any* kingdom to visit Seolia. He knew that as soon as they saw her, her true identity would be discovered.”

“But she visited Thoya and Perosan,” I said. “As a child.”

My mother smiled. “Damiana and Petra knew Celestina — were her friends. John trusted them, and they needed to meet Raven to prevent their kingdoms from declaring war on Seolia. It would’ve been very easy for Seolia to fall under the rule of one of our kingdoms, but John guaranteed that Raven had a pure heart and could control her magic.”

“Her magic,” Jeanine said, raising an eyebrow. “They knew of her magic?”

“This is a game that has been played for a very long time,” was all my mother said in reply.

I was speechless for the third time today. “Raven is not a game, mother. If she’s a pawn in something...”

“Raven is a solution,” Alice said. “Raven’s story is far from over. And your father, despite what you might think, is not the enemy you’ve believed him to be.”

A guard banged on the door in warning. I had no time to ask more questions.

Luca came up beside me and nudged my shoulder. “You don’t want her to see me anyway.” He was grinning as I looked up at him. “She’ll want me.”

Jeanine snorted behind me. I tried to laugh, shaking my head.

“It’ll be okay, Zeke.” He put his arm around my shoulders as I stood. “We have to be patient. Dad said she’s smart.”

She was brilliant and exactly what Reales needed.

“Let her come to a conclusion on her own.”

Jeanine patted my back. It was time to go, but I didn't want to leave them. I wasn't sure how long it would be before Mira allowed me to see them again. "I have to go," I muttered. "I'm sorry."

Alice stood from her chair and put her hands on my face. "We do not blame you for any of this. Stop blaming yourself."

But I did blame myself. It was my fault they were down here — that Mira captured them to keep me controlled.

"Zeke, we have to go," Jeanine said as a guard stepped into the cell.

I sighed, and my mother kissed my cheek. "Go to her, son."

Luca hugged me, playfully punching my ribs. I grinned and shoved him off.

"You two never stop, do you?" Alice asked, sighing as she stood between us. "John said she's beautiful."

"She is," Jeanine said. "She's truly unlike anyone else."

Smiling, I nodded. "She has the purest heart."

"Then don't fret, my boy. She'll win this. Good will prevail in the end."

CHAPTER TWELVE



RAVEN

*Z*eke kept his promise to me.

When I opened my eyes, he was next to me, watching me as I slept. I didn't have any nightmares. I didn't even dream. He simply told me he took care of it when I inquired about it. He also informed me that he had sensed something trying to claw its way in and that he shoved it back out. I feared he wouldn't sleep from now on until he had cleared my subconscious of anything he didn't like.

But ever since waking up, he had been quiet. Aloof. We'd made love twice since, and while I couldn't get enough of him, I felt he was trying to apologize for telling me he couldn't return with me to Seolia. I understood, but it didn't take the sting away. I planned on leaving in only a few days, and the thought of being without him made me ache. And the idea of him walking through town or running into more women from his past brought something darker out.

As my mouth watered, I watched him straighten the lapels of his dinner jacket. The way my body reacted to him... it was like it wanted to make up for living without him for so long. Even though we had one another every lifetime, I worried our curse was insatiable hunger for each other. I could never run a kingdom if he were in the room with me. All I wanted to do was touch him, taste him, and get lost in his love for me.

His grin was peeking at the corners of his mouth.

I bit down on my bottom lip as I studied that sharp jawline of his that could slice my heart in two, and it would still beat for him. He was devastating tonight, but seeing him dress in all black was like watching a painter craft his masterpiece. He was cut from the very landscapes of my deepest desires. He was walking sin, put on this earth to darken my soul.

He slicked his black hair back, and my fingers ached with the need to touch him. When a piece of hair fell over his forehead, he smoothed it back again, the ends of his strands curling underneath his ears. His tongue ran across his lips as he dipped his chin to me, sliding his hands into his pockets.

Powerful. A god. He had to be.

My skin was taut across my bones as my eyes slowly roamed down and up his tall frame. “You are my sin incarnate,” I breathed.

That raspy chuckle of his had a smokiness to it tonight, my legs parting slightly as it washed over me, the hairs on the nape of my neck rising. He crossed the room to me slowly, teasingly. I wanted to strip him and skip the next few meals. Live strictly off one another. His confidence was evident, his steps purposeful. My insides felt like honey as his gaze settled on my mouth.

He had refused to let me dress, pinning me to the bed every time I tried. And when he had stood to get dressed, I wanted nothing more than to watch him.

Now, I was very aware of how naked I was as this unearthly creature sauntered over me.

“My curse,” I whispered as his gaze became devilish.

His eyes were raking over every inch of my body. “You are doubting how much I live for you,” he murmured.

And as blush bloomed across my skin, I remembered he could feel my self-consciousness. “You are a god, my love.”

“And you, a goddess. Do not ever doubt the complete annihilation I want to perform on you just so I can piece you back together and repeat it.”

He was here to damn me to an eternal place of burning because the thoughts that ran through my mind were anything but pure. His gaze on me became predatory, like he was about to eat me alive. And part of me feared that one day, he would consume me entirely. “How are you mine?”

He towered over me and cupped his hands around my neck, his thumbs tilting my chin back until my skin stretched tightly across my throat. Being particularly explorative tonight, he started a slow assault on my mouth, skating the tip of his tongue across my lips. My eyelids fluttered from the sensation.

A low moan escaped from his throat as he teased me. I was confident he could taste my desire for him. “I am yours...” — his voice was gruff — “because I made a deal with Hades for my soul.” His teeth grazed over my jawline. “My soul for lifetimes with you.”

I couldn’t keep my eyes open from everything around me fogging. “Can I make the same bargain?” My voice was barely a whisper as his lips danced down the base of my throat. I must have been dreaming. Nothing in life could ever feel this good.

Quickly, he grabbed my waist and lifted me, trading spots until I was straddling his lap. His hands squeezed tightly around my hips, grinding me slowly against his swollen length through his pants. I sighed softly and needed more of him everywhere.

His lips found their way back to mine, and he kissed me, moving a hand to tilt my head to the side so he could push his tongue into my mouth. My heat was burning so hot inside me that I could have set my organs on fire.

He pulled back just enough to whisper against my lips, “We will always burn together.”

My eyes fluttered open as I stared into his. Something deeper than love, more profound than desire, tugged inside me. “Your eyes are the color of my ash.” I was in disbelief as I gazed at them. I had never realized it before. Every part of us was connected somehow. I had never seen eyes like his

because they were picked from a palette to complement the result of my raging blood. “You were made for me.”

I had always known that, but it cemented the longer I was with him. At this point, not even Hades could keep me away from him if he came calling to collect.

Resolve that I didn’t realize I still had was melting away, and I wanted to completely surrender to him — to our fate — no matter what the end result was.

He stared at me. Hard. His eyes traced over every inch of my face. He could sense it in me — my need to fully give myself to him — and drew in a broken breath through his nose. He was overwhelmed.

Fuck, I was, too. He could drag me into the pits of despair, and I would still beg for him. I could tell by the way he clenched his jaw that he wanted to say something, but there was nothing for us to say.

We knew we were cursed.

We had been since the second we laid eyes on each other.

We were interrupted by a knock on the door, but he continued to stare at me for a moment longer before he kissed me tenderly, his hands sliding up my back and drawing me up to my knees. He took a nipple between his lips and sucked while sliding two fingers into my core.

His physical way of communicating. This wouldn’t work forever, but right now, I wasn’t going to complain.

“Zeke,” I whispered as I cradled the back of his neck with one hand, the other balancing against his shoulder. I threw my head back while his tongue circled my nipple, his teeth sinking into the flesh gently.

His fingers sank so deep into me that I could feel his knuckles kneading into my skin. And when he released my nipple, I dipped my chin to meet his eyes. “Kiss me,” he whispered.

Barely able to focus, I kissed him. I kissed him like it was my first and last kiss rolled into one. Like how he always

kissed me, I kissed him in an attempt to convey to him how much I loved him.

As my thighs shook, I started to fuck his fingers, moaning into our kiss. And when I came over his fingers, the moan turned into a cry as goose bumps raised everywhere across my skin.

Pulling his fingers out, he broke our kiss to draw them across my lips before he kissed me again. And then he shifted me from his lap to the bed, sticking his fingers in his mouth and sucking my taste from his fingers as he walked to the door.

I was breathless as I watched him walk away, knowing that if I ever had to leave him again, I may not survive it.

He was quiet as he returned with a box, similar to the one I found at my door the other morning. He set it down on the table, and I shakily stood from the bed as he untied the brown string. Flipping the lid off, he picked up a small piece of paper with my nickname scrawled on it — another gift from Mira.

His jaw tightened as he dropped the paper and removed the tissue paper to reveal another dress. He took a slow step back and let me replace him to pull the dress from the box.

It was made of a deep-green velvet with the same intricate lacy details; only it was the sleeves that were all lace. The bodice and skirt were made of velvet, the dress not falling past my thighs as I held it against me.

I felt his eyes burning into my back as I picked the dress up and slid it over my body, smoothing it down. The lacy sleeves clung to my arms, and my olive skin peeked through the green. The skirt was loose, and it twisted with me when I twirled. I'd never seen a dress like this, and I was curious how she kept finding ones that seemed made just for me. "Where does she keep getting these?"

Silence.

"The detail is incredible. The lace always has ravens. It's like she's having them made for me."

"She is."

When I noticed his clipped tone, I stopped looking at the dress and moved my gaze to him. He was leaning on the table, his knuckles white as he gripped the edge of it. This was not his usual hungry gaze. There was something darker about how he stared at me.

I wrinkled my brow. “Do you not like the dress? Because I love it. I know it’s a little short...”

He watched me as I walked to my trunk and picked up my mother’s tiara. It still matched perfectly. I fastened it to my hair, which was wavy and fluffier than usual. Securing three bands down my ponytail, I pulled at each section until they were puffy, the shorter pieces falling out and curling around my shoulders and jaw.

He hadn’t released pressure from the table. I fully expected it to buckle underneath him.

“What’s wrong?” My voice was gentle as I asked, but it did nothing to change his posture. I stepped into a pair of black heels that added three inches to my height and then stood awkwardly, waiting. “Can you talk to me, please?”

Finally, he straightened and swallowed, rolling his shoulders to release tension. I knew his relationship with Mira was strenuous, but this was something different. He didn’t seem to like her giving me gifts, though he didn’t seem to mind the black dress.

I crossed my arms over my chest when he extended his hand. His eyes narrowed, and he slid his hands back into his pockets. Why had his entire demeanor changed? Did I scare him off earlier? Why couldn’t we spend more than two days together before we were tense again?

Averting my gaze, I sauntered past him to the door, pulling it open and not looking back to see if he followed me.

His eyes on my back could have burned the dress off me.



THE DECISION TO push his boundaries came from the frustration of him ignoring me.

Mira stood to greet me as we entered the dining room. I wrapped my arms around her tightly. “I love it, Mira. You’re spoiling me.”

She pulled back to admire my dress. “Nonsense, Little Bird.”

The nickname still gave me uncomfortable chills, but it was growing on me.

Biting my lip to keep from smiling, I slid between her and Jeanine into a chair. Zeke glared at me as he was forced to sit in his seat at the end of the table.

Jeanine grinned at me like a fiend. I met his gaze as Matthew came around to fill my glass with wine. Zeke gave me a subtle shake of his head, his eyes darkening on me as the tip of my tongue ran across my top lip slowly. “Hello, darling Matthew,” I cooed, taking a sip from my glass.

I could feel Matthew blushing from where I sat. Zeke shifted in his chair, his hands clenching and unclenching as he watched me taunt him. Jeanine was trying not to laugh from the corner of my eye, causing me to grin behind my glass.

Matthew bowed to me. “Raven.”

My name on his lips made Zeke’s eyes snap to him. I took another big sip and held the glass out to the side, Matthew immediately refilling it. I broke my gaze from Zeke and smiled at Matthew, who was beaming at me. “Thank you, darling.”

I heard Zeke’s chair shuffle as he stood. I didn’t look at him as I took another sip, but Mira was staring at him. “I need to speak with my fiancée for a moment, Mira.”

Oh, now he wanted to talk.

Jeanine snorted while Zeke left the room. I took another sip of wine and squeezed Mira’s hand. There was amusement in her voice as she asked, “You’re a dangerous one, aren’t you?”

I was grinning as I stood and sidestepped around Matthew. The hall was dark as I looked back and forth for Zeke, seeing him approach me from the shadows. I opened my mouth to say something, but his hand wrapped around my wrist, and he yanked me into a pantry. Slamming the door, he pressed me against it. “Do you think it’s amusing to taunt me with the affections of another man?”

It was dimly lit in here and I wasn’t sure he could see me, but I shrugged in response.

“It’s not,” he growled.

I glared at him. “Neither is refusing to speak to me for no good reason,” I bit back.

“If you love your darling Matthew so much, I’d suggest you realize who you’re dealing with.” His lips moved next to my ear. “His blood will be on your hands.” His hands found my waist, and he spun me around until my chest was pressed against the door.

I twisted back around and shoved him a step away. “No.”

He returned to me and kissed along my throat, slipping a hand under my dress and sliding his fingers across my stomach. “Let me have you, Raven.”

“You cannot use my body while refusing to speak to me.”

He lifted his head; his lips parted slightly. “You think I’m using you?”

“I think you use this as an excuse not to tell me how you’re feeling.”

“No,” he said hoarsely, drawing his hand out and taking a step away. “I am ashamed of myself that you believe that.” He motioned to the door with the other behind his back. “Let’s return to the table.”

I wrinkled my nose at how proper he was being. “It doesn’t mean I want you to stop touching me.” I took a step toward him and pulled him back to me. “I want this.” I placed a hand against his heart. “If you’re upset, I want to know why.

I love..." — I slid a hand down his stomach — "All of this. But I need more."

"Raven," he whispered, seemingly hesitant to touch me now. "You have all of me."

"I shouldn't have to flirt with someone to get your attention."

"Baby, you always have my attention." A small, but stressed grin. "May I kiss you before we talk?"

I rolled my eyes. "You don't ever have to ask."

He kissed me, raising my dress slowly. "May I fuck you?" He stuck a finger in my panties and dragged them down my thighs. "May I make you mine?"

"I am yours," I answered, stepping out of my panties as they fell to the floor. "Infuriatingly so."

He grinned while unfastening his pants. "Infuriatingly so?"

I nodded as he wrapped his hands around the back of my thighs, hooking my legs around his waist. "Say it again, Raven." He filled me quickly but didn't move. "Tell me again that you're mine."

"You first."

He laughed. "You stubborn little witch." Kissing along my jaw, he slid his arms up my back until his fingers could wrap around my shoulders. "I've never belonged to anyone." A kiss on my lips. "Until you."

"Yours," I whispered, putting my arms around his neck. "I'm yours."

Nodding, he began thrusting into me, holding me close to him. "Stop flirting with other men, Raven."

"Stop avoiding me," I breathed, my head falling to press my forehead against his. "Let me in."

"You're in." He dragged his hands down my back, resting them against my ribs. "Fuck, Raven. You own every part of me." His hand covered my mouth as his drive into me turned manic, preventing my sounds from escaping. "Every." In.

“Single.” Out. “Part.” Over and over, promising me, pounding into me. “Mine,” he said in small whispers, as if convincing himself.

His gaze penetrated mine as we locked eyes, and when we came, it was together. Simultaneous obsession with possessing one another was what I feared would one day bring us down.

His thrusts slowed to drag the high out, only stopping when I was full of his cum. And when he pulled out of me and set me down, he put his hand between my legs to guarantee that it was dripping. “Now he’ll smell me all over you.”

Reaching down, he grabbed my panties and slid them into his pocket after fastening his pants. “These only slow me down.”

I pulled my dress down. “And if I bend over?”

He placed his hands on either side of my head against the door. “The only time you better be bending over tonight is after dinner when we’re back in our room.”

“Our room,” I repeated, wringing my fingers in front of me nervously. *Our* room, *our* room — like we were permanent, like what was his was mine. He agreed to talk, and now I was dreading it. “I need to ask you something.” Lowering my eyes to the floor, I curled my fingers until my nails bit into my palms. “Did I scare you earlier?”

“Scare me? How would you scare me?”

I puffed my cheeks out, laughing as he squished the air back out. “I just... with what I said. I know we’ve only known each other for two minutes....” I was muttering and scrambling to get the words out.

He tipped my chin up to look at him, grinning. “Please continue.”

I glared but then sighed. “I don’t want to push you away or make you feel pressured. I have to leave eventually, and if you want to, I don’t know, split up when I do....”

He put a finger against my lips. “You’re not pressuring me to do anything. I don’t understand what brought this on, but if

I've given you a reason to doubt, it was not my intention."

"You stopped talking to me," I mumbled against his finger.

"My love." He brushed the pad of his thumb across my cheekbone. "You didn't frighten me with what you said. I was made for you, just as you were made for me. I am yours, Raven. I promised you on the ship that you were it for me, and I intend to keep that promise until I die." He kissed me softly. "Whether we've known one another for two minutes or two years, it doesn't change that. I hadn't even spoken to you when I decided to belong to you."

I sighed dramatically. "If only I felt the same way about you."

"This is the last time I'm talking to you," he grumbled. "But I never want to hear you suggest we end this again."

"But how is it going to work? We're going to be apart. I don't exactly love the idea of you needing soap now."

He laughed loudly. "Is that why you're worried? You have no reason to."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You're being so nonchalant about something that I am clearly obsessing too much over," I snapped bitterly.

He sighed. "Raven, I want you every single day. I want to see your face when I wake up." He kissed me twice. "I want to follow you around your castle, around your village. I want you to introduce yourself to your people as mine. I want everyone to see how obsessed I am with you. Do you think I'm crazy about you returning to Cade?" He shook his head. "But I have people here. I don't have the answers you want yet, but please know that I am actively searching for them, and that is the only reason I remain quiet... even if it requires me to kill Cade to ease my mind while you're away," he tacked on quickly and quietly.

Before I could speak or argue, he put a finger against my lips again. "And if you ever feel I'm using you, please tell me. The last thing I want is for you to feel like you don't matter to

me or that I only want you for your body. If you wanted to stop fucking, I would be content to stare at you.”

“You’re a lousy liar,” I said through a laugh. “Your people here... do you mean your brother?”

He stiffened just like he had done on the ship.

“Where is your brother? Do I get to meet him?”

“Not yet,” he replied quietly.

“Are you not close?” I puckered out my bottom lip. “Will he not like me?”

“Oh, Raven.” He rested his forehead against mine. “He will love you.”

“Have you told him about me?”

A small smile. “I have. I don’t think I talk about anything but you anymore.”

“Can I meet him before I leave? And your mother?”

Clearing his throat, he pulled me off the door to open it. “Maybe.”

“I would like to, very much.” I gave him a cheesy smile. “And you said you would always give me what I want.”

He slid his arm around my shoulders and kissed my temple. “One day.”

I said nothing further about it and wondered if maybe he wasn’t close with his family. Whenever I brought them up, he would shut it down quickly.

There weren’t two chairs open next to each other when we returned to the dining room, causing him to growl. He eyed his chair at the end of the table and dragged me to it, pulling me into his lap as he sat. Jeanine immediately started laughing as Mira rolled her eyes. “Ezekiel, John or Jeanine could move down if you’re insistent that you two sit next to one another.”

“This is fine,” he answered, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me back to lean against his chest. “Raven is very lax when it comes to tradition.”

I snorted, pulling my dress down. I was naked beneath and had a feeling he wouldn't be pleased if others were made aware.

“And since you're so *fond* of both of us, I'm sure you won't mind.”

Jeanine was guzzling her wine, and I realized it was to hide her expression. Mira simply smiled, though it didn't seem genuine. “I am so pleased to see both of you so happy together. Having something important to you would make the loss much greater.” She sat up a little straighter, staring at Zeke. “But we're not going to let that happen, are we?”

Zeke leveled out her stare. “No. We're not.”

I looked at John, who was rubbing his forehead, sighing. Jeanine set her glass down and cleared her throat. “Mira, why don't you tell Raven the good news?”

Mira exhaled slowly and leaned back against her chair. “I spoke with my advisers, and we would be happy to reopen the orphanage after you and Ezekiel wed.”

After we wed. A conditional reopening. “Thank you, Mira. That means so much to me.” I needed to make a decision. And fast. My judgment felt clouded. I wanted to marry him. Needed to marry him. But at what cost would it come to my kingdom? We would always have to be on guard. The kingdom of Reales was not beloved like Seolia.

“My planner is picking out flowers tomorrow. Any requests?”

I smiled. “Red roses.”

He squeezed my thigh.

“Can I go with her? Is there a flower market here?”

“Of course, you can, Little Bird. It's down by the harbor. Ezekiel will be in the training yard tomorrow, but you're free to meet her there shortly after breakfast.”

“I'll go with her,” Jeanine offered.

I gave her a grateful smile. Zeke wouldn't want me going anywhere without him, but he would feel better if Jeanine went with me. "Tomorrow then. It's a date."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



RAVEN

*Z*eke crawled up my body, satisfied with his dessert.

Not that he'd eaten anything after our reentrance at dinner. Everything was tense after his interaction with Mira, and he seemed more protective over me than usual, keeping his arm around my waist the entire time. Being lied to was my least favorite, and I had the darnedest feeling that Mira had done precisely that when she told me she was fond of Zeke. It seemed quite the opposite.

But why?

I found him rather delicious.

As did Thia, who'd left a note with the soap she sent, offering to bring it to him personally next time. I had burned through it while he laughed. I hadn't even allowed him to read it — not that he asked to. And when I had asked him how he would feel if it was reversed, his response was a growl, and he quickly claimed me all over again.

Resting his head against my chest, he listened to my heart thundering in his ear. I tangled my fingers in his hair and played with the strands, already mussed from our inability to stop touching one another.

How we were able to keep going was a mystery of the universe, and I fully comprehended how irregular it was.

We had left the bathwater running so long that it was getting dangerously close to spilling over his grand tub. *Our* grand tub, he kept reminding me. One look at me stripping out of my dress had him laying me on the floor beside it.

He kissed the space between my breasts before he rose to his knees and leaned over, shutting the water off. And then he looked at me again and grinned, running a finger down my stomach.

I lazily swatted his hand away with a smile. “You can’t keep me on the floor all night.”

“On the contrary,” he responded with a grin. “I can do what I want with you.” He laid down on top of me and trapped me underneath him to prove it.

I rolled my eyes, groaning from his weight. “You speak as if you own me.”

“I do.” He dipped his head down and kissed my neck. “You’re mine. You are your own person, Raven.” He kissed me softly. “But, as your flame, I have the right to prohibit anyone from trying to take you away from me.”

“Prohibit,” I said through a laugh. “You mean to kill.” His dopey grin in response made me laugh again. “And what about me? Do I have the right to *prohibit* anyone from trying to take you?”

“Once you see the flashes as I have, you won’t even try to stop yourself from it.” He sat up again and pulled me up. “And I feel that things will change between us once you do. Be more intense than they already are.”

He stepped into the tub first and took my hand, helping me in. Water sloshed over the sides, but he didn’t seem to care as he sank and pulled me with him until I was resting against his chest.

Frowning, I brushed my fingers across his knee. “I worry that you’ll believe I don’t love you the longer it goes without me realizing it.”

Reaching over, he grabbed the orange bar of soap from the small ledge and dipped it in the water. “I know you love me.” Running the bar of soap down my stomach, he kissed the top of my head. “I think you’ve been left a lot.” Across my chest. “I think you still have trouble trusting that I won’t leave you.”

I squirmed as he ran the soap up my ribcage. “You said our natural scent is your favorite. Do you smell what Jeanine does?”

He returned the bar of soap to the ledge. “That was a half-lie. I love smelling me on you.” He put his hand on the inside of my thigh. “Especially here. But the merged scents, no. I don’t believe I will until you accept it.”

“So much pressure,” I mumbled, sinking against him until my head was submerged.

When I came up, he turned me around until I was straddling his waist. I rubbed the water from my eyes as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I am not pressuring you to do anything. Even if you never see what I have, nothing changes between us. I know what we are to one another.”

I gave him a small smile. “I will miss you tomorrow. What will you do?”

His fingers moved up and down my ribs. “I’ll be in the training yard running drills.”

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously, but what do you do? Do you run drills with them or shout orders all day? Will you think about me?” I fluttered my eyelashes.

He laughed. “A little of both. A lot of thinking about you.”

I smiled and ran my thumb across his bottom lip. “Do you enjoy it?”

He kissed the tip of my finger. “The thinking about you? Eh.”

I tugged at his strands, and he laughed again. “I don’t mind it. It helps with my aggression.”

I pouted. “But then you won’t have any left for me.”

“Oh, you’ll find some way to piss me off and bring it back out.”

I yanked at his hair again, and he cursed, uncurling my fingers from it. “I won’t have any left if you keep doing that.”

I frowned, and he mirrored it. “What is it, baby?”

“I just want everything you do to make you happy.” I put my hand on his cheek and rubbed the pad of my thumb across his eyebrow. “You should never be anything but that. Wildly unhinged with nothing but that.”

“Wildly unhinged,” he repeated, a smile spreading across his cheeks.

I nodded with a smile of my own.

“You make me wildly unhinged.”

I giggled as he pulled me down, covering my face with kisses. “Promise me something?”

A swift movement of his hips had him filling me. My eyes rolled back, whimpering as I lost focus for a second. His grin was smug as my eyes narrowed on him. “Tell me, baby.” He began slow, tortuous thrusts. Damn him.

“Promise me that one day, all we’ll be is wildly unhinged together.”

He kissed me sweetly while his forehead rested against mine, the tips of our noses touching. “I promise we’ll give it all we’ve got.”



I WAS STANDING in a black room, but I wasn’t trapped in a box.

I spun around, but there was no way out. And similar to my nightmare after being shot, there was a glass pane in the middle of the room. I looked for Zeke on the other side, but he was nowhere to be found. The last time I was here, I was dying — fading away until he came to find me.

Had something happened to me?

As a form came out of the darkness, I froze. My hair stood on end as my mother approached me, stopping a body's length away. She was on the same side as me, and since she was dead, maybe I was, too.

I cocked my head, and she smiled at me, but it wasn't warm. It made me cold. Shivers raced down my spine, and when I tried to call on my fire, there was nothing.

My elements were frozen.

Panicking, I took a step away from her. "What do you want from me?"

Zeke would find me. He always did.

I wailed in pain as my hand started to burn, clutching my wrist as if that would somehow stop it. And when Zeke came to stand on the other side of the glass pane, my relief was quickly replaced by something sticky as a hand wrapped around his arm. His stare was empty. Distant.

Jeanine stepped out from behind him. I knew what was coming, but I couldn't find my voice.

The dark bitterness pooled in the pits of my stomach, wanting to be let free.

I took steps backward, but I saw them again everywhere I turned.

When Jeanine's hand wrapped around his neck, hot tears pushed at my eyelids. I was forced to watch as her lips pressed against his collarbone, his hands wrapping around her waist.

I pinched my eyes shut. "Notrealnotrealnotreal," I repeated over and over.

But despite my most valiant efforts, I could not wake up.

"Look at them, Raven."

The burning spread to my wrist and through my arm. My eyelids flew open, watching as he slowly leaned into her and locked her in a passionate kiss. Noiseless screams tried to escape from my throat, tears flowing down my cheeks as I banged on the glass with my fists.

My fury tried to push through the black, but it was drowned. All I felt was empty.

“Let her free.”

My eyes snapped to my mother at her command and then floated back to Zeke and Jeanine, still wrapped up in one another.

But I couldn't hurt them. And the scene in front of me changed when I shook my head, putting my burning hand behind my back.

They were no longer in a black room but in the bakery in Seolia. And I had to watch again as I stood outside the window, her hand wrapping around his arm. The look on his face as he realized I was standing there. The betrayal I had felt at that moment.

“Why are you doing this?” I whispered, placing my palms flat against the glass.

They faded to show up again in the cabin of his ship. They were laughing about something while eating muffins. I couldn't hear their words, but his bright smile was wide.

A smile I thought was only reserved for me.

“Does he love her?”

My mother came to stand beside me, changing the scene back to them standing in front of me, tangled in their embrace. Nausea rolled through me while watching his hand slide underneath her shirt, palming the small of her back.

“Do you ever wonder?” she asked, staring at me. “If maybe he never stopped?”

“He said he's only ever loved me,” I answered through the mangled sob in my throat.

“My poor girl,” Celestina said. “Always let down by those she trusted. It is time to harden your heart, Raven. It is time to let them go, to be more than what you are.”

“More,” I repeated, wiping my cheeks with the backs of my hands. “Because I am never enough for anyone to stay.”

“Precisely,” she replied. “You never will be until you become what I’ve given you.”

“But I love him,” I whispered, eyes blurring from the tears. All I could see was them still all over each other.

“But he loves her. It will never be you.”

Bringing my burning hand up, I whispered, “Morana.”

All my doubt and pain darkened the veins in my arm until they were black. And from my fingers, ebony ribbons flowed. They were beautiful and delicate but deadly — like shadows coming to life.

The glass pane between us disappeared, allowing the ribbons to curl around their bodies and seep into their skin. It felt like acid was flowing through my veins, leaving me breathless and heavy.

As their bodies began to fade, I realized the ribbons were killing them. I screamed for them to stop, running toward them but never getting any closer. Ribbons of gold intertwined with the black, giving me their life.

I was killing the love of my life.

I fell to my knees, begging to leave this place.

My head snapped back, my green eyes morphing into black—black as hatred.

I felt nothing.

I stared at them as they faded before me, the ribbons cloaking them.

The man I loved loving another. My friend betraying me.

I was right to doubt them — doubt myself.

I would never be enough.



MY ANGUISHED CRIES were loud as I was thrown backward from my mind. Someone’s hands were on me, attempting to

stop my thrashing and pinning me down. He pushed into my mind, trying to find the memory of my nightmare. Hot tears streamed down my face as I saw nothing but them — kissing, caressing, exploring.

“Baby, it’s not real.” His voice was frantic as he tried to stop my flailing, begging me to look at him. “That’s not me, Raven.”

My eyes snapped open, but I could hardly see anything. The black tried to shove through the green, preventing me from seeing his face.

He shook his head over and over, kissing my lips. “Come back to me, Raven.” His voice was broken, but I couldn’t feel anything.

My neck was strained, the image of them together still in the forefront of my mind. He tried to shove it back. “Stay with me, Raven. Please.” He kissed my lips, my neck, and my forehead.

I was nothing to him: nothing but lies.

He bit down on my bottom lip, and fury pushed at my skin. He did it again, and I smelled him. Pine.

He kissed me again as my body began to calm. I cried through it, trying to focus on his face. The darkness inside me screamed as he fought through it, scattering my nightmare until it was nothing but a dark blur.

“Look at me.” He grabbed my chin roughly between his fingers, forcing my gaze to stay on him and promising that he loved me, only me. “It wasn’t real, Raven.”

“You don’t love me,” I whispered. “You promised you did; you promised you don’t love her.”

“Oh, Raven.” He shifted until he was entirely on top of me, resting his elbows on either side of my head. “I’ve never loved anyone but you.” Grabbing my hand, he put it against his heart. “This beats for only you because of you. I’ve known it since I was a child.”

My eyes rolled back as it crept back up, trying to steal me away.

“No, Raven.” He kissed me. “We’re going to have tiny little demons.” Pulling a memory from my mind, he pushed it to the front. “Think of our future. Tiny little demons nearly falling off our ship, just like you almost did when you tried to touch the water.” I saw us on the ship and him coming up behind me to stop me from tumbling over.

I felt us.

“Remember when you threw the bottle at my head?” He pushed another memory forward.

My anger from that night warmed my body, nodding as a tear slipped down my cheek.

“You told me you were in love with me that day, Raven. I swear I thought I could fly. That carried me through. You carry me through.”

My sob was obstructed as I wrapped my arms around his neck. His forehead dipped against mine while he held me. “It wasn’t real, Raven. It feeds on your insecurities. That is never going to happen. I will never betray you.”

I trembled. “Why is this happening?”

He rested his body weight on me, squishing me underneath him while trying to calm my nerves. I tried to pull the image of them together, but he’d broken it. “I don’t know,” he answered before he kissed me again. “I need your warmth back, baby.”

“If I lose you,” I whispered, my voice hitched and weak.

He shook his head. “You won’t, Raven. I’m not going to let it take you.”

“You’re the only thing that can bring me back. There’s too much pain in my past. I can’t push through it on my own and we’re going to be apart...”

He rolled to his side and pulled me to him, pressing us close together. “We’re not. I’m going to figure this out, Raven.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He tried to quiet me.

“I’m not your responsibility. My brokenness isn’t yours to fix. You have an entire life here....”

“You are my life,” he interrupted. “Everything about you — the cracks, the crevices, the darkness, the past, the present, when you wake up, where you fall asleep, the sounds you make....”

I tried to smile through my tears.

“Your flirting, your filthy mouth.”

I started to laugh.

“It is all mine, Raven. There is not one piece of your shattered heart that I do not want. I carry it with me. We’re both broken, Raven. And we’re both healing one another.”

“Then let me help you,” I pleaded. “Tell me how to help you.”

He closed his eyes, sighing into my mouth. He wanted to. He wanted to give this burden to me so we could face it together. “Please let me help you,” I whispered, desperation straining my voice. “I’m on your side, whatever it is, but you must tell me.”

“I can’t, Raven....” His lips pushed against mine, his tongue moving into my mouth.

I opened it for him because he wasn’t going to tell me. He was trying to pour all of it into this — his silent plea for me to figure it out on my own.

“Even through your pain....” — he pulled back to stare into my eyes — “You’re still trying to prevent it from happening to others. That’s how I know it won’t overcome you, Raven.” He pressed his hand against my heart which beat soundly against his palm. “This is too pure.”

“I will protect you,” I promised. “I am going to keep you safe.”

“We’re going to die trying to protect one another.”

“Then we will die together.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



RAVEN

*H*e should have left for the training yard much earlier, but he promised to stay and have breakfast with me before he went to train. I insisted that he didn't have to, but he *absolutely* insisted that there was no place else he would rather be and then shut me up by disappearing under the quilt again. He had made it to where I came to expect at least two orgasms every morning. When I told him, he suggested we go for three.

So, we did.

I only slightly regretted that as he dragged me to the dining hall beside him. My legs were incredibly sore, and I dreaded having to walk down the steep stone road today to meet the planner at the flower market. I had become used to him carrying me everywhere. Maybe I could talk Jeanine into it.

I bit my lip as I looked over at him, drinking him in for about the twentieth time this morning. He was in his training gear, unsurprisingly all black, and said he would lose the shirt an hour after getting there. I'd pushed him against a wall and sucked his neck until my mark was clearly visible on his skin. He had attempted to do the same to me, but it was already beginning to fade.

He was currently brooding about it on our walk, and I had to clear my throat to keep from laughing at his lack of ability to maim me with his touch permanently.

“Stop,” he grumbled.

I widened my eyes in mock innocence before I grinned. “It’s cute that you want to hurt me.”

Laughing, he tugged on my hair. “It sounds bad when you say it like that.”

“But I like when you’re bad,” I sighed dreamily.

He responded by pulling me to him and kissing me while walking me backward. “Should we go for four?”

I nodded, giggling as he kissed all over my face and neck. I tried to shove him off, but he palmed the nape of my neck and kissed me roughly as we entered the dining room.

The sore legs were definitely worth it.

He backed me until the back of my thighs hit the table. I assumed we were alone, but I didn’t honestly care. Nothing would stop him, even an audience.

When he released me all at once, I was breathless. I reached for him again, but he grabbed my wrists. “We’ll fuck in here eventually, but I need to eat something.”

“I know something you could eat.”

He growled in frustration, pulling out my chair. “Don’t tease.”

I sat down, pouting.

He sat beside me and rested his hand on my thigh. “Don’t, Raven. I can’t stand telling you no.”

I slid his hand farther up my thigh. “I’m addicted to you.”

He hooked a finger in my dress and drew it up, but I promptly shoved his hand away. “You need to eat.” I plastered on a fake, cheesy smile and loaded his plate full of slices of bacon and fruits.

“You’re a wicked witch,” he snapped.

When his head jerked forward, he swatted Jeanine’s hand away as she walked around the table and sat across from me. “Ow,” he grumbled, rubbing the back of his head.

I shoved a piece of bacon into his mouth. “He’s a little grumpy this morning.”

“Because I have to leave you,” he said with a snarl, throwing the bacon down onto his plate.

“What are you going to do when I leave for Seolia?”

His expression of anger quickly changed into sorrow. We had avoided the topic since my nightmare last night, but we were getting closer to that day coming, and neither one of us had come up with any solution that would prevent us from being apart.

I couldn’t stay here, and he couldn’t leave with me.

“When are you planning on leaving, Raven?”

I looked at Jeanine with a slight shrug. “Probably a day or two after the engagement celebration, whenever that is.”

“It’s tomorrow night,” Jeanine said gently with an apologetic grin.

“Oh,” I replied, starting to gnaw on the inside of my cheek. “I guess in a couple of days then.”

Zeke stared at his plate, unmoving and unable to look at me. Nothing I could say would make any of this better or easier. It would be just as hard for me as for him.

“You need to eat,” I said softly, handing him another piece of bacon.

“I need to go,” he said, standing and throwing the bacon down. “Duty calls.”

“Zeke,” I said, reaching for his hand. “Take something with you, please. I don’t need you passing out.”

Jeanine tossed him an apple, which he caught with a nod. “I’ll see you tonight. Don’t wander away from her.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “But I don’t want to wait until tonight. Can I come to see you today?”

“No,” they answered in unison.

And when I frowned, he sighed and brushed his thumb across my jaw. "I need you to be safe." Without another word, he leaned down and kissed me. And then he was gone, disappearing out into the hallway.

I watched him go with tearful eyes, and then I shoved my chair out. "I'll be right back."

Walking quickly out into the hallway, he was almost out of sight when I called his name. He turned, catching me as I lunged into his arms. I kissed him without allowing him to speak or even take a breath.

"Raven," he breathed against my lips, holding me so tightly against him that we shared one breath between two.

"Don't walk away from me," I whispered, kissing him again. "Tell me you love me every time you go."

"I love you." He kissed my cheek. "I love you so much it hurts." The other cheek. "I love you so immeasurably, Raven, that I don't know how I will survive each day without you."

"Then come with me," I begged. "I don't want to be without you, but I can't stay here. Bring your family. They can live in the castle with us."

"Raven..."

I shook my head. "Please just think about it. Can you do that? Don't give me an answer yet. I will do whatever I need to to make it work. If they don't want to live in the castle, I'll build them a cottage or whatever they want. Or, wouldn't your mother want to stay with John? You still haven't told me about that...."

"Raven," he said again, kissing me to shut me up. "You'll have your answers before you leave. How about that? We'll see how you feel after that."

"Nothing is going to change how I feel about you. Haven't you learned that by now?"

A small smile. "Love has made you blind."

I traced his face with my fingertips. "No, my love. You are just all I see."



I MADE him stay in the hallway with me until he finished his apple. To distract him from his gloom, I told him stories of me as a child, explaining how I used to blind the little boys at the festivals temporarily. He shared with me that he'd watched one of the memories in Seolia and wondered what I had done to them.

But even with me opening up to him, he spent the rest of the time asking me questions to avoid talking about his own childhood. There was still so much I didn't yet know about the man I loved more and more with each passing breath. If he ever decided to let me all the way in, I worried I might implode with giddiness.

My emotions were jumbled as I walked back into the dining room, waving at Matthew as he poured Jeanine a fresh glassful of orange juice. I put on a big smile and greeted him as I sat back down in my chair. "I was wondering if we'd see you this morning."

He bowed to me in greeting. "I had errands to run in town this morning." He poured the juice into my glass next. "I wanted to ask you something."

I nodded for him to continue.

"I know Zeke is in charge of our army...." — he seemed nervous, clearing his throat — "I've wanted to join, but he's intimidating. I don't think he likes me."

"He likes you fine, Matthew. Would you like to ask me to ask him for you?" I wrinkled my nose at Jeanine. "I don't know how any of that works. Can he not go down there and join?"

"Everyone who joins has to go through Zeke," Matthew answered. "He has a very rigorous system for who gets in."

Why would it matter who joined their army?

"I'll handle it. Does that mean you don't want to serve us anymore?" I smiled as he blushed. "I will miss you."

“But we’re friends, right? I can still see you?”

“Of course, you can. Any time. And if you ever come to Seolia, I will arrange a tour for you myself.” Though, not the kind of tour Zeke received. He would murder us both.

Jeanine cleared her throat. “We’ll speak to him, Matthew. Can you arrange a carriage for us?”

I clapped my hands together at the relief of not having to walk down that road. Jeanine snorted at me as Matthew nodded and bowed again before leaving the room.

“Why does Zeke have to approve of everyone who joins the army?”

She seemed hesitant to answer as she took a sip from her glass. “He has strict rules about who falls under his command. He’s responsible for all of his men, and if one of them falls out of line, he’s responsible for that.”

That made sense. “Do you think Matthew can handle it?”

She shook her head with a sad smile. “Matthew is a child, Raven.”

“He looks to be my age.”

“Compared to the men Zeke controls, he’s a child. I wouldn’t want to put him through that. He won’t come out the same happy kid who went in.”

I frowned. “So I shouldn’t ask him?”

She shrugged. “You can. It’ll just be up to Zeke.”

My man did exude power if every man who wanted to join their army had to go through whatever test he gave them. That massive responsibility fell on his shoulders, and he’d wasted over three months chasing me around. “Who has kept the army in line while he’s gone?”

“Mira has captains. It takes a handful of them to do what he does, though.”

My eyes widened.

She seemed very cautious about every answer she was giving me. “He’s very... intimidating.”

“Because of his abilities?”

She licked across her lips, chewing on her bottom one. “Mhm.”

“I can’t help you if you never tell me anything,” I snapped.

She sighed, running her fingers through her hair. “I know, Raven. We want to, but we’ve been asked not to involve you.”

I blinked in confusion. “By who?”

Looking down at the table, she seemingly tried to avoid my stare. “I’m telling you everything I can. You’ll get there, but I can’t give you anything else right now.”

I stood from my chair and moved to the one next to her, grabbing her hand. “Just tell me one thing, and I’ll stop,” I promised. “Is he safe?”

She twisted in her chair and put her hands on either side of my face. “I will promise you this: I will tell you everything if it ever reaches a point where I don’t believe he is. Until then, please believe me when I tell you that my hands are tied.”

“Okay,” I replied, rather meekly. As long as he remained safe and unharmed, I could continue being patient. I wanted to believe they’d tell me if it were a dire situation. “Where is Mira, by the way?”

“She had meetings all morning and is preparing for your party. You’ll be getting ready in my chambers. You’re not allowed to see Zeke tomorrow at all.”

I scowled. That wasn’t going to happen.

“It’s tradition, Raven. You can’t see him until tomorrow night. I can’t believe that bastard didn’t tell you that.”

I giggled. “He was probably hoping no one else would, either.”



WE SPENT all morning at the flower market with Mira's planner. I wasn't sure what I expected for a kingdom the size of Reales, but it was certainly more than three vendors. Keaton's shop at home was double the size of the market, which was saying something since we were short on room on the island and built the shops to fit.

Luckily, one of the vendors sold nothing but roses, and we ordered more than I'd ever seen in my life — more than what was at my birthday celebration. And when they offered to shave off the thorns, I insisted they didn't.

We weren't us without them.

I was shifted into Frost while Jeanine led me out of the market and pointed to our carriage waiting for us. It would be hours until Zeke was done training, and I couldn't wait that long to see him.

I had changed in Zeke's chambers before we left for this exact moment.

I stopped her, flashing my sweetest smile. She immediately groaned and shook her head, trying to tug me toward the carriage. I quickly built a wall of ice to block the ability to climb into it. "Take me to him."

She stared at the wall with a semi-amused, semi-irritated grin. "You really shouldn't use magic in front of people here." She glanced around the empty road. "You put yourself at risk."

I rolled my eyes. "My entire life has been a risk. I want to see him."

She shook her head wildly. "No, Raven. He'll kill me."

"I'll blend. Look." I pulled a thin piece of fabric from my pocket, similar to the one they always wore in town, and wrapped it around my neck, pulling it over my face.

"And your white hair?"

I tucked it into my hood, pulling it farther down my face.

"And your weird eyes that look like they have snowflakes dancing in them?"

Groaning, I pulled the fabric from my mouth. “I can’t change my eyes. Please just take me to him. I’ll be super *chill*.”

She didn’t find my joke funny, instead glaring at me.

I thought it was funny.

She looked up at the castle and back to me, rolling her eyes and exhaling an annoyed breath. “Fine, but I swear if he kills me....”

Bouncing on my toes, I linked my arm through hers. “I won’t let him, I swear. Shouldn’t you disguise, too? He knows we’re together.”

Throwing her hood up, she shrugged. “I hang out there sometimes. He lets me train when I feel like it, but it’s intense. The Zeke you’re about to see is not the one from breakfast this morning. He’s a lot meaner.”

The thought thrilled me.

As we walked the opposite way down the harbor, I followed Jeanine’s finger as she pointed ahead of us.

In the distance, there was a large, oval structure. It looked like it had been around for centuries. And as I tilted my head while approaching, I realized that it was built the same way the cathedral had been — with columns and odd moldings, designs that hadn’t been used in a very long time.

“Was this built the same time the cathedral was?”

Jeanine nodded. “Rudolf had a love for the history of Reales, of what it was before our kingdom was erected. This, the cathedral, and some manors have been around for centuries. He never wanted them torn down, but they’ve fallen into disarray.”

“But Zeke found a use for this one?” This crumbling structure looked like it would fall apart at any moment. And in the middle of it was a long field made of dirt and more men than I could count.

There easily had to be hundreds of them. And he was in control of all of them.

“Where do they all live? Why are there so many?”

Jeanine scratched her forehead, her nose wrinkling at my questions. “You can’t see them, but behind this are two stables, and behind the stables are tents for all of them. Zeke needed all of them close, so he ordered fabrics from Perosan to build places for them.”

My eyes widened slightly. “He built tents for every man here?”

“I helped when I could. Sometimes he’d make them help. And every three months, Mira would order crops from Seolia to feed all of them. Did you never wonder why we needed so many?”

Embarrassment heated my cheeks. I hadn’t known that there were even orders. John had always taken care of shipments in and out, and I had never asked to be kept apprised.

The longer I was here, the more I realized that I hadn’t been as involved with my kingdom as I believed.

Men were knocking into each other and scaling walls. The structure contained a smaller ring where men were tossed around, bloodied, and bruised.

Pure destruction of bodies was unfolding before me. “The fuck are they doing?”

Jeanine smirked. “Having fun.”

I winced at the sound of bone cracking. “Is it a game?”

A grin spread across her mouth, and I followed her gaze.

Standing in the middle of the ring was my man. His shirt was off, and his muscles immediately cured my dry mouth, pooling at the sight of his sweat-soaked body. With blood caked on his face and neck, I wondered if it belonged to him or someone else. His hands were wrapped in thin pieces of fabric, nearly brown from blood.

I’d seen his body countless times, but there was something different about seeing him like this.

His muscles were tight, straining as he moved. His lines were well-defined from the glistening of his sweat, his hair soaked while partially hanging over his forehead, clinging to his neck. His sun-kissed dark skin stood out next to the men who'd clearly been in Reales too long with their paled skin.

And my man was cocky as he beckoned someone forward.

"He's winning," she said as we hid behind one of the stone columns. "He always does. There aren't many who can take him on successfully."

I looked around at the men surrounding their small ring. They certainly looked strong, but Zeke had abilities. He could sense what someone was going to do before they did it. He used his mind *and* strength, and damn, he looked sexy bloodied up.

We climbed and sat on the edge of a tall stone, our eyes glued to the man entering the ring to accept Zeke's challenge. He looked the same size as him, but his hair was a bright blond, and he looked around my age.

Now I understood what Jeanine meant before: Matthew wouldn't make it in here.

Zeke remained calm, cocking his eyebrow at the man lowering into a fighting stance. I grinned at his confidence.

When the blond charged at his waist and wrapped his arms around it to shove him back, Zeke planted his feet and bent, wrapping his arms around his opponent's lower back and flipping him to the ground. He groaned as he landed, rolling to his side before he stood again and bounced around to shake it off.

Like that would help against the refined beast Zeke was.

Zeke's hands rested on his hips, waiting. The blond charged him again and slid, trying to knock Zeke off his feet, but he jumped over him. He stood again and began swinging, getting one in on Zeke and striking him on the jaw. He laughed as he spat out blood before curling his fingers into a fist and swinging up, knocking the blond's head back from the chin. When he toppled over, wild cheers surrounded him.

Watching him felt like live art. He was made for this.

He spat more blood out and ran his hand through his hair, drawing in another challenger. Jeanine rolled her eyes. “This guy always tries to take him on and gets knocked on his ass.”

Grinning, I returned my focus to Zeke. He stood there, a smug smirk on his face.

I would have let him fuck me right here in front of everyone.

The challenger put his fists up and made small advances toward Zeke, who remained still. All he did was put his fists up with loosened arms, giving him one punch to fill him with fake confidence before advancing, throwing a punch to his jaw and nose.

When bone cracked, excitement pulsed through me.

The man stumbled, but he wasn't down yet.

But he would be.

Time seemed to slow as Zeke jumped and twisted, delivering a kick to his head. He tumbled down, and the crowd hollered before Zeke even landed back to his feet.

I needed to touch him. My fingers ached with the feeling of wanting to feel every dip and groove of his muscles. “I want to go to him.”

I hopped off the stone, nearly stumbling back a step as Jeanine grabbed my hand and pulled me backward. “No, Raven. We can't.”

I tried to pull her along, but she was stronger than she looked. “Why?”

Her eyes darted from me to Zeke and then back to me. She looked at a loss for words, and now I was the one with a smug grin. “Do you see what happens when you don't tell me anything? You don't have a legitimate excuse for stopping me.”

Pulling my hood tighter, I yanked my hand from hers and continued into the ring. The crowd's murmurs as I entered

drew Zeke's attention as he turned and looked at me.

It wasn't anger or frustration on his face. It was fear.

Jeanine caught up to my side, speaking to him before I could. "I tried, Zeke. She wanted to see you."

From the look on his face and the tone of her voice, I suddenly felt embarrassed for waltzing in here to see him. It was clear to me now that him asking me not to come wasn't his typical overprotectiveness.

He legitimately did not want me here.

Clearing his throat, he broke our gaze to look at the men staring at me. "Scatter," he barked, waiting until the lot of them had dispersed before he looked at me again. "I told you not to come here."

"I know," I whispered, taking a small step back. "I'm sorry; I just missed you."

"Raven," he sighed, moving his gaze to Jeanine. "If you leave now, they'll know she means something to me. Spar with her for an hour. Pretend like she's here to practice with you."

He looked at me again. "I can't touch you here, Raven. Stay with Jeanine." And then he disappeared back into the crowd to shout orders at a group of men waiting for him.

I, however, blinked back hot tears at the rejection. "Can we go?"

Jeanine sighed as she removed her jacket and tied it around her waist. "No, Raven. You heard him. Pull yourself together and spar with me."

Removing my jacket, I copied everything she did and tied it around my waist. "Why can't he touch me?" I looked around her at him. He was standing in front of the group of men, watching as they performed a drill I didn't recognize. Not that I had any reason to. We didn't do any of this in Seolia.

"Before you," she started, throwing a punch that I dodged. "He never had anyone. No one could threaten him with anything because he had nothing to lose." Another punch.

I swatted her hand away. “Why would they threaten him? He’s the prince. They have to follow his orders.”

She motioned for me to put my fists up. I rolled my eyes but did as she said. As we turned in a slow circle, she kept her voice lowered. “Not all of these men are residents of Reales. They have no allegiance to Zeke or Mira.”

I wrinkled my nose, dodging another punch. “Then why are they here?”

As I thought I was about to get an answer, right as she was about to give me something finally, we were interrupted by a man.

He was tall, not wholly unattractive, but something about him made me uncomfortable. “You’re doing it wrong,” he said, pointing to my stance.

“She’s fine,” Jeanine said. “I’m teaching her.”

“Not doing a very good job,” he grated out, moving to stand beside me and putting his hands on my waist. “I’ll teach her. She looks like she could use a man’s touch.”

“Really, really not,” I replied, shoving his hands from my waist. “I think you must’ve misheard her. She said *she* was teaching me. She didn’t ask for your help or your opinion. Neither did I.”

Jeanine grabbed my hand quickly as ice started to coat my fingertips and pulled me away. “Don’t, Raven. Not here.”

“Are they all such assholes?” I grumbled, staring at the wall she’d brought me to. It was at least twenty feet tall and made of splintering wood. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Scale it,” Jeanine said.

I gaped at her before tilting my head back. “I don’t want to.”

She laughed lightly and took my hand, placing it on a ledge barely large enough to hold on to. “Ever wonder how he managed to scale your balcony every night?” She took my

other hand and put it on a higher piece of cracked wood. “He mastered this wall. Only a few have.”

That spurred my determination a little.

Tightening my hold on the fragile pieces of wood, I looked down to find a place for my feet. Every piece of wood on this damned wall was tiny and hardly useable. But if Zeke could do it, so could I.

Or, that was what I told myself as I grunted, pulling myself up to the next level and nearly slipping as my left foot slid right off the ledge I’d found. “Fuck,” I bit out, repositioning myself and taking one step higher. My arms were already shaking as I tried to hold my body weight with only my arms since I couldn’t balance myself using my feet.

I felt rather proud of myself until I looked down and realized I had only gotten about four feet off the ground. Jeanine was smiling at my shock, reaching up and slapping my ass. “Keep going.”

Groaning, I grabbed the next ledge and shakily rose, cursing as a splinter made its way into my hand and pausing to suck the piece of wood out before taking another step. “I think I want to go back to sparring.”

“Get halfway, and I’ll let you come down,” she said, moving to stand underneath me.

I guessed it was in case I fell, which was tempting as I looked around for the next one to grab hold of. “I didn’t sign up for this, you know. I don’t need a trainer.”

“You wanted to see how Zeke lives. This is what he does every single day.”

“But *why*?” Taking another step, I took a moment to wipe my clammy hands on my shirt. “Why is any of this necessary? Precaution?” Words were getting hard the higher I climbed. I was dripping sweat and couldn’t use my energy to cool myself down with my ice because all of it was going toward getting to the halfway mark.

“Three more steps and you should be there,” she called to me from the ground.

I looked down at her, squealing in excitement. “I have to be like, what? Five hundred feet in the air?”

“Yes, Raven. Five hundred feet, not nearly ten.”

Giggling, I refocused on the wall. It took me about another five minutes to make up those last three steps, and once I did, she clapped and whistled for my triumph.

Looking down at the ground, I smiled. I had been higher than this in the barn, scared to jump off, but he had been there to catch me. I knew I would be fine jumping down alone, but I wished he could at least be here to see me.

She motioned for me to jump, and after inhaling a deep breath, I let go and fell the short distance to the ground.

I winced as I landed, immediately lifting a foot to roll my ankle from the sting. But that wasn't the part that hurt the most — it was the fist that connected with my scar the second I landed.

I gasped, clutching my side as I stumbled sideways. But there was no time to recover as another punch was delivered to the same area, blood immediately pooling against my shirt. I cried out as Jeanine caught me from falling, yelling loudly for Zeke.

“See,” the man from earlier said as he stalked toward me again. “If you had let me teach you, you would've been prepared for someone coming up to you for an attack.”

Jeanine released me to bring a knee up, rendering him useless as he wailed in pain, clutching his balls.

Tears stung my eyes from the pain, unwillingly shifting to myself as each element went on the defensive, preparing for anything I may want to use against him.

But I couldn't. As my blood poured, the familiar stinging from the aconite filled my body, making every inch of me burn.

Zeke was by my side instantly, grabbing the man by the collar and pinning him against the wall. “What did you do?” he shouted, using his free hand to punch him in the ribs.

“It’s just some fucking woman,” the man shouted back at him, trying to wrangle free from Zeke’s hold.

“Just some fucking woman,” Zeke growled through a breathy, frustrated laugh. “That is the fucking Queen of Seolia, you fucking asshole. And no soldier of mine will ever lay his hands on a woman.”

“Take him to the dungeon!” he shouted.

From behind me, two men appeared to grab the man from Zeke’s clutches and delivered multiple punches to his face to knock him unconscious before dragging him out of the stadium.

Meanwhile, I was on the ground, trying to keep my vision from blurring as the poison shot through my body. Then, I realized that while I had healed from the arrow, the poison that had remained trapped in the scar was now free to finish the job.

Zeke fell to his knees in front of me, catching me as I tumbled forward. “Raven,” he said, trying to sit me up. “Raven, hang on. Baby, look at me.”

“We need to get her back to the castle,” Jeanine sputtered. “She’s going to need stitches. Look!”

I assumed she pointed to my scar because Zeke twisted me enough to pull up my shirt.

Cursing, he lifted me up and into his arms. “Send them to their bunks,” he said to someone. “We’re done for the day.”

“Can’t shift,” I cried, putting my hand against my scar. “Can’t shift, can’t shift.”

Zeke said nothing as he carried me out of the stadium and toward the carriage, still waiting for us at the bottom of the road. “Take her to my chambers,” he said while laying me down on the bench. “I’ll be right there. I need to handle him.”

I wasn’t sure what was unfolding, but my head was laid in Jeanine’s lap after she climbed behind me. I screamed in pain as the burning spread to my arms and legs, the mixture of red

and black blood pooling in my hand. “Zeke,” I rasped, my eyelids fluttering open and closed.

“He’s going to follow us there, Raven,” Jeanine said, brushing the hair from my face. “He’ll be there, I promise.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ZEKE

*P*oorly contained rage was the only way I could describe what had happened in the last half hour.

I had gone to the dungeon while Jeanine had taken Raven back to the castle. Using my ability, I had woken the man up who'd hurt her by going into his mind and scaring him awake.

And then I had unleashed, beating him into the ground while understanding that my mother and Luca could hear every single part of it.

But I had reached a point of no longer caring. Because this was what I had become. For her, I would be the monster Mira made me. For her, I would kill men with my bare hands who touched her.

And while he cried and pleaded for his life, I'd shared with him precisely who she was to me while continuing to hammer him until his face was no longer recognizable.

Until his life was taken by me. Becoming another shadow that Raven didn't want me to be ashamed of.

And for her, I would never be ashamed of defending her honor.

I wanted to dare someone else to try. Because even after finishing with him, I was still on a feral high. It wasn't enough. She'd bled in my arms, screaming in pain, and I wasn't sure this anger would ever subside. And if she weren't

upstairs in my chambers right now, I would be searching for someone else to end.

But hearing her screams and cries of pain from my hallway had me sprinting into my room, rushing to her side as Jeanine tried to hold her still. John was pouring pure alcohol on the wound to try and clean the sludge her blood and the magic had created, which only made her scream and thrash more.

I felt utterly helpless.

Jeanine crawled on top of her, pinning her arms to her sides and shushing her.

“Grab her legs,” John barked at me.

I hadn't realized I had been frozen to the ground, watching as the person I loved the most wailed in pain. The last time this poison had taken over her, her elements froze. For weeks, she lost who she was while I watched her fall apart and depended on Cade to fix her.

“Zeke!” he shouted.

I sprang into action and leaned over the bed, grabbing her legs to hold still.

Her fragile frame looked even smaller as she fought to stay awake and alive.

Broken breaths, broken noises, broken sounds. That was all I heard as John sloppily stitched up her wound, trying his best while she continued to try and move.

“Baby,” I called out gently over her cries. “Baby, you have to be still.”

My voice seemed to soothe her, which only hurt more. I was the one who'd done all of this to her.

I was always the reason she was in so much pain.

“She's going into shock,” Jeanine panicked, saying her name repeatedly while trying to keep her awake.

I tried to push into her mind, my lips parting when all I could see were colors.

Her elements' colors blended in a pile of madness and panic. I'd never seen anything like it before, and I realized this was her magic. This was what they looked like when not manifested into her physical form.

It was beautiful — dark orange, violet, and white, all mixing and twisting in an explosion of colors. And through the colors was black mist, trying to contain the elements.

Trying to calm it, I realized — keep them from fighting to the surface.

My name being repeated pulled me from her mind, blinking as I tried to focus on Jeanine. “She keeps saying your name.”

Climbing onto the bed, I kept her legs cradled between mine as Jeanine moved from around her waist to let me replace her. The color of her irises was a mixture of her magic; if they were moving through her, it meant they weren't paralyzed.

But they were manic in how they swirled behind her eyes, and I couldn't tell if they were trying to protect her from the poison.

Or from the black magic.

“Raven,” I whispered, searching her eyes.

John had finished stitching and was sticking a cloth against her wound to try and catch the bleeding. She had stopped wiggling and was lying completely still in my hold.

“Raven,” I repeated a little louder. “I'm right here.”

The only part that moved was her mouth as she whispered breathless apologies to me.

To me. She was apologizing to me.

“Raven, you have nothing to be sorry for,” I assured her, though I wasn't sure if she could hear me. “I'm the one who's sorry. About all of this.” A tear slipped down my cheek. “Everything.”

Because I was slowly coming to realize that if I had never visited Seolia, had I never met her, none of this would have happened to her. She would be safe on her island, tucked away in her naïveté.

She would be safe away from me.



HOURS PASSED, and she slept for the entirety.

I'd stayed by her side, but far enough away to not touch her. I feared if I did, I would only break her further. She looked so delicate buried under the covers. So fragile.

Jeanine and John had disappeared only moments earlier to prepare for dinner. I wasn't sure how, but we'd managed to keep this from Mira. According to Jeanine, she had planned to be out most of the day to prepare for the party. If she were inside, she would've heard Raven's screams.

Raven was integral to her plan for realm domination, and she would've come in to find out what was happening. Since she hadn't, I assumed she remained clueless about what had happened.

She would find out soon enough that I'd killed a soldier, not that I believed she would care. As long as we had more men than Thoya and Perosan, she wouldn't question me why.

I could feel Raven's warmth, which meant Blaze was at the forefront. Her most stubborn element had fought past the black mist and kept her body heated as it tried to heal from the tear in her flesh.

I hadn't moved in hours; my hands and arms were still bloodied from beating that man to death.

And all I could do was stare at her, contemplating how I could free her from the pain that seemed to follow her ever since meeting me.

I could help her leave Reales before Mira found out. It would give her a head start while I tried to figure out how to

call this entire thing off. I would need to kill the guards at the dungeon's door to try and free my mother and Luca. If I could at least get them on a ship, I didn't care what happened to me.

It wasn't like I was contributing anything good to this world.

But that still left Mira and the army alive.

Without me, would they still stay under her command? Could I shatter enough of their minds to render her idea useless? How much could I accomplish in the few hours I would have?

But that still left me with the most significant problem: Raven would be left vulnerable.

No matter how I looked at this, someone would always look for her and try to get to her.

As her eyes fluttered open, she jolted up upon seeing me. A broken whimper escaped her, and I jumped up from my chair to rush to her side. "I'm okay," she whispered, peering down at her side. "It's just a little sore."

Sinking to my knees at her side, I pressed my forehead against the mattress. She tangled her fingers through my hair and stroked it gently.

Hearing her voice reminded me why leaving her would never be simple. Selfishly, I couldn't stand to live without ever hearing it again. It was so light and soft, even in moments of turmoil.

My breathing was mangled while I tried to push away memories of how broken she was the last time this happened — of her nearly drowning herself from the pain of her emptiness.

She tugged at my strands until I slowly lifted my head and gave me a small smile. "It's not your fault."

A tear escaped my eye and fell down my cheek.

"No, Zeke. You're not going to do this. You're not going to blame yourself." Her voice was heavy with emotion, but I

heard determination behind it. “Look at me.” She tugged my hair again. “Look. At. Me.”

I raised my eyes to hers.

“You told me to stay away, and I didn’t listen. I should have. It was my choice.”

“I should’ve made you leave.”

“No one has ever been able to make me do anything.” She tugged her shirt — my shirt — up to show me her scar. “It’s healing. It’s fine. I think the poison is finally gone. Something burned it out.”

“Blaze,” I whispered. “Blaze burned it out. There wasn’t enough left to paralyze your elements again.”

When she patted the space beside her, I shook my head. I wasn’t sure I could ever touch her again.

Groaning, she tugged on my arm. Her grip on me was shaky, so I relented only so she wouldn’t rip apart the stitches.

I sat on the very edge of the bed, keeping space between us.

She shoved my arm. “Don’t do this. You could kiss me.”

“I can’t touch you, Raven. I broke you.”

She scoffed, tugging on my arm again. “You did not break me.”

Leaving her, losing her, watching her dwindle. Over and over, I had hurt her. Over and over, I kept letting her down.

And the tether finally snapped.

“No, I did.” I stood and crossed my arms over my chest to keep from touching her. “I left you — you broke. My father shot you — you broke. I lied to you, invaded your dreams, you broke. My life here? It is breaking you. Are you noticing a pattern here?” I was partially shouting, but not at her. At myself. “I am breaking you every single day. I am hurting you. Somehow, some way, I always break you.”

The words that tumbled out of my mouth next were unplanned and not at all what I truly wanted. “I shouldn’t be with you. I need to let you go.”

But the fact that I’d said them had tears streaming down her cheeks, her lips parted at my words.

I regretted all of it immediately. “I didn’t mean that.” I reached for her, but she pulled back and turned her head from me. “Raven, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I don’t want to let you go.”

“I need you to leave.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

I shook my head. “Raven, no. I’m worried about you. I’m not leaving you.”

“I can take care of myself. Go. I need you to go.”

She was trembling, and I reached for her again, but she shook me off and stood from the bed. I followed her as she walked to the opposite side of the room, but she kept moving from my grasp. Tears wouldn’t stop falling from her eyes, and my own were falling down my cheeks.

I’d promised her I wouldn’t leave her, and I had just threatened to do it. I broke my promise to her. “Baby, please. Please.” I tried to grab her, but she shook her head.

She walked to the door, and I chased her, but she opened it just enough to slide out before I could stop her.

Jeanine walked down my hall as Raven passed her, looking at me. “Where is she going?”

“I fucked up,” I said as I chased her down the hall. “Raven,” I called out, reaching for her hand.

She refused to look at me. I felt her slipping as her emotions disappeared. She was letting it overtake her. I’d made her doubt, and now it was clinging to her, feeding her darkness. “Raven, don’t do this. Don’t let it win.”

She walked into her corridor, and when I tried to wrap my arms around her, she put all of her strength into shoving me off. I was fearful of holding her too tightly, and she knew it.

Pushing open her door, she slammed it closed with a breeze and locked it before I could follow her in.

I banged on the door repeatedly. “Raven, let me in. I don’t want to leave you, baby.” Pressing my forehead against the door, I banged on it over and over with my fist.

How were we already back here?

I heard her cries from the other side. I was desperate to get inside. “Find a key,” I said to Jeanine.

“Zeke, maybe we should give her some time.”

That was the exact opposite of what we needed to do. “Please. Please go get me a key.” My voice was breaking, and she nodded before disappearing back down the hall. “Raven, please open the door.”

I ended up just like everyone else in her life, contributing to her fear of abandonment.

I couldn’t feel her on the other side. I was going to run out of time.

Taking a step back, I kicked the door. It rattled. I kicked it again and again until it buckled and flew open. “The fuck,” I whispered as my eyes widened.

The room was full of a black haze, like a light fog, but thick enough to feel it on my fingers as I ran a hand through the air. And the longer I stood there, the thicker it grew and surrounded everything.

And standing in the middle of all of it was Raven.

I ran to her, coughing as the black fog surrounded me. There was nothing but despair coming from her. Grabbing her face between my hands, I frowned at how cold her skin was.

Death. This was what she meant. She felt like death.

“Baby.”

Her eyes were closed, and the tears dried on her cheeks.

“Baby, look at me. I was so afraid, Raven. I didn’t mean what I said. I’m never going to let you go. Please look at me.”

It was becoming difficult to draw in a breath.

Her eyelids flew open. I expected to see her green irises but felt paralyzed when all I saw was black.

“You’re a liar,” she seethed.

I shook my head before kissing her — her mouth, cheeks, forehead. All I felt was cold. She had buried herself down deep in there. “Raven, this isn’t you. Whoever this is, you have to push her down.”

Jeanine gasped behind me. “What is this?”

“It’s the black magic. This form, this creature, overtakes her senses and emotions. I can’t reach her.” I kissed her again, but she shoved me off, her black eyes narrowing on me. Hatred. Hatred was creeping across her as she stared at me. “Raven, this isn’t you. I didn’t mean what I said. I need you to come back to me.”

“Zeke,” Jeanine coughed. “I can’t breathe. We need to get her out of here.”

I grabbed Raven’s hand, growling as she shoved me off. “Stop this. Give her back to me.” My eyes were watering as the fog thickened. “She won’t let me touch her.”

Jeanine came up beside me and grabbed Raven’s hand. “You asked me to tell you stories of Zeke when you were hurt. Do you remember that?” She slowly began pulling her.

My heart sank. She wanted stories of me to ease her pain; all I did was create more for her.

“Did you know we were in the Black Forest the day your magic came back? He was so proud of you, Raven. We sat there for hours. Instead of sleeping afterward, he couldn’t stand to be away from you and stayed with you all night while you slept.”

Raven blinked her eyes.

When we made it to the hallway, I shut the door behind us the best I could since it was hanging off the hinges. We would need to air it out later. Or maybe I would keep it like that so she would stop running away from me.

“The night of the ball, he watched you from the hallway and was overwhelmed by how beautiful you looked. He stood there and stared at you through the crack in the door, growling about how you danced with other men.”

I laughed softly and ran my hand down her hair as Jeanine walked with her back toward my chambers. I felt the slightest flicker of her warmth and nodded for Jeanine to keep going.

“He was at Duck’s the day you went in to cry. He watched you walk through the village.”

Her black eyes snapped to Jeanine. She had felt me with her that day, and Cade had heard her cry for me, itching to know where I was.

“The memories,” I said, gently grabbing Raven’s chin and turning her head to me. “The memories are what brings her back.”

“The festival,” Jeanine said. “I wasn’t with you when you met her.”

I smiled and moved to stand in front of Raven, grabbing her other hand and walking backward with her up the stairs. “I was about to return to Duck’s when I saw you through the flames of the bonfires. What I experienced the second I saw you, Raven, I will never be able to put into words. Do you remember it, my love? Do you remember feeling our connection?” I ran my thumb across her bottom lip. “As soon as I kissed you, I recognized you. I never wanted to kiss another.”

“Duck’s,” she breathed, but her voice wasn’t hers. I didn’t recognize it.

I nodded, my head tilted slightly after we leveled on my floor. “This new form of hers doesn’t have memories. That’s why she feels so empty when it takes her. It doesn’t know what love is.”

“He loves you,” Jeanine whispered to her as I opened the door. “I watched him fall in love with you, Raven.” Another flicker of warmth. “The two of you were arranged to be married when you were born. Did he tell you that?” I hadn’t

yet. “You’re supposed to be with him. You always have been. Whether you would have stayed or gone, it was always supposed to be him.”

I leaned my forehead against Raven’s as we sat her down on the edge of the bed.

“And Raven, I think you’re my best friend. I’ve never had one before, but I feel like maybe life isn’t so bad when we’re together. You make me laugh. You annoy the hell out of me.”

I laughed, but then. Panic. I felt panic on her.

“She’s trapped. She’s tried to tell me that this... thing traps her. I think...” I trailed off, searching her eyes. “I think this is some sort of spirit, and unlike her elements, it can’t manifest fully into her physical form yet because Raven keeps fighting it. Blaze keeps fighting it.”

Little demon fighting off death. How ironic.

“I need you to hold her still.”

Jeanine crouched down in front of her and grabbed her arms. The dark creature narrowed her eyes on Jeanine as she realized we’d caught on.

“She’s going to fight you.” Climbing on the bed, I sat behind Raven and wrapped my arms around her chest to keep her arms pinned. “Hold her wrists. Her weapons are always her hands, and I don’t know what this one can do.”

“Fuck,” Jeanine muttered, wrapping her fingers tightly around Raven’s wrists. “I’m going to request hazard pay from now on.”

“Try sleeping with her,” I mumbled. “Keep talking to her. Memories. Of me, of her. Anything you can to keep her tethered to us.”

Closing my eyes, I focused on Raven’s mind and gently pushed in.



LIKE HER ROOM, her mind was made of black fog and mist. Thick and coarse and uncomfortable as I pushed my way through it. It clung to me, cold as the mist fell on my skin like a drizzle. But there wasn't a source of where it could be coming from.

It just *was*.

Muffled screams were coming from the distance, and I followed the noise, shaking off the fog as it wrapped around my ankles. It could trap me in here with her if I didn't locate her quickly enough.

And then I saw what she had warned me of.

A clear box in the middle of the haze, her hands banging on it as black tar dripped from the ceiling and covered her frame.

"Zeke!" she screamed, panicking as she tried to find a way out.

"Raven!" I shouted back, running to the box and searching for a door. A window. Anything that could free her.

She was crying, screaming, scrambling to wipe the sludge from her body. The sludge, I realized, was replacing her blood.

"I can't," she screamed, banging on the clear glass. "I can't get out!"

I hit the glass with my elbow repeatedly, but it wouldn't crack. It was too thick.

"Fuck," I growled, putting my hands against the glass. Like her nightmare after she'd been shot, she would have to get herself out. "Raven, look at me."

She looked everywhere but me as she tried to dodge the tar falling on her.

"Raven," I snapped. "Look at me, baby. Calm down and look at me."

She was crying as she stood still, putting her hands against mine. "I can't," she squeaked. There was so much terror in her eyes. "It won't let me out. My elements are frozen."

“Raven, only you can control your elements. This is all of your fear, all of your doubt.”

She leaned her forehead against the glass, her body shaking. I was desperate to reach her, but she had to push through this by herself. “Raven, you have to let me love you. You have to trust me.”

She shook her head, lowering her eyes. “You tried to leave me. You lied to me.”

“I didn’t,” I said gently. “You locked yourself in here before I had a chance to explain.” I put my forehead against the glass. “Baby, I am so in love with you. Nothing will keep me away from you, but listen to me.” I tapped the glass with my finger, and she looked up at me. “You have an entire kingdom who would fall at your feet, who love you. You are loved, Raven, even though you may feel like you’re not.”

She sank to her knees, tears streaming down her face. I lowered with her, fighting back my tears because she needed me to be strong for her right now. It would never be possible to show her how deep my love ran for her, but that wasn’t what mattered the most.

Raven needed to love herself. She needed to realize that she was worth loving — that everyone who’d ever left her and made her feel unworthy was a reflection of them, not her.

“I want to be worth staying for,” she whispered in a weak, broken voice. “I want to trust that you can be that person. I’m so tired, Zeke.” She was a ball in the middle of this box, the black ink continuing to fall and stick to her. “I’m so tired of feeling alone all the time.”

“Raven, you can’t let your past dictate your future anymore.”

“There are so many secrets between us. You’re hiding things from me.”

I nodded, frowning. “I am protecting you. Protecting myself. But that doesn’t take away from how devoted to you I am.” I placed a hand against my heart. “I haven’t lied to you,

Raven. This belongs to you, but you have to allow me to show you that. You have to stop doubting me.”

Her eyes flickered behind me, and her panic returned. “You have to leave. Zeke, you need to go!”

My brow creased as I turned my head and followed her gaze.

From the mist, a form was slowly making its way toward us. I tilted my head, my jaw clenching as something that looked like Raven moved closer to me.

Raven banged on the glass, standing. “Leave! Zeke, you have to go!”

I shook my head, looking at her as I stood. “I’m not leaving you here. You have to fight this.”

“Zeke,” she cried, shaking her head. “You have to go. She will kill you. I can’t...” she looked around the box, pushing on every pane of glass. “I can’t get out!”

The creature cocked her head as she stared at me. I had expected to see Celestina, but the spirit had taken the form of Raven instead. But not mine — this was a paler, dead-eyed version of her. This was all of her pain, all of her misery.

And when she thrust her hand out, I watched as ebony ribbons left her fingers and danced their way toward me. Raven screamed my name, banging her hands on the glass.

They skittered across the ground slowly, making their way toward my feet.

“Please, please go,” she begged me, hitting the glass repeatedly with her fists.

“I’m not leaving you,” I replied. “No matter what happens, Raven, I will be by your side.”

Death looked so beautiful as it inched closer to me.

And as they circled my feet, I felt myself wanting to hand my life over to them. “I love you,” I whispered, the ribbons twisting around my legs.

“No, no, no,” Raven screamed behind me.

Weak — I felt so weak. Lightheaded.

And they seemed to be humming a soft melody — a melody that sounded like her name. And maybe, if I gave them my life, I would forever become a part of her.

The glass shattered as I fell to my knees, ribbons circling my waist.

And through the haze, all I could see was orange.

Flames.

Raven was screaming as she loosened fire from her palms, fire that seemed to scatter away the mist. The orange morphed into purple as she pressed her palms against my chest, and I gasped as air refilled my lungs, bringing me back to her.

The ribbons cloaked us both now, and Raven's head rolled back as they pushed into her skin. And as the last of the ink sank into her, I realized it wasn't killing her.

It was becoming part of her.

It had trapped her to live in her.

“Fuck!” I yelled, grabbing her face between my hands. Her hands were still against my chest, the purple flames growing brighter. “Fight it, Raven. Fight them.”

I had to get her out of here. I looked around, but the creepy version of her had disappeared.

Because I was holding her, with the ribbons now living inside of Raven, the darkness did, too.

Cradling her against my chest, I stood and kissed her repeatedly.

And threw us out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



ZEKE

Jeanine shook my shoulders while shouting my name, pinching my skin between her fingers.

My eyes shot open as my room became focused, my knuckles white while I squeezed blankets between my fingers. “Raven,” I rasped, my head pounding as I sat up quickly.

Jeanine had already left me and was on the ground, holding my fragile witch in her arms and crying her name.

Tumbling off the bed, I crawled to her side and grabbed Raven to pull her against my chest. Her lips were parted, her skin clammy, but she was breathing. “Baby, wake up.” I kissed her forehead. “Raven, baby. I need you.”

“What happened?!” Jeanine shouted at me, taking Raven’s hand between hers.

“I don’t...” I stammered, skimming across the memory. “I don’t know! That... thing. That creature. It’s in her now. She saved me and sacrificed herself to do it.”

“She fucking... *lifted* off the bed!” Jeanine exclaimed. “And then fell on the ground unconscious!”

“Raven,” I cried. “Wake up. I need your smile, your laugh.” I pressed my lips against hers, my tears falling to her cheeks. “Please,” I whispered against her lips. “Please don’t leave me.”

Jeanine was inaudible as she sobbed, putting Raven's hand against her lips.

And then, without opening her eyes, without moving, she shifted into Blaze and gasped, her eyes flying open as warmth spread across her body. I crumbled until I was leaning against the bed, holding her tightly against my chest as relief and tears flooded my body.

Jeanine fell on top of us, wrapping her arms around Raven's waist as she tried to catch her breath, her eyes searching the room to reconcile what just happened.

And then she was sobbing, putting her hands on my face, running one through my hair, touching me everywhere she could.

"I'm here," I choked, kissing the top of her head. "I'm right here."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said through her sobs. "I didn't mean to."

Shushing her, I grabbed her chin and tilted it up. "Let me see your eyes."

They were full of tears and bloodshot, but I had never been so relieved to see her flames.

I laughed — from stress, relief, I wasn't sure, but then kissed her. She smelled of burning wood and pears, and I held her against me as long as I could until she needed a breath.

Wiping the tears from her face with the back of her hand, Jeanine sat up. "What happened?"

Raven was shaky as she rose, her red hair sticking to her cheeks from the tears. I unpeeled it from her face and tucked it behind her ears as she blinked, still trying to focus on us. "I don't... remember. I was upset, and the more upset I became, the colder I got. And was somehow able to dream while awake."

I tipped my head backward and stared at the ceiling as I tried to calm my raging heart. Her raging heart.

“And then I was trapped. I could hear both of you, but I didn’t know how to get out. She... she left, which is when Zeke found me.” She covered her face with her hands as her chest caved in.

“Hey,” I whispered, running a hand down her hair. “I’m okay, Raven. You saved me.”

“I almost killed you,” she mumbled into her hands, her body shaking.

“Baby,” I sighed, pulling her to me again. “That wasn’t you, Raven.”

“But it is me.” She removed her hands and stuck out her bottom lip, which I kissed. “It’s all of my pain. It’s all the empty memories, the times I felt alone.”

“And you’re going to learn how to control it,” Jeanine said, rubbing her back. “It’s in you now. We’re going to help you, Raven. And then it’ll just be another thing you can scare people with.”

Raven’s laugh was breathy through her tears as she nodded once, squeezing Jeanine’s hand.

A knock on the door had me covering Raven as Jeanine peeked over the bed. I rolled my eyes as I recognized the voice. “Queen Mira wanted me to inform you that dinner will be served in fifteen minutes,” Matthew said.

Jeanine cleared her throat and rose to her feet. “Thank you, Matthew. We will be there shortly.” She waited until he left before looking at me. “Do you feel like going, Raven? I can tell her you don’t feel well, and you can stay here.”

Raven shook her head against me. “I’ll go. I’ve learned from you that the less she knows, the better.”

Chuckling, I kissed the top of her head while Jeanine smiled. “I’ll see you in fifteen minutes then.” She leaned over and kissed the top of Raven’s head. “I wouldn’t show up as Blaze.”

With a small smile, Raven grabbed Jeanine’s hand and said, “You’re my best friend, too.”

Jeanine squeaked, and I couldn't help but grin at the noise since she rarely wore her heart on her sleeve. She kissed Raven's forehead and didn't say another word as she left the room.

She curled into me. "I'm so sorry, Zeke. I couldn't control it."

"Raven." I tilted her chin up. "Don't apologize to me. You did control it. You fought through it to save me." I brushed my lips across hers. "I think you love me."

She sniffled and nodded once, resting her head against my chest.

And as I held her in my arms, safe and sound, this moment's euphoric satisfaction made one thing very clear: through the muddled melancholy of my thoughts lately, her light made it apparent.

I could not live my life without her.

My constant fear of losing her, of never having this, of having to say goodbye to her — I couldn't do it.

I wanted to devote my entire life to her.

If it meant continuing to live as I had been, if it meant continuing to work for Mira, I would do it.

Fire, earth, ice, death... I wanted all of it.

I wanted all of her.

If it meant I could call Raven my wife, I would do whatever it took.

I took her left hand and slowly slid my mother's ring from her finger. She sat up quickly, her eyes refilling with tears as agony took over. Immediately, I brought her lips to mine, kissing her tenderly. "It's not what you think," I whispered against her lips.

And suddenly, I was nervous as I shifted her from my lap to the floor, as I scooted out from the bed and rested on one knee, as I took her hand in mine and kissed it once before I stared into those flame-filled eyes of hers.

That damnable red hair.

As I stared at my entire future.

“Raven,” I whispered.

I felt her heart rate increase through my own.

“This might be the worst timing....”

“We’ve been nothing but bad timing,” she replied with a sweet smile.

“Please marry me, Raven. We’re tangled and twisted, but I need you to marry me. If you don’t want to, I’ll understand, but I’ll keep asking. I’ve been trying to stay out of it; I haven’t wanted to push you—”

She put her fingers against my lips. “Yes.”

“Yes?” I repeated with her fingers still against my lips.

She nodded, laughing through her tears. “It’s always been yes. I just needed to know that it’s what *you* wanted.”

“Raven.” I fell into her, wrapping my arms around her body and kissing her repeatedly. “I’ve wanted nothing else since I met you.”

Her arms snaked around my neck, and she nuzzled her face against it, soaking my skin with her tears. I didn’t care about the repercussions. She was going to be my wife.

Fuck, this was the happiest moment of my life.

“I love you,” I murmured against her hair, pulling her into my lap.

She lifted her head to look at me, and I pressed my lips against hers. I kissed her softly, tenderly, desperately — for as long as she let me, which still wasn’t long enough.

It would never be enough.

But when I finally broke from her, it was only to beg for her forgiveness. “Please forgive me. I didn’t mean any of what I said. Not a word.”

She shrugged. “I’ll talk it over with Jeanine and let you know.”

I laughed, and she smiled, shoving off of me. “Feed me, you infuriating man.”

I looked her up and down. “Are you going to dinner in my shirt? I like it, but I prefer darling Matthew not to see you like this.”

She grumbled as I stood with her in my arms, cradling her against my chest. If she would let me carry her everywhere, I would. A goddess like the one in my arms should never have to walk. “Jeanine said he carried you in. Did he hold you like this?”

She nodded with a rotten grin.

I glared at her. “Did you like it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I did. All I could think about while my flesh ripped apart was how good his arms felt.”

The dry sarcasm in her voice had me laughing again.



WE WERE LATE FOR DINNER, and no one had started eating when we walked in. Raven apologized profusely as she sat in her chair. “I wasn’t feeling well,” she said to Mira. “You didn’t need to wait on us.”

“It’s perfectly fine, Little Bird. Jeanine told me. I hope you’re feeling much better,” Mira responded, flashing one of her fakest smiles. She was annoyed, but she wasn’t going to let Raven know that, and I wondered how much longer she could keep this act of hers going.

I rolled my eyes, and Jeanine grinned at me. Darling Matthew immediately came to Raven and poured her a glassful of wine. She gave him a bright smile, which would typically annoy me, but I was grateful for his willingness to help her. That was the only reason I had begrudgingly agreed to let him train with us for a day to see how he handled it. He would be eaten alive, but I couldn’t tell her no after I had been such an asshole.

Maybe I could beat the lust right out of him.

“I think she’s good on wine, Matthew, if you want to share with the rest of us.”

Jeanine snorted, and Raven pinched my thigh. My gratitude could only handle so much. Even John rolled his eyes at me, but damn. He needed to move on. She belonged to me.

Mira asked, “How was your training today, Ezekiel?”

I took a sip of my wine before I answered. Raven had already guzzled hers down. I was starting to believe it was the only reason she wanted to come to dinner. I needed to ensure she had bottles — no, cases — for when she traveled back to Seolia.

If there were any bottles left on the planet after she was done here.

“It was fine,” I answered. “Non-eventful.”

Raven and Jeanine exchanged a grin.

I leaned back in my chair and ran my hand down Raven’s hair. “I guess I’ll train tomorrow since someone informed my fiancée that she has to stay away from me.” I glared at Jeanine.

“It’s tradition, Ezekiel,” Mira said. “You know this.”

“It’s a fucking useless one,” I snapped. “It’s just a party. Why can’t I see her?”

“Uh, I have a head attached to this,” Raven muttered, uncurling my fingers from her hair.

I hadn’t realized I’d been tugging on it and winced, giving her an apologetic grin. I kissed her temple before I was right back to argue. “I think it’s time to break tradition.”

“It’s bad luck,” Jeanine sighed. “Now shut up.”

Raven snickered, and I glared at both of them. “And you’re just fine with this?”

Raven looked at me with an amused grin. “I’m...”

“I will help her get ready tomorrow, but tonight, you can only have her until the sun rises,” Jeanine interrupted. “It doesn’t matter how she feels about it. It’s time to share her.”

I shook my head. “No.”

Raven pouted. “I feel like I’m being traded like a pig.”

Everyone laughed, and I tugged on her hair again. “But an adorable one.”

She scowled and shoved my hand away.

Mira snapped her fingers at us. “Children, don’t fight over our little bird. We will all be reunited tomorrow night. I will be too busy preparing for the party to sit with you at breakfast, but everything you need will be in my chambers.”

Well, fuck.

I closed my eyes as Raven asked, “I thought Jeanine was helping me get ready?”

I felt Jeanine’s hard stare at me, but there was nothing we could do.

I opened my eyes to meet hers as we both braced for it.

“She is, Little Bird. She stays in my chambers,” Mira answered.

Raven’s forehead creased, her eyebrows drawing in as she stared at her plate. Don’t say anything, I begged her silently. Jeanine stared at her, too, chewing on her lip. “I apologize. I didn’t realize you were together.” Her voice was strained as she tried to figure it out.

Jeanine was pale. Paler than usual.

And then, Mira betrayed the secret we’d kept from Raven. “For about two years, yes. We are lovers.”

Raven’s head slowly, so slowly, turned to me, her mouth drawn in a tight line.

With a tightened jaw, I pushed into her mind. *Don’t*, I whispered into her subconscious.

When her eyes began to glaze, I pushed into her mind again as she recalled seeing Jeanine and me in the bakery together. Scattering it, I shook my head. Her eyes narrowed on me.

I knew what she was thinking — that I had wanted Jeanine so severely that I was willing to steal her away from Mira.

Her eyes glistened again, and I sighed, reentering her mind. Her nightmare was trying to piece itself back together.

Breaking it, I scattered the images and reached for her hand under the table, but she yanked it away. There were so many emotions flushing through her that I couldn't keep up.

“I'm exhausted,” she said. “I think I should retire for the evening.”

I sighed, hanging my head.

When she stood, we all stood with her. She kissed Mira's cheek, and when I moved to follow her, she pinned me with a stare. If I pushed her too hard, she might reveal what she learned.

It's not what you think, Raven.

Her chin dipped as she left the room, not sparing me another glance.

I looked at Matthew as he watched her go. “Matthew, can you make sure she makes it safely, please?” Since she tended to get lost.

He nodded in response and set the carafe of wine before chasing after her. I looked at Jeanine as she tried to push away tears with the tips of her fingers.

We had betrayed her. Again.

Sighing, I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my temples. We needed to tell her. My mother said not to, but it was getting too complicated and we were risking too much by letting her find out on her own.

I was tired of hurting her.

Raven wanted to help us, and it was a risk we had to be willing to take. If anyone could stop Mira, it would be Raven. I didn't want to sway her decision, but I didn't believe she would take Mira's side. She was still uncomfortable around Mira and loved her people too much.

My legs shook in my chair while I counted down the minutes. If Jeanine and I were to jump up and chase after her, Mira would know something was amiss. Again, I had to be patient and was getting really fucking tired of it. I needed to be with my fiancée.

Fuck, she had just agreed to marry me, and now she was probably doubting it all over again.

I was not going to continue giving her reasons to doubt me.

And finally, after months of fearing how Mira would react, I said fuck it and stood. "I need to be with her if she's ill."

Mira looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "Ezekiel, you do not leave the table until your queen dismisses you."

"I am dismissing myself, Mira. You've never been my queen."

I didn't say another word as I left the room.

It was way past time that I bucked against tradition.



THE DOOR to my room was wide open.

And I already knew what that meant.

I went in and looked around, calling her name to no avail.

Flung open and mocking me, her trunk sat with ruffled clothes. I dug through them and muttered a curse word. "She fucking..." I threw the clothes back down as Jeanine came into the room. "She left in her jumpsuit. She's exploring. This is what she does when she needs space to think."

John came in after Jeanine and chuckled, walking to my window and looking out into the forest. “That girl. Always old habits with her.”

I ran a hand through my hair, standing beside John. “She’s in the forest somewhere. Goddamnit, Raven.”

Jeanine came to my side. “Why does she keep returning to the forest?”

I shook my head slightly, my eyes searching the tree tops I’d stared at thousands of times before. “I don’t know. Maybe John was right. Maybe she’s following her instincts, and something is in there that I’m unaware of.”

John looked at me. “Nothing from her memories?”

I stared at him, narrowing my eyes on the grin he was trying to hide. “You know what she’s trying to find?”

“Not what,” John replied. “Where.”

“There is nothing in the forest but trees and cliffs,” I argued. And then it was like fate pushed the memory into my mind from one of her dreams. One of the first ones I had ever shown her. “A cabin.” I studied the surroundings. A pond. Trees. “I don’t recognize this. I’ve been all over that forest.”

“I’m about to tell you something, son. Something that you might have trouble understanding.”

Cocking an eyebrow, I looked back toward the forest as I anticipated what he was about to say.

“Magic, Zeke. It’s guarded by magic. Raven is the only one with access to it.” He pulled out a map from around his back and handed it to me. It was old, and most of the ink had faded, but a red circle was sitting in the top left corner of the forest. “That’s where she’ll be. If she’s inside that circle, you won’t be able to see her.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I asked, “How?”

“Celestina was powerful. More powerful than even Mira realizes.”

“Why haven’t you told her about this?”

John smiled. “Have you ever tried telling her anything?”

He had a point. Placing knowledge in the palm of her hands was tricky. You never knew how she would react to it. “I feel there is a lot more to Raven’s story that you’re not telling me.”

“When Celestina died, I found it difficult to mourn. I loved her like a sister, but I had the most unsettling feeling that she was lingering.” He turned away from me and stared out the window again. “Magic is as much of a mystery to me as it is to you, but Raven’s story is far from over. I don’t know why; I don’t know what to expect with her, but I’ve always been waiting.”

It was Jeanine who asked, “Waiting for what?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” John turned his attention to me then, with nothing but seriousness in his expression. “But I can tell you this: Raven is the key to something. But what she’s meant to unlock, I’m not sure we will be ready.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



RAVEN

This was a dumb idea.

I was fully aware of it. Sneaking out of the castle was a *dumb* idea. Not one of my brightest, but I knew that if I stayed in that castle, it was only a matter of time before they came looking for me. And I was tired of the secrets; I was tired of them dodging my questions.

If I wanted answers, I had to find them alone.

And while my mother wanted to give me the impression that Zeke and Jeanine meant more to one another than they'd led me to believe, I wasn't convinced. They couldn't have been so desperate for one another that Zeke would risk a falling out with Mira. He wouldn't have risked his life to be with Jeanine if I were indeed the only one he'd ever loved.

There were pieces of the puzzle missing, and I was going to find them.

Matthew had made sure I made it back to Zeke's chambers, and when I had convinced him I would stay put, I did the complete opposite and dug through my trunk to find my jumpsuit.

It was worrisome how skilled I had become at sneaking out of places.

Instead of walking around the back of the castle toward the wall, I went forward. Earlier, I had noticed that the forest was

unguarded and open for anyone to walk into from Zeke's stadium.

An excited grin splayed on my mouth as I jogged down the steep road. There was no one around but me — not that it surprised me. Nothing lively ever seemed to happen in Reales.

I felt as small as an ant between these stone walls. Even the sky seemed to stretch wider to accommodate their height — it seemed a bit overkill, even for a kingdom like Reales. Maybe if Zeke ever became king, I could talk him into tearing them down.

Because if there ever came a day where Mira wasn't queen, I wanted no part of that throne.

The stones under my boots made deep thuds, and the sound echoed back into my skeleton, making me shiver. I kept a hand against the wall as I climbed down to keep myself balanced.

When the bottom of the long road came into focus, I paused.

My heart ticked a little faster, but fear was drowned by adrenaline as I took small steps closer to the form.

A male horse — a very black horse to be exact. As black as my soul, as black as the sludge nesting in my veins. Zeke. This horse reminded me of Zeke, as it was the shade I felt had been crafted for him — the black that held my deepest desires and my love for him.

Something from my dreams long ago tugged. I'd seen this horse before.

I looked around for the owner. The beast looked like it had been well taken care of, but it was only me here. It was unsaddled, and when he tipped his head to me, I slowly reached out to pet his black mane, smiling as it whinnied in response.

The tips of my fingers grazed along its back, and the softness of the black hair shot chills up my arms. I felt an intimate connection, and though I couldn't understand why, I wouldn't let the unknown keep me tied down anymore. So

when he kneeled, I didn't give myself a chance to doubt before I climbed on his back and swung my legs over, sitting upright.

Sliding my fingers into his mane, I squeezed his ribs gently with my ankles. "Show me."

And like he somehow understood, he immediately took off into a gallop. He wove us through the streets, the high walls blurring as we rushed by. I would try and look around to make a note of our surroundings but felt nothing short of excitement as he led us to wherever our destination was.

A wide smile spread across my face as we passed the tree line. He only picked up speed, the cold air of night whipping around my face. My hair flew behind me like wings, tearing my braid apart. As I leaned farther into him, he neighed, propelling us miles and miles from the kingdom.

Closing my eyes, I released his mane and spread my arms out to the side as the sounds of the forest surrounded me. It was the first time I'd felt free in months.

When his sprint slowed to a trot, I opened my eyes.

There was a small cottage ahead of us, encased by tall trees and a quaint pond. It was tucked far away in the forest, so far that I couldn't see the cliffs or hear the water.

My horse came to a stop next to the porch and whipped his head around. I took that as my cue to dismount.

Patting his back, I waited until he kneeled low enough for me to slide off, watching as he trotted over to the pond to lap up water.

Why did this horse feel like mine?

My focus moved to the cottage in front of me that looked as if it had been abandoned long ago.

The steps creaked, leading me up to a rotting porch. "Hello?" I called out, tiptoeing across the porch to look for a window or anything that would let me know if it was safe to go inside.

Blowing a breath, I pulled open the rickety door, jumping as it shut behind me with a loud bang, masking me in complete

darkness.

And without me lighting my fingertips or even taking a breath, candles flickered to life across the small cabin, illuminating the room with small bursts of flame.

“Uh...” I trailed off, falling backward and hitting the door behind me.

Atop a table, perched in dusty candelabras, candlesticks covered in hardened yellow wax grew brighter as they beckoned me toward them. I didn't particularly want to find out how this cabin had come to life on its own, but when I noticed an envelope on the table, I didn't have much choice.

Looking around as I took small steps closer, I noticed a bed and a loveseat.

Quaint. Like a lover's retreat.

“Ah,” I whispered as I realized where I was standing. This was where my mother and Leonidas would come.

And now it all made sense.

The secret corridors, the dock in the Black Forest, he would leave to visit her. It took at least a week to sail from Seolia to Reales, possibly longer twenty-five years ago. That was a lot of time sailing for two people only to have a night together, which made my mother's murder much more mysterious.

I smiled, though. Zeke would sail two weeks to only have a night with me.

I wondered about the conversations my parents may have had — if the idea of me ever came up. Or if their relationship had even been as serious as that, itching for a future they could never have, never would have.

Gloom clung to me at the possibility of never having a future with Zeke. Would we be like my parents? Would we always search for our wildly unhinged future only to finally snap from the pressure? Would we ever spill our secrets to one another?

Our story seemed too similar to theirs. I refused to let it end the same.

A yellow envelope with my name scrawled on top was resting on the table, staring back at me.

How?

Sitting in one of the chairs, I pinched the envelope between my fingers. My name was written messily like it had been done in a hurry. Holding the envelope closer to the candlelight, I flipped it over, and stamped on the back was the seal of Seolia.

A letter from my father.

Choking back a shaky breath, I peeled the waxy seal, careful not to tear the thin parchment inside. My fingers trembled as I pulled out the paper and unfolded it, my eyes wet in anticipation.

My father's words were written in a rushed cursive.

MY DEAREST RAVEN,

I KNEW YOU WOULD FIND THIS LETTER ONE DAY.

FROM THE SECOND I SAW YOU, I KNEW THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT YOU. THOSE GREEN EYES LOOKED AS IF THEY HELD THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE.

I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE ANGRY WITH ME. BY NOW, YOU'VE LEARNED THAT I WAS THE ONE WHO KILLED YOUR MOTHER. I AM UNSURE OF ANY EXPLANATION I COULD GIVE YOU TO ALLOW ME TO EARN YOUR FORGIVENESS, BUT LET ME START WITH THE TRUTH.

I LOVED YOUR MOTHER DEEPLY, SOMETIMES SO MUCH THAT I THOUGHT IT MIGHT TEAR APART THE HEART BEATING INSIDE MY CHEST. SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL AND ADDICTING, BUT SHE POSSESSED MAGIC SO DARK THAT IT WAS STARTING TO OVERCOME HER, AND SHE ALWAYS CRAVED MORE, LETTING IT SIMMER INSIDE HER UNTIL SHE FELT SHE COULDN'T HOLD IT IN

ANY LONGER. I COULD KEEP HER FROM DESTRUCTION FOR MANY MONTHS, BUT SHE BECAME HARDER TO CONTROL UNTIL, ONE DAY, I WASN'T ENOUGH ANYMORE.

SHE WANTED THE KINGDOM AS HER OWN AND ASKED ME TO MURDER RUDOLF AND LEAVE US OPEN TO MARRY, BINDING OUR DOMAINS TOGETHER. DESPITE WHAT I DID TO RUDOLF BY SLEEPING WITH HIS WIFE, I COULD NOT MURDER HIM. WE HAD KEPT THE CIRCLE OF PEACE TOGETHER, ALWAYS FIGHTING TO KEEP THE FREE WILL OF OUR PEOPLE. I LEFT HER AND RETURNED HOME TO SEOLIA, RESIGNING NEVER TO SEE YOUR MOTHER AGAIN UNTIL I RECEIVED WORD THAT YOU HAD BEEN BORN.

I RUSHED TO REALES, KNOWING YOU WERE MINE THE SECOND I SAW YOU.

I TRIED TO PLEAD WITH YOUR MOTHER TO LET ME TAKE YOU WITH ME, AS I WAS FEARFUL THAT HER DARK SOUL WOULD CLING TO YOURS AND DESTROY YOU. BUT SHE FOUGHT ME, SCREAMING THAT YOU WERE THE KEY TO HER PLAN BEING FULFILLED AND THAT YOU'D BE THE ONE TO TIE OUR KINGDOMS TOGETHER, FORCING PEROSAN AND THOYA INTO A WAR.

SCREAMING THAT WE COULD FINALLY BE TOGETHER.

WHEN I RETURNED WITH YOU TO SEOLIA, I GAVE YOU TO ONE OF MY MOST TRUSTED FRIENDS. AND I WATCHED YOU, RAVEN. I NEEDED TO SEE IF YOUR THIRST WAS AS UNQUENCHABLE AS YOUR MOTHER'S. BUT INSTEAD OF HER BLACK CLOUDS LINGERING OVER YOUR HEAD, I SAW THE GOOD IN YOU — HOW YOU PROTECTED THOSE WHO COULDN'T FIGHT FOR THEMSELVES. I WATCHED AS, YEAR TO YEAR, YOUR MAGIC GREW, AND YOU USED IT FOR GOOD.

I COULDN'T BRING YOU TO THE PALACE BECAUSE RUDOLF WOULD KNOW THAT I HAD TAKEN YOU, AND OUR LIVES WOULD BE AT RISK.

AS I LIE DYING, I FEEL LIKE IT'S TIME TO ADD YOU INTO MY WILL, NAMING YOU THE SOLE HEIR TO MY THRONE. I TRUST THAT YOU'LL TAKE CARE OF OUR PEOPLE, KEEP THEM SAFE, AND MAINTAIN THE PEACE WE HAVE SPENT DECADES TRYING TO PROTECT.

I DO NOT HAVE LONG NOW, RAVEN, BUT YOU ARE THE HEIR TO SEOLIA AND IN THE LINE OF SUCCESSION FOR REALES.

YOU HAVE A SISTER, RAVEN. I DO NOT KNOW MUCH ABOUT HER, BUT I CAUTION YOU TO WATCH FOR ANY DARKNESS SHE MAY HAVE INHERITED FROM YOUR MOTHER. THE THIRST FOR POWER IS NOT EASILY SATIED, AND YOU MUST BE CAREFUL, RAVEN. I PLEAD WITH YOU NOT TO TRUST EVERYTHING YOU HEAR AND REMAIN LOGICAL.

AND PLEASE KNOW THIS: I LOVE YOU, EVEN IF I COULD NEVER SHOW IT. I WOULD STARE AT ISLA'S COTTAGE EVERY AFTERNOON TO HOPEFULLY CATCH A GLIMPSE OF YOU, EVEN IF JUST FOR A SECOND. AND YOUR MOTHER LOVED YOU, TOO. YOU HAVE RECEIVED THE VERY BEST PARTS OF US. HOLD ON TO THAT, MY DEAR RAVEN. DO NOT ALLOW THE BITTERNESS OF THIS WORLD TO BRING YOU DOWN.

I AM PROUD TO BE YOUR FATHER, RAVEN.

MY GREATEST REGRET IN THIS LIFE IS NEVER KNOWING YOU THE WAY A FATHER SHOULD.

LEONIDAS

I HAD to throw my head back to prevent my tears from wetting the paper.

Clutching it to my chest, I heaved from his words. My father wanted me but feared my darkness overcoming me like it had my mother. And I was letting it, day by day, steal all the good from me. But unlike her, I didn't thirst for power. That had never been something I wanted. I thirsted for justice — to remain peaceful amongst the other three kingdoms, to return to Seolia and rule knowing that it was where I had always belonged.

His throne had become so tainted to me since believing he had killed my mother because she was a witch. But it was because he didn't want to use me for her politics and her need to gain control over all four kingdoms. He acted out of instinct

to protect his daughter from the wickedness possessing her mother.

My engagement. Zeke and Jeanine had been trying to warn me about something. Did Mira want to bind our kingdoms together like our mother?

Closing my eyes, I tried remembering what John told me during our meeting months ago. He said he feared war was coming.

Had I been blind this entire time?

So many games were being played, so many moving pieces. I needed to figure this out.

I stared at the letter in my hand. My father trusted me to rule over his kingdom. He believed I was capable.

No more irresponsible decisions. It was time to stop worrying those who cared for me — time to stop looking into my past to decide my future. I had a kingdom to protect — a fiancé to keep safe. I had people relying on me, trusting me.

It was time to be a queen.

Placing the letter in one of my boots, I walked outside. The horse was at the bottom of the steps, waiting for me. From the porch steps, I climbed on his back and settled upright, about to kick into a trot when I looked into the forest.

My heart caught in my throat as, through the trees, I saw him.

Zeke.

He didn't seem to notice me as he continued weaving through the trees, looking down at a map. And then he stopped, turning in a slow circle.

I cocked an eyebrow, tilting my head as I watched him look around, utterly confused. He was less than fifty feet away from me but looked as if he were blind.

I waved my arms around, giggling as he growled while looking at his map again.

And then Jeanine came stomping through the forest behind him, dragging his bow along the ground. “I think you’re lost,” she said, tossing him the bow.

“I’m not lost,” he bit out, pointing directly toward me. “It’s supposed to be right here.”

I looked behind me at the cabin.

“He said you won’t be able to see it, idiot. Did you expect it to like you enough to change its mind?”

See what? The cabin? The cabin that came to life on its own?

And that was when I realized — it was enchanted. Celestina had done something to guarantee that only those she wanted to grant access to it were given the chance to visit.

I looked down at my hands. I didn’t possess any sort of magic like that. I couldn’t make it visible to them.

I was about to put them out of their misery when my head snapped in the opposite direction — a blood-curdling scream.

Biting my lip, I looked back toward Zeke and Jeanine. Zeke looked torn on whether to stay or continue looking for me.

In a split second, I decided to keep him safe. I could beat both of them there. It would leave the other vulnerable if I carried one of them with me.

After another scream, I squeezed the horse with my ankles, and he immediately took off toward the noise.

And once I had cleared the invisible border of my safety net, Zeke shouted for me to stop. But I kept going, racing through the part of the forest where I had been chased the day I arrived here.

“Slow down,” I whispered, lowering to peek through the trees.

He obeyed and slowed from a sprint to a trot. Another scream had me snapping my head to the left.

In the distance, a woman was held down by a stringy-haired man through the deadened trees. I saw no one else around them, and I could certainly take one man down alone.

Perhaps we could build another snowman.

Dismounting, I ran toward the screams, stopping short when two men appeared from behind thick trees. “Fuck,” I snapped, shifting into Blaze.

Why were there so many men in this goddamned forest?

The men’s eyes flared slightly in terror at my shift and my horse as he trotted up next to me, digging his hooves into the ground in a warning. “It would be in your best interest if you walked away!” I shouted to them, lighting my palms with flames.

“I don’t think so,” another voice called out, but it wasn’t from one of them.

My eyes moved to another man who came out from behind a trunk, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at me and whistled at the man pinning down the woman. As he looked up and saw me, he stood quickly and pulled her up with him, drawing a knife from behind his back to hold against her throat. Noisy cries came from her as she looked from me to the blade.

I glared at him, grating my teeth. I needed to help her but couldn’t take four down alone. But I refused to leave her like this, and hopefully, Zeke and Jeanine would be here soon. “Take me instead,” I offered, extinguishing my hands. “Let her go and take me.” I shifted into myself. “I’m the lost princess. I’m a much better prize.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



RAVEN

As they stared at me while contemplating my offer, I looked past them at the woman, who was also gawking at me in confusion. She was older with graying hair, so I was confident she understood who I was. And seeing your princess return after a quarter of a century had to be jarring.

The voice of one of the men drew me away from her inspection. “And how do we know you won’t use your flames as a weapon?” His accent was one I didn’t recognize. I’d heard many dialects before from travelers who came to our realm seeking refuge from surrounding countries, but his had a pleasantly airy quality — not at all what I would have expected from the type of men I had seen wandering through this forest. His was crisp.

I shrugged. “You don’t. You’ll have to trust me. But it’s either you release her, or you find out how bad it burns when my hands are around your throat.”

“We want your horse, too.”

Looking at my horse, I suppressed a smile. It wasn’t like he would leave me, anyway. If they kept me, he would make sure he stayed close.

I looked at the man who seemed to be the leader and nodded. “Fine. He’s stubborn, though.”

The man laughed, taking a step closer. “We thoroughly enjoy breaking things.”

I rolled my eyes. “Is that supposed to entice me?” I wagged a finger as he took another step. “No. No touching until you let her free. I want her a safe distance away before we make our trade.”

He sighed. He was attractive, which made this entire exchange all the more irritating. He was tall and dark-skinned, with eyes so hazel that the white surrounding his irises popped like snow. His head was shaved, which only further accentuated the sharp bone structure of his face. And he didn’t look like the type of person who would do something like this. While fitted for outdoors, his clothes were nice and not raggedy, unlike the men he kept company with.

But monsters could come in all shapes and sizes.

Judging by his looks, he didn’t need to trap women to get what he wanted. And if I wasn’t already in love with the most gorgeous man, and if this one wasn’t an asshole, I may have flirted with him.

He whistled again, and the man holding the woman rolled his eyes before releasing her. She stared at me for another few seconds before she took off in a run back toward town.

“Tie the horse,” the leader said to the men beside him.

I looked at my horse. “It’ll be okay,” I whispered, petting his mane. “Let them.”

He neighed and whipped his head around as the men slowly approached. One of the men held a rope in his hand, and I held out mine. “Allow me. He won’t fight me, but he’ll fight you.”

He looked at the leader, who studied me the same way I’d just studied him. After a moment, he dipped his chin, and the man with the rope, while leering at me, placed it in my hand.

“Must you all be so disgusting?” I mumbled, grabbing the rope and leading my horse to the closest tree. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, patting his neck. “But it won’t hurt if I do it.”

He breathed a deep sigh, dipping his head to rest against mine. I rubbed his forehead before I stepped out from underneath his embrace and threw the rope around the tree. He stepped closer to the trunk, allowing me to tie it loosely around his neck. “You feel so... human.”

“Not whispering spells over there, I hope.”

“Not that kind of witch.” Though, apparently, my mother was.

When I turned around, the leader was a body’s length away from me. “Odd that the lost princess already has a horse that knows her so well.”

I shrugged, stepping away from my horse and closer to him. I refused to show fear. “Odd that someone who looks like you resorts to these measures to get laid.”

He smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. “Presumptuous of you to assume that I want to fuck you.” His eyes fell to my feet and, inch by inch, made a slow drag up my body. “Presumptuous, but correct.”

I sighed, annoyed. I was growing rather bored of fighting men in the forest: same shit, different day. “As fun as talking to you is, I’d rather get to the main event. I have a party to get to.”

He tapped his chin, looking at me curiously. “You’re rather calm for being surrounded by four men who want nothing more than to strip you out of that tight little piece and make you scream.”

I grinned. “I hate to be a disappointment, but I only scream for one man.”

Behind him, the other three spread out in a line. My horse neighed loudly behind me in a warning.

Without shifting, I put a hand behind my back and created an icicle.

After all, I did give them my word that I wouldn’t use flames.

And no one but Zeke was ever allowed to have my body.

Eyeing the man on the left, I bit my lip in a flirtatious smirk to keep their attention on my mouth and brought my arm forward, shooting the icicle toward him. I guided it toward his throat using a gust of wind and pierced right through the center.

As his body crumbled, all three men turned their attention to him, which was when I turned.

And ran.



WHY WAS I always running through this fucking forest?

I needed to get enough distance from them to figure out my next move. Flames could set the entire forest on fire: ice or earth, ice or earth.

Or death.

No, not yet. I didn't know how to control her yet. What if I freed her and couldn't shift back?

The thud of their feet pounded behind me, and I weaved through the trees, never staying in a straight line. I couldn't throw icicles at them. I would miss, and the exertion of extra energy would slow me down.

Earth would cause them to stumble, but it wouldn't keep them down.

I threw a glance over my shoulder. They were gaining on me. I was driving deeper into the forest and the complete opposite way of the cabin, which meant I was leading them farther away from Zeke and Jeanine. I made the same mistake last time, which nearly cost me my life.

I had no other choice.

But I had a problem. I didn't know how to pull her.

I cursed aloud at Zeke for shattering the nightmare multiple times. I needed it, but he had split it into so many tiny pieces that they couldn't come back together in my mind.

“Oh, Princess!” The attractive one shouted in amusement.

There had to be a way for me to use it. It was living in me.

Every few steps, I’d close my eyes and pull at the shattered pieces of my nightmares.

Glass box. Black ink.

Closing my eyes again, I squeezed them tight and prayed not to run into a tree. “Show me,” I whispered, hoping my mother would somehow hear my plea and bring the nightmare back.

Tendrils of blonde hair made a wave of nausea roll through me. Jeanine’s hand wrapped around someone’s throat — a throat I recognized. One by one, the pieces clicked into place, and my lungs burned, but not from running. My breath caught as I watched Jeanine and Zeke locked in a tight embrace, their mouths moving together in familiarity.

Despair fell over me like a cloak.

Control her, Raven.

I stopped running. Stopped feeling.

Turning toward my chasers, I thrust my hand out. “Morana.”

My black hair lengthened, falling to brush against my lower back. I blinked my eyes, the green replaced by black. And from my fingers, ebony ribbons.

Zeke, Zeke, Zeke.

I kept his face, his love for me, in the front. I just needed to control her long enough to get out of here safely.

The ribbons twisted toward one of the men like snakes slithering. He tried to dodge them, but they caught him quickly and wrapped around his legs, the other two men slowing as he tried to shove the ribbons off.

And after they’d coaxed his life from him, his body fell to the ground, and the ribbons returned to me. My head rolled back as I felt a surge of energy through my body, his life-extending mine.

And fuck, it felt good. Better than it should have.

It would be easy to become addicted to this.

When I dipped my chin again, both men had stopped running and were still as statues as they stared at me. “Your turn.” I lifted a hand toward the other man, and the ribbons danced their delicate spin toward him, ignoring his shouts for them to stop as they circled his body, squeezing the life out of him.

And as they did, Zeke started to fade from my mind.

And all I felt was pain.

His pain, I realized. The pain of the life I was stealing. And it felt terrific. I could taste it on my tongue like a sweet, acidic jam.

I flinched as heat shot through me, causing me to blink rapidly as Blaze tried to ignite — as my heat attempted to melt the chilly quality of death.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember how Zeke’s lips felt against mine.

I needed the memory of him to keep me tethered.

As the ribbons uncurled and returned to me, my head rolled back again to accept his life. But as I was about to bring it down again, I was tackled, stunning me long enough for him to grab my wrists and pin them above my head, preventing me from loosening the ribbons again.

Growling, I twisted my legs around his waist to try and rock, but he quickly rested his body weight on top of me. “And just where do you think you’re going, Princess?”

I hated that name.

Blinking, I shifted into myself and contemplated lighting my body on fire if it would get him off of me, but it was something I hadn’t tried before, and I didn’t want to burn along with him if it got out of control. And knowing me, it would.

“Let me go,” I demanded, trying to pull my hands out of his grip. “Once my hands are free, it’s me versus you, and we both know who will win that.”

“You’re cocky for someone pinned underneath me.”

I shifted underneath him, raising an eyebrow. “And you’re awfully cocky for someone who has absolutely no interest in you.”

“One kiss won’t kill you,” he argued.

“It won’t kill me, but it will kill you once my fiancé finds you.”

“And just who is the lucky bastard who gets to deal with all of your deadly personalities?”

“No one you would ever want to meet,” I mumbled, again trying to move out from underneath him.

He leaned in slightly, staring at my mouth. I silently dared him. He would be met with my teeth. But when he moved an inch closer, his nose wrinkled, and he jerked his head back. “Fuck, you’ve been mated.”

My eyes widened. “How... how did you know that?”

Mated. Zeke was my flame; was that the same thing?

He leaned in again, only it was to my hair instead of my face. “This sweet scent of pear...” he pulled back, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “It’s mixed with something else. Something woodsy.”

“Pine,” I answered in a whisper, turning my head to smell my hair. It was maddening that I hadn’t yet seen evidence of this bond, but everyone else could. And then I was offended, turning back to glare at him. “Why are you so disgusted by the smell? Is it bad?”

He looked at me curiously and was about to answer when the tip of an arrowhead pressed against his temple. “I suggest you get off my best friend.”

I turned my head quickly to see Jeanine standing behind him, holding her bow with the arrow cocked and ready to

shoot. He sighed and rolled his eyes, releasing my hands as he slowly rose. Holding his hands out to the side, he stood and took a step back, but she kept the arrow against his temple until I was safely beside her. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head, bending over to rest my hands on my knees as I caught my breath. The adrenaline of being chased and the shock of stealing lives left my body all at once, making me feel heavy and tired. That, and I hadn’t slept in over a day.

“You really need to stop coming in here.”

I nodded, straightening. “I know. Where is he?”

“Followed another set of footprints.” She looked at my captor. “What do you want me to do with him?”

I shrugged. “What do you normally do with them?”

“Zeke captures them and decides whether to kill them or make them join our army.”

An actual answer, and my jaw was slack. “These are the men he recruits?”

“Who is Zeke?”

We both looked at him, but I answered hers instead of his question. “Leave him for Zeke then. I have an idea. Follow me.”



AFTER RETURNING TO MY HORSE, I untied the rope from around his neck while Jeanine pushed the man toward the tree. She grabbed one end of the robe, and I held the other, tying him to the trunk and securing the knot in the back. He was throwing curse words at us, trying to reason with me, but I ignored him. “Get a small branch,” I said to Jeanine as I turned to face him again, giving him a bright smile.

“Just a word of advice: don’t barter with women’s lives. It leaves a bad taste in our mouths, and we must do things like this.” I took the branch from Jeanine and shoved it

horizontally in his mouth. “This is going to hurt just a smidge.”

Yanking his arm toward me, I shoved his sleeve up and lit the tip of my finger. He shook his head and shouted something at me, a garbled mess with the branch in his mouth.

On the inside of his arm, I brought the tip of my finger down and started writing a message across his flesh in flames. He wailed in pain and tried to rip his arm away from me, but I held him still. “This is much better than the alternative, believe me.”

When I dropped his arm, Jeanine tilted her head to read it and laughed. He shakily brought his arm up, tears falling from his eyes as he read the message aloud the best he could.

“It’s a pity,” I said. “I believe we could’ve been friends.”

“He’ll be here soon,” Jeanine said. “There’s something you need to know, and we can’t stay here in the forest. What I’m about to tell you can’t be heard by anyone else. Zeke will handle him.”

I nodded. “Where to?”

Without answering, she climbed my horse and reached her hand out for me to grab, pulling me up to sit behind her. Tangling her fingers in his mane, she kicked her heels against him, and we took off in a sprint.

We stayed deep within the forest, passing by the cliffs and heading straight toward the water’s edge. The sun bounced off the rolling waves as morning dawned. “I don’t feel like a swim,” I shouted, eyes widening as we approached.

She laughed and used her grip on his mane to turn his head, guiding us along the water’s edge and back toward town. “I have to get around the wall,” she shouted back.

“How did you find me?”

“When we saw you take off, we followed the trail of footprints, but then they split into multiple directions. Zeke followed one, while I followed the other.”

“Is he okay? Should we have waited on him?”

She shook her head. “He knew that if I found you first, I would take you somewhere. Once he finds that asshole, he’ll search his memories and know you’re fine.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

She sighed, looking at me over her shoulder. “He’s worried about you but more fearful that you will decide to leave him again.”

I frowned. “That thought never entered my mind. At this point, nothing could keep me away from him.”

When we reached the end of the wall, she pulled us to a stop and unstrapped her bow from her back quickly before removing her jacket. “Shift and wear this. The town is littered with soldiers, and I don’t know why. We didn’t inform Mira that you were missing.”

Shifting into Frost, I grabbed her jacket and tugged it on. Securing it up to the neck, I flipped the hood and pressed my cheek against her back to hide half of my face. All the secrecy only added to my pool of curiosity. If Zeke was the commander, why wasn’t he informed that his soldiers had been sent out?

“Stay down,” she said.

She took off into a steady trot, which I assumed was not to appear suspicious. We passed through town, turning down the road that led into the abandoned part. When we passed the empty tavern, I smiled, my body immediately drumming to life at the memory of Zeke holding me against the ladder.

And then, as I felt this petite body in my arms, I frowned.

Had their passion been as strong as ours? Had he ever wanted her enough to drag her into abandoned buildings? How did their relationship come about, and *why*? While friendly, they seemed like they could barely tolerate one another. Not exactly a pair I would’ve imagined wanting to sleep together.

When the road ended, she turned onto a dirt path, and we trotted up a rocky hill. Sitting up, I looked around and leaned over sideways as homes of every size came into view. She

muttered a curse word and reached behind her, grabbing my arm and pulling me down again. “Stay until I tell you.”

We slowed to a stop, and I didn’t move, my heart thundering in my ears.

Jeanine asked, “Why are you out here?”

I felt the presence of two men on either side of me, but I kept my forehead against her back. One of them tapped my knee, but I remained still.

“She’s a friend of mine. Why is half of our army scouring the streets?”

“We need to see her face,” one man grunted. “The princess is missing.”

I wrinkled my nose. Why were they so desperate to find me? Mira told me that this was my kingdom, too. If I were truly free to walk around alone, why were soldiers hellbent on making sure I was found? I didn’t need to be babysat. I was the Queen of Seolia. I answered to no one.

“Does Zeke know you were sent out here?”

“Mira’s orders,” the other man argued, tapping my knee again.

I sat up quickly and threw my hood down, shoving his hand off. “I’m a fucking blonde, you prick. Keep your hands to yourselves. Last I checked, Jeanine is on Mira’s court, which would make both of you beneath her. I know your small dicks are threatened by that but remember it next time you decide to argue with her, or I’ll make sure your heads roll.”

They stumbled to the side as I kicked my horse back into a trot. Jeanine cackled in front of me, reaching around to slap my thigh. “It’s no wonder Zeke is so goddamned obsessed with you.”

I smiled, laying my head back down against her.



WHEN WE STOPPED AGAIN, I looked around. We were standing in front of a vast, stunning manor. It was hidden behind tall trees and had a long gray-stone driveway that matched it. I could tell by looking at it that it was maintained well once upon a time, though the large pots that held flowers were faded in color, and nothing new had been planted in a very long time.

Hooves clapped along the stone as we approached. The manor was tall but long, with eleven windows along the top and bottom floors. In the middle sat a grand, triangular archway with a black door. Hedges and bushes were dead and overgrown, and moss had overtaken the walls, masking the beauty of the manor in ruin.

When we stopped, I slid off and looked at her. “Where are we?”

She gave me a small, sad smile. “This is where Zeke grew up.”

My mouth fell open as I turned back to the manor. She grabbed my hand and pulled me with her, leading me around the back. I snapped my fingers, and my horse followed behind us. I didn’t want anyone trying to take him, though he could handle himself. Like Zeke, he didn’t seem to want to leave me.

She went to a tall clay pot and dug through it, producing a key in her hand. Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I asked a question I didn’t really want an answer to. “How did you know where that was?”

She walked toward the back door, throwing me a weird glance. “Because he told me?”

As I started to recycle through my bleak thoughts of them together, she opened the door and turned, waving for me to follow her, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to imagine everywhere they had been together once inside.

When she saw my frown, she mirrored it. “Raven, I promise to answer all your questions, but you must come inside. I can’t talk to you out here.”

I stood there and contemplated with myself. There was already so much I'd had to learn since arriving here. Was this something I needed to put myself through? And once I asked myself that question, I knew the answer was yes. For him, I would wear the cloak of despair. I would always do what was necessary to keep him safe, to secure our future.

So I followed her inside.

The inside matched the outside. Ruin.

Furniture was missing, portraits fell off the walls, and dust covered everything.

Walking to the middle of the living area, I waved my hand around to scatter the dust. The portraits on the walls were of his family, and there was a single one of him as a young boy. The paint was faded, but the gray of his eyes stood out — as did his stubborn frown. Brushing my fingers across it, I smiled and moved to a larger portrait containing four people.

Zeke looked around five; a small boy was beside him with the same black hair but blue eyes. Behind Zeke stood John with his hand on Zeke's shoulders, but his other arm was wrapped around a woman's waist with a kind smile. "His mother," I breathed, touching her dress with my fingers. "Where is she? He won't talk to me about them."

"Come on; we need to get away from the windows."

I cringed, running a hand through my tangled mess of hair. "Jeanine, I don't know if I can do this. Your relationship with him was so intimate, and you know where things are, where to go. And I just... I just got him, and I already feel insecure. I want to help, but I can't go anywhere you two... because I don't know him like you, and that's hard for me."

She came to me and put her hands on my cheeks. "Raven, I need you to listen to me. Nothing happened between us here. Zeke hasn't returned here in over a year. And I have a feeling you are overestimating how often anything happened between us. I can explain all this to you, but I need you to trust me."

When silver lined my eyes, she shook her head. "You have nothing to be insecure about, but if we stay here where her

soldiers can see us, you will be risking all of us, especially him. We either need to go upstairs, or we need to leave.”

“Upstairs,” I answered quickly.

Nodding, she dropped her hands from my face and grabbed my hand to pull me behind her. The stairs were near the front door, and part of the wooden railing was cracked and chipping away, but it was intricate and detailed, which only added to my bewilderment as to why his family would abandon a place like this.

The second story was full of doors and another living area with dusty bookshelves propped up against the walls. She released my hand and went door to door, looking in each room until she finally stopped on the fourth one. Smiling, she beckoned me over. “The only reason I know this was his room is that it looks like he wrote his name on the walls.”

I laughed softly as I followed her into the room. She was correct; his name was scrawled messily on the walls next to a small bed, along with what looked like drawings of monkeys. A wardrobe on the adjacent wall was full of clothing he couldn’t have worn past age twelve. On a long dresser sat a framed painting of him and his brother. They looked young, maybe a little older than the one hanging up downstairs. “How old was he when he left here?”

I returned to the bed and grabbed a knit plush from the pillow. It was a ragged and worn monkey, clearly beloved by him at some point. “These things looked like they belonged to a child.”

“He moved into the castle once he was older to spend time with Rudolf. Even though Mira is the heir, Rudolf loved Zeke. He brought him to the castle to teach him the ways of royal life.”

I nodded, sitting on the bed that creaked from my weight and holding the plush in my lap, chewing on my bottom lip. I didn’t press but squeezed the monkey nervously. I had no idea what to expect.

Closing the door, she leaned against it and cleared her throat. She seemed just as weary as me. “Mira was the one who sent me to Seolia to turn your village against you.”

I slumped lower into the mattress. People seemed to love shocking me lately.

“I’ve been her lover for two years like she told you, but I’ve known her a lot longer. I used to be more involved in court decisions, but she stopped taking the advice of others.”

I frowned. “So the promise of reopening the orphanage....”

“Bullshit,” she interrupted. “Mira has no plans of revitalizing the kingdom. But that’s not the worst of it. When Zeke started to show interest, and I am using that word loosely, it was about two months before he came to Seolia. I didn’t understand why because he had barely talked to me and didn’t start until Mira ordered him to bring you back. And I didn’t turn him down because... well, you’ve seen him.”

I sighed and gestured for her to continue.

“He only started sleeping with me because he needed information.”

I tilted my head. “Information about what?”

“John and Zeke needed to know why I was being sent to your village to spread rumors about you. John knew Mira wanted you to marry Zeke to bind our kingdoms, but trying to turn your people against you was never part of the plan. That was something she came up with on her own. It wasn’t until we came to Seolia and talked to John that we realized it was because she wanted power. She wants your people to fear you so they’ll fall in line.”

I was beginning to dread her answers. “Fall in line for what?”

“She wants to bind our kingdoms so Perosan and Thoya will recognize us as the superpowers and give Mira control over them.”

My father had been right. Mira wanted a war if she wasn't recognized as the leader of the four kingdoms. And then it clicked. Zeke's inability to tell me things, his refusal to let me meet his family. It was because of this. His manor was abandoned, left with personal possessions. And I didn't need to ask because I already knew the answer. But I did, in hopes that maybe I was wrong — maybe my sister hadn't done such a horrible thing; perhaps he wasn't in love with the queen's sister who had hurt him.

“Where's his family?”

Jeanine's eyes glassed over. “They're in the castle, underground. She keeps them locked away and won't let Zeke see them unless he does everything she asks.”

My body crumbled as I slid off the bed and to the floor. “No, no, no....”

“That's why he couldn't tell you, Raven. He searched your memories when he came to Seolia and discovered who you were and why Mira wanted you. He stayed away so you wouldn't fall in love with him. He didn't want to break you, but he risked his family. He had to get you back here and let you find all of this on your own. He wanted you to make your own choice about Mira. He didn't want to push you, but Mira won't let him see his family until you marry him and agree to her plan. His mother told him not to tell you. She didn't want to risk you or what the two of you have.”

Small, broken noises came from me as I finally received the answers I'd been begging for. These weren't the answers I wanted.

Jeanine sat in front of me and pulled me into her arms. “We were never a couple, Raven. He was trying to keep Reales and his family safe. We both hate ourselves for what we did. He wasn't anticipating falling in love with you, and Mira wasn't, either. She knows she can use you against him now.”

The army. That was why it was so large. Mira wanted to intimidate the other kingdoms.

“How long?” The room seemed to be shrinking around us.

She coughed out a sob. “Since right after she took the throne. She locked them away to keep Zeke in line. John has been trying to help him ever since. He’s seen Luca only a handful of times since this started.”

My eyes were blurry from the tears, which burned as they slid down my cheeks. Everything Zeke had done was to protect his family, and I had been so wrong about everything.

“The ring on your finger... it’s his mother’s. She gave it to him before he left, and even though she knew the proposal was a mission, she said she had a feeling he’d want it.”

Small sobs were all I could manage. My heart was breaking for the man I loved.

“But he wanted to marry you and keep living life like he has been so he can be with you.”

He’d been risking everything for me, and all I had done was constantly doubt him.

She stroked my hair. “It’s not too late to change things, Raven. You can fix this. You’re the only one who can.”

She was right. I could fix this. I would fix this. I would keep him safe.

“I need to leave for Seolia tomorrow. I need to figure out how to handle this without Mira trying to shower me with gifts.” It made me sick that my sister would do this to me after we had spent our lives apart. It made me even sicker that she would do something like this to Zeke.

“About that,” she said. “His mother has been making those dresses. That’s why he was so upset when he saw it. It wasn’t because you were wearing it; it’s because his mother is locked away, having to work for Mira and further her agenda to manipulate you.”

“She makes dresses?”

She smiled through her tears. “She’s a seamstress and had a shoppe in town. All the girls wanted one of her dresses. Her previous partner is still there, but she can’t put out inventory

like before. There are no funds for her to continue doing so. It's only a matter of time before she closes."

Another thing I needed to fix. "I need you to come with me tomorrow, and I need a favor. I'm going to fix this, Jeanine, but what I'm about to ask of you is big."

She nodded.

"Can you take me to them?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ZEKE

I trudged along in the forest, frustrated that the trail I chose to follow was splitting into multiple directions. Someone was chased, and I had a sinking feeling it was Raven. Something in my soul told me that she was okay and hadn't died... yet. If men from the forest had captured her, it would only be a matter of time.

I needed to find her, and fast.

I was mentally cursing myself for letting it get to this point — to where she felt she needed to leave. My plan from the beginning had been nothing but complete chaos. I should have told her what was going on long ago instead of letting her believe the worst about Jeanine and me.

I wouldn't make that mistake anymore.

Depending on who found her first, we had a plan to tell her everything that was going on. I was hoping Jeanine had chosen the correct path and that Raven was safe in her company.

I quickly ducked behind a tree when I noticed two soldiers in the distance, stomping through the forests and hitting trunks of the trees with swords. What the fuck were they doing out here? I certainly didn't send them. John had returned to the dining hall last night to distract Mira so Jeanine and I could sneak out. No one else knew of Raven's disappearance. And

despite my issues with John, he wouldn't have betrayed Raven and told Mira.

If they found her first, what were their orders?

I had to think quickly. Every decision I'd made so far had been wrong, but I couldn't let them get to Raven before me.

I stepped out from the tree and called for them to turn. Asserting my leadership, I stood still and waited for them to jog to me. "Why are you out here?"

"Looking for the lost princess, sir."

These weren't recruits. These were men of Reales. Men I grew up with — men I didn't demand to take part in our strenuous training. And men who I was sure hated what I had become, too.

"And what are your orders after you recover her?"

They stared at me with a mixture of bewilderment and unease. It was rare that I wasn't kept up to date with the happenings of my goddamn army. "To bring her back to Mira's chambers to prepare for the engagement celebration, sir."

"You're supposed to escort her there?"

When they nodded, I sighed. This ruse Mira had created was getting out of hand. She was going to make sure Raven was there, even if it meant sending out the entire army.

"I've already covered this area. Head toward the water's edge and check there."

Saluting me before they left, they turned and headed toward the water. I was going to run out of time, so I chose the smaller set of prints that led deeper into the forest. "Goddamnit, Raven," I mumbled, jogging along the path. "Why are you always being chased?"

When I heard a string of curse words tossed around, I grabbed an arrow from my quiver and strapped it to my bow, taking quick steps toward the noise. But when I saw a man tied to a tree with a rope, I stopped and cocked my head. He looked at me and stopped trying to untangle himself, instead trying to

beckon me forward with one of his hands that he could barely move from his arm being pinned against the tree.

Out of curiosity, I lowered my bow and stood before him. A branch was on the ground near his feet with deep teeth marks.

I wasn't even sure what to ask.

Breathless, he asked, "Are you Zeke?"

I imagined he had tired himself out trying to escape. And when I didn't answer, he rolled his eyes. He was quite exasperated, and I sensed nothing but irritation in him. "Right, your little... fiery witch left me here and wrote you a love note on my arm."

I closed the distance between us in two giant steps, practically hurdling toward the tree.

Yanking his arm up, I ignored his groan. There was a message on his flesh, seared and scarred into his skin with flames. "For you, my love." I grinned. "She left me a gift."

"Do you often leave one another human beings?"

"You've done something to piss her off, and she's left your fate in my hands." Sighing, I took a step back. I needed to see what he did to her to decide the proper punishment. But when I pushed into his mind, he jerked his head back.

"You're the fucker everyone is so afraid of."

I schooled my face but felt a little smug. "And who the fuck are you?"

"I am the Crown Prince of Nova. A country that is about a week away by foot."

Well, this just became interesting.

"I came here to retrieve my brother. He somehow ended up in your army."

"The only men in my army are murderers and rapists."

He nodded but rolled his eyes again. "My brother is a lost soul and has murdered, but it was within reason. He murdered

one of my father's advisers for raping our mother."

I wouldn't have believed him, except I could taste the truth on him. "A prince traveled to Reales alone?"

He looked behind me. "You're alone."

I opened my mouth but then shut it. He was right. Before Raven, all I did was travel alone. Now, whenever I was alone, it felt strange. I needed Raven by my side, or I didn't feel whole. But his answer brought up more questions. "How did you know I'm the prince?"

"Ezekiel Audovera, second in line to the throne of Reales. Or, third since Raven has been found."

Her name on his lips had me gripping my bow tightly. "She told you her name?"

He shook his head and nodded toward my tattooed hand. "You did."

Ah, I hadn't thought about that. My hand would always give away the name of the woman I was completely obsessed with. Maybe I could tell them I had a fondness for birds.

"And how do you know so much about us?"

"Raven's story has been spread far and wide. And Reales has been stealing men from other countries for over a year, and you expected no one to fight back? I am the first of many coming to retrieve someone."

I hadn't thought about that, either. I didn't believe any of the men in my army were worth saving, but his brother's story made him a hero. "We didn't steal them. They came to Reales to cause trouble, and I gave them the option of staying or dying when I caught them. Why did your brother travel here?"

He shifted against the tree, again trying to wrangle his arms free. "The adviser he murdered has a vengeful family. He ran out of fear, but he needs to return home. If you let me free, I will collect my brother and return home."

"That leaves me in quite the predicament because you've done something to upset Raven, and she's left it up to me to decide what to do about it." Before he could speak, I pushed

into his mind again and stayed there, even as he flinched. I watched everything unfold — how she found him, how she traded herself for another woman’s safety, how he chased her and begged her to kiss him.

I pulled out of his mind, my eyes narrowing as I drew my bow again. “You said you traveled here alone.”

He attempted to hold his hands up to me from underneath the rope. “I did. I found those men traveling here and decided to join them because I didn’t know how to get here on my own.”

“And kidnapping women? Dragging them into the forest to rape them? Deciding to trade my fiancée’s life for someone else’s?”

“We weren’t going to rape anyone, and we did not drag her out here. We were going to use her as bait, but when Raven said she was the lost princess, I figured that would work out better.”

“You asked her to kiss you,” I spoke lowly as rage trickled into my skin.

He pinched his eyes shut. “That does look bad, but she’s quite beautiful, and I am sure I am not the first man you’ve dealt with that has wanted to kiss her. Her lips alone....”

I growled. He wasn’t helping his case, though he was correct. I feared it was something I would deal with for the entirety of our lives.

“I could smell your merged scents if that makes you feel better. I knew you were mated.”

Mated. I could never explain the feeling that came over me when I heard that, but a primal instinct had me rolling my neck, suddenly craving her taste and wanting to sink my teeth into her flesh.

Claim her. Mark her. My mouth was wet at just the idea of her.

“Both of your reactions to that are quite interesting. Yours is more normal than hers was.”

I blinked, regaining focus.

“She couldn’t smell you. She asked if the scent smelled bad because she couldn’t understand why I didn’t enjoy smelling it on her. You, however, instantly wanted to find her when you heard it. That makes me believe that she hasn’t accepted your bond yet.”

I frowned.

“Are pairings not an occurrence in your kingdom?”

“Are they in yours?”

He nodded slowly. “It’s strange to me that someone with as much magic as she holds doesn’t understand how pairings work. And you, you have your skillset. Does anyone else?”

I shook my head. Not that I was aware of, but I had always assumed that magic lived outside of our realm, though I didn’t understand why it seemed that Raven and I were the only ones who possessed it within.

He shrugged. “It’s interesting, that’s all. Now, can we get back to releasing me?”

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “There has to be some punishment for you pinning my fiancée down and asking her to kiss you.”

He held out his arm. “I am permanently scarred from her. Is that not punishment enough?”

Chuckling, I looked at his arm again. “Once you have your brother, leave. Do not return to this kingdom, or Raven will do much worse than burn your arm.” I took the tip of the arrowhead and sliced through his rope, freeing him.

He loosened a sigh of relief and shook his arms out in front of him, pulling his sleeve down to cover the scar. “Does she not frighten you all hours of the day?”

Grinning, I took a step back. “If she could harm me, then yes. But the flame prevents her from being able to.”

He stared at me, unmoving. “You’re... flames?”

I nodded, returning my arrow to the quiver.

“Flames,” he repeated in awe. “Those are a rarity. Our kingdom has only had one flame pairing in over a century. That is... quite something. A word of advice: don’t spread that around. There are rulers not as kind as I who would use that to our advantage. Flames, while they can survive separately, once mated, are... lethal together. Combined with the power the two of you hold...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “And her beauty. I would keep a very close eye on her.”

I looked toward the castle like I could see her. I needed to get to her, feel her, but I knew she was safe from seeing Jeanine in his memories. “You say mated like it’s an action. Is it not as simple as finding one another?”

He looked around dramatically, seemingly bewildered. “Am I in an alternate universe? Do you truly know nothing about mates?”

“There hasn’t been a pairing of any sort here in over a century. I’m not exactly well-versed in the subject, no.”

“Mates are cherished in my country. We celebrate with a ceremony that dates back hundreds of years. Your urge to be near her, to...” He cleared his throat. “Do things to her—all natural. Your scent could be because of your flame. But she seemed rather confused. Lost. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. She may not have felt the bond yet.”

“Bond?”

He nodded. “The draw you feel to her? The urge to... that’s a bond.”

“She does feel that,” I said confidently. “She just seems to have trouble fully... comprehending it.”

“The draw she feels to you could be because of your flame. There’s a difference between the two. It would take more time than a short walk to the castle to explain, but if magic truly does not live within your realm, it may prohibit the ability to feel it. And without any prior knowledge of pairings, understanding it may be even more difficult.”

“Do you have one? A mate?”

He shook his head. “If I did, I wouldn’t have tried to kiss Raven. Mates are committed to only each other.”

And I am committed to only her. “Can mates... deny the bond?”

He sighed. “Yes, but she would always feel a pull to you and you to her. She could deny it, even after you have already accepted it.”

I frowned. I felt that was what she was doing, even if unintentional. She was still holding back, not letting me in. “And... have I? How would I know?”

“Ah.” He tipped his chin toward the sky, squinting an eye as if thinking of a way to explain. “You have. Flames are an unconditional, calm, secure bonding. Because you know you have every life together, you live life more peacefully. Mates are...” he clicked his tongue. “Fundamental. More centered around the life you have now. Primal, protective...”

“I am completely centered around her.”

“If magic ever has a stronger presence here, your bond will become more apparent. It might be until then that she feels it.”

I was silent then. I wasn’t sure what to think of that. She hadn’t even accepted that we were flames yet; how could I feel all of these things, and she couldn’t?

He seemed to notice my silence and cleared his throat again. “I don’t think she will, by the way.”

I glanced at him.

“Deny it. The way she spoke of you, the concern she conveyed when I was touching her, she was very protective of you. Very forthright in letting me know that she belonged to someone else.”

My frown tilted upward into a prideful grin. That terrifying, majestic witch did belong to me. “What is your name?”

Extending his hand to me, I gave it a single shake. “Melik. My brother is Alfie.”

“And magic is in your kingdom?”

He nodded as we approached the wall. I would need to bypass the castle to get him to his brother. I couldn't risk Mira seeing me release a soldier. “Magic is in every surrounding kingdom. None quite like what I saw your Raven possess. Those ribbons are something else.”

My head snapped toward him. “You saw her ribbons?”

He returned my curious look with a bemused grin. “Have you not?”

I shuddered, recalling her nightmare. “I have, but not in the way you did.”

“They were black and came from her fingertips...” he tried to explain.

I shushed him and pushed into his mind again, paying closer attention to her being chased. I stumbled a step as I saw her whip around with black eyes, ribbons escaping to wrap around the bodies of two of her chasers. I saw the hollowness in her eyes and felt the despair. And I could see the way she tried to fight for control. “Ribbons,” I repeated with a sigh, running a hand through my hair. Now that she could call on that version of herself, we would need to learn how to keep her controlled.

That woman. My future wife embodied death.

“Between her and that angry blonde, you have your hands full.”

I grinned. I wanted nothing more than my hands full of Raven. “I'll get you to your brother, but you can't be seen. I'm taking you to our training ring, and you'll need to point him out to me.”



AS WE STOOD to the side of the stadium, I waited while he scanned across the men fighting and running drills. At least half the army was scouring the kingdom for Raven, and I

needed to call them back since Jeanine had found her. I was hoping his brother wasn't one of them, or it would take all day to locate him.

But when Melik crouched and covered his face with his hands as relief washed over him, I knew he was in the ring somewhere. I gave him a moment to collect himself before he stood again and pointed toward the middle of the stadium. "There, with the tattooed arms and shaved head."

"Go back into the forest. I'll bring him to you."

He glanced at me in disbelief.

"I don't break my word, Melik. I will bring him to you, but I can't let the others see that one of them is being freed. While your brother's crime was justified, the other men in this ring committed horrific acts and cannot be free to roam around my kingdom."

With a nod of understanding, he looked at his brother once more before turning and walking toward the tree line. I headed straight for his brother, calling his name. Alfie stopped the drill and turned to face me. "I need you to follow me."

Without a word, he turned to follow me back out of the stadium. I had trained my men not to question orders, and though Alfie didn't particularly stand out in my memory, the fact that he didn't say a word meant he had never caused me any trouble.

"Do you need my help finding the lost princess?"

The fact that Mira had spread that bullshit around the entire kingdom grated on my nerves. Raven was a queen, not our lost princess. "No, she's been found," I answered. "You're going home, Alfie." I nodded toward Melik, who stood between two trees.

Alfie audibly gasped once he saw his brother. He ran past me, and Melik laughed loudly as they embraced. As much as I wanted to allow them to exchange pleasantries and catch up, they needed to leave Reales. I wasn't fond of how Melik had touched Raven, but I also didn't want someone to spot us and tell Mira.

“Stay here. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

I left them without waiting to hear their acknowledgment and jogged toward one of our stables, which was situated on the opposite side of the stadium. Though we rarely needed them, we kept some horses available to us. I used to ride often before Mira requested my presence.

I didn’t have time to saddle horses for them, but I did have time to load two saddlebags with canteens of water and fruit that we kept on hand to feed the horses. I slung them over the backs of two horses and attached lead ropes to their halters, pulling them behind me. He said their kingdom was a week away by foot, but this would get them home much faster.

Since I couldn’t help my brother, I could at least do this.

Once I returned to them, I held the ropes to Melik. “The bags have some food and water. It won’t last you a week, but it’s a start. Take this and keep your eyes open. It’s unsafe here.” After giving Alfie my bow and quiver of arrows, I held a hand to Melik. When he grabbed it, I gripped it sturdily. “But touch Raven again, and we will have a different conversation.”

He dipped his chin in a nod but grinned. “Spoken like a true mate. I assure you I will stay far away from your witch.”

I released his hand so he could mount his horse. “Heed my advice,” Melik said. “Watch her.”

That wouldn’t be an issue. She would never be far from me.

“And if you’re ever in Nova....”

He didn’t finish, but I knew what he was offering. They kicked their horses into a sprint and headed back into the forest, and hopefully far away from Reales.

Sighing, I looked up at the sky. It was mid-afternoon, which meant the party was only two hours away. I needed to pull my soldiers out and inform Mira that Jeanine had located Raven. And I wanted to see her, but Jeanine would prevent that from happening because of the fucking tradition that made no sense.

If I ever became king, that would be the first thing I banished.



AFTER RETURNING TO THE CASTLE, I informed the handful of generals under Mira's control that Raven had been found and to pull the soldiers out of the village and forest. They always listened to my orders, but only if those orders went along with what Mira wanted. If I were to order them to kill Mira, I did not doubt that they'd try to kill me instead. They were Reales loyalists and remained faithful to whoever held the crown. When Mira made me commander, they weren't pleased about it. I was younger than all of them, and they'd seen me grow up with the knowledge that I was immature.

Having my family taken away from me forced me to grow up.

And needing to protect Raven turned me into a man.

I walked around the side of the castle and through two of the towers until I came upon the garden. This faux-engagement party, though not faux anymore since she agreed to marry me, was not how I wanted to be celebrating. I wanted to be on my knees, worshipping her body, praying to her.

I looked back toward the castle as I stood on the edge of the tent that the servants had set up this morning, contemplating bucking tradition once and for all and burying myself in Raven. But Mira calling my name drew me from my delicious thoughts and reminded me that I was here for a reason.

Sighing, I turned my attention back to her. "Jeanine found Raven. They'll be here tonight."

Mira wasn't relieved or annoyed. She seemed put out. "And where did she go?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, Mira, because I'm not allowed to fucking see her. How did you even know she was gone?"

“You’re quite dramatic,” she sighed. “Go prepare for the party.”

“She’s been asking about Luca and my mother and may find it odd that they’re not here to celebrate my engagement. You could do the decent thing and let them join us.”

Clasping her hands at her waist and narrowing her eyes on me, she stood up straighter. If she were trying to intimidate me, it wouldn’t work. I could easily take her down. Without my family under her finger, Mira would be completely powerless. The second I managed to free them, Mira would be dead. It was only a matter of time for her, and she knew it. “Go, Ezekiel. I will send them leftover refreshments if it satisfies this fit you’re having.”

“Leftover refreshments,” I said with an ironic laugh. “They’re locked in an underground dungeon, but you’ll spare leftover food from *my* engagement party that they’re not even allowed to attend. They haven’t even met Raven.” I balled my fists at my sides before stretching my fingers back out. I couldn’t lose it. I needed to walk away.

But we were hitting a year and a half of them being locked up, and I was no closer to getting them released than when I started. “I have done... everything you’ve asked me to do, Mira. Why haven’t you let them free yet? Raven is here; she’s marrying me.”

“I need to make sure that happens first,” she replied dryly.

That unfamiliar primal instinct came over me again. “She will,” I bit out.

“Raven is stubborn, Ezekiel. I have only known her for a few days, and even I see that. If she doesn’t want to do something, she won’t. She needs motivation.”

“Her motivation is that she loves me. She wants to marry me.”

She shrugged, her gaze moving to the multitudes of red roses being brought into the tent. “We’ll see, won’t we? Now, excuse me, she was insistent that red roses are everywhere and

you need to get dressed. Her dress is ivory. Do with that what you will.”

Between Mira and Melik being able to tell that Raven hadn't accepted our bond yet, I was beginning to question if maybe, she didn't honestly want to marry me. If perhaps, I had forced her into everything. If maybe, just maybe, I had pushed her too far this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY



RAVEN

Hours later, I stood in Mira's chambers and stared at my dress for the evening. It was breathtaking. Instead of the dark colors of the kingdom, it was the color of ivory. Bridal. Full of promise.

I sighed as I ran my fingers over the silky fabric, letting the coolness of it calm my nerves.

Jeanine and I decided that we needed to continue pretending like everything was fine. If Mira knew I suspected anything, she would find a way to torture us, and I refused to let Zeke hurt anymore. I would figure out a way to defeat her once I was back home. It meant that I needed to play along tonight.

I wanted to marry him, but I wasn't sure I deserved him anymore. I had made entirely wrong assumptions about him.

But, we had a plan. I would leave for Seolia tomorrow, and hopefully, Zeke would go with me. We asked my soldiers to load our things on my ship, including some things I had taken from his childhood room. And if he decided not to leave with me, he would be missing at least half his wardrobe.

Jeanine assured me that Mira would be distracted enough with the party that she wouldn't notice our things being moved to my ship, and we hadn't been stopped or asked about it.

One more night. I only had to pretend for one more night.

Jeanine was patiently waiting for me to dress. She was in a long, black dress which was a stark contrast to the delicacy of her pale skin and bright blonde hair, but she looked radiant. And now that I understood what the nature of her relationship with Zeke was, my envy had subsided a little.

I had bathed upon return and my hair dried in its natural curls, which Zeke loved to see. I didn't bother running a brush through it, but I did pull half of it up in a braid while the rest fell over my shoulders.

Discarding my robe, I pulled my dress on and stared at myself in the mirror. The brightest color I'd ever worn was a light blue, and the ivory was a nice change, complementing my olive skin. The long-sleeved dress was off the shoulder, meeting the sweetheart neckline perfectly, accentuating my breasts. The skirt was floor-length, made of the fluffiest tulle I had ever seen, and cinched at my waist.

My delicate heels were gold and wrapped around my ankles, adding two or three inches to my height.

Yes, it was a beautiful dress and one I would've been proud to wear if I knew what the outcome would be of my relationship. If I knew he'd forgive me for my constant doubt of him.

Jeanine came up behind me and loosened shorter strands of hair from my braid, smiling as they curled around my face and pulling a long box out from behind her back. "From him," she whispered as she lifted the lid.

Atop an ivory cushion sat a white-gold necklace. The chain was thin, holding a dainty charm shaped as a crescent moon. Silver lined my eyes as I looked from the necklace back to her. "He wanted me to tell you that you put the stars in his sky."

Laughing softly, I pressed the tips of my fingers to my eyes to try and push away tears. She put the necklace around my neck, and I pinched the small charm between my fingers. "Let's go find my love."



BETWEEN TWO TOWERS, bright bursts of candlelight twinkled, welcoming us into the garden. Long wooden tables were set out; the entirety of the tabletops covered in rosy floral arrangements. Empty wine glasses, golden utensils, and intricately patterned ivory plates sat at every place setting. Chairs with golden rods were lined up at the tables with gauzy ribbons woven through them. Above the tables stood ivory curtains on golden poles that were bunched and tied at every corner, creating a makeshift tent that welcomed the colors of the night.

Above us was a perfectly starry sky.

It was mesmerizing.

Jeanine released my hand and stood beside the tent while I wandered to the middle, spinning slowly as I took in every detail. My head tilted back to admire the sky and how brightly the stars seemed to shine for us tonight. The swooshing and swaying of my skirt as I spun made me feel like I was a princess in one of the fairy tales Grace always talked about.

And when I stopped twirling and lowered my chin, I stared directly into his eyes.

My breath left me.

Zeke, my love, who had given so much of himself to protect his family and couldn't tell me for fear of harm coming to them. Zeke, who gave me his mother's ring without even knowing if I would stay with him.

My love, my love, who was willing to risk everything for me.

He was striking in his black pants and jacket, but he had an ivory shirt under his jacket instead of his regular black one. The top two buttons were left open, exposing just enough skin to make me long to touch him. I took him in unapologetically and loudly, just like the first night we met.

Only I was meeting him all over again tonight.

He swallowed as he looked me up and down, and it was not my heat that flooded my body. Like always, it was his apparent desire that made me sweat. His undeniable passion for me could have heated universes.

He pulled at the cuffs of his sleeves, and I watched every movement with matching intensity. I drew in unsteady breaths, trying to push oxygen through me. I should stop staring and move, but I couldn't. I was enamored and frozen to the ground with want. I could watch this man stand still all day.

This selfless man.

One of his hands clenched into a fist and released, his veins constricting. He knew exactly what he was doing to me. Even the moon seemed to shine down on his black hair, making it glimmer and illuminate his tanned skin.

Breathe, Raven.

I smiled at his voice in my mind, slowly lifting my eyes to his.

He was surreal and unreal and mine.

He took a step toward me and then another, self-assurance apparent as his eyes made a slow, purposeful trek down my body and back up while his tongue skated across his lips.

His patience from being apart was running out.

He was mere inches away, and all I could do was stare into his charcoal eyes, unable to steady my thunderous heartbeat.

Our heartbeat.

When the soft thrums of the harp filled the tent, I raised my hands to his shoulders while his wrapped around my waist. The world around us faded into nothing as he spun us slowly around the ivory tent. Colors blurred, sounds muffled, and all I focused on was him.

Him, him.

I was desperate to protect and love him the way he needed to be loved. He deserved nothing less than that. He deserved everything for what he had been through.

Neither of us uttered a word to one another, but our bodies were saying everything our mouths couldn't convey. His fingers gripped tighter around my waist, and he lifted me off the ground, raising me above his head as he slowly spun in a small circle.

My hands cupped gently around his neck as he lowered me down his body.

I would burn worlds for this man. Freeze them. Break the very ground of each one.

I would sacrifice everything for him: my kingdom, my sanity, my own heart.

And then I felt it.

Like a snap.

Deep within my chest first, the way our hearts beat as one, contracting to the same rhythm to push our life's blood through our organs. It glided gently down my bones, the fractured memories of us in universes beyond this one. Our souls were woven together, bound by every weakness, every strength.

My twin flame. My mirrored soul.

Our darkneses intertwined.

He was made for me in this lifetime and in every single of them before and after this.

He was tethered to me, and I to him.

The scents. They merged. His pine entwined with my pear, mixing, melding. The smell was intoxicating.

Sweet, yet bold. Strong.

And when a single tear fell down my cheek, he knew.

He knew I finally understood how deeply connected we were. We had been chosen for one another by the gods themselves — no matter which way I moved in my life, he would mirror it.

As the song ended, the bottoms of my feet touched the ground. His eyes glistened, his nostrils flaring as he could smell it. Relief was in his eyes, his body relaxing.

Come back to me; we had said over and over to one another, never knowing how much weight those words truly carried. We were supposed to find one another.

It was always supposed to be him.

“Zeke,” I tried to whisper, my voice scratchy and broken. Overwhelmed. I was completely overwhelmed with how large a part fate had played in our story.

How rare we were.

“Raven,” he replied softly, wiping the tear from my cheek.

I stared into his eyes. “You came back to me.” Memories; so many memories of us, and it was like I could feel each one; recall the moment it was created.

“I will find you in every lifetime, baby.”

But this wasn't about only me anymore.

“Zeke,” I tried again, my words caught in my throat. “I am going to keep you safe.”

He stared at me, his forehead drawing in.

“I never told you how beautiful this ring is. Thank you for giving it to me.”

His eyes searched mine frantically, his fingers pressing into my skin as he flickered through my memories.

“They're safe, Zeke. You don't have to do this anymore. You're not obligated to anyone.”

He was quiet as tears rolled down his face, watching the memory repeatedly. “Raven,” he murmured. “You saved them.” Visible relief was on his face, his body loosening like it had been strapped and bound.

“You're free,” I barely whispered. “You're free.”

It wasn't simple. I had to kill the soldiers guarding the doors, taking down two on my own while Jeanine finished the

third.

It was a necessary risk.

His forehead pressed gently against mine. "I will never be free of you, my love."

My face crumbled as he cradled the back of my neck and tilted my chin up, pressing his lips to mine.

It was like flames and stars colliding, forever burning together in the universe.

We would always be ignited.

"You make me so wildly unhinged," he whispered against my lips.

Something that sounded like a laugh escaped through my tears. I kissed him again and again until the world around us seemed nonexistent. "We don't have to do this," I murmured, touching the tip of his nose with mine. "We can leave. You don't have to marry me."

"You infuriating witch," he grumbled. "I am going to marry you."

"Promise me," I breathed. "Promise to crawl in and never let me go. I want you embedded in me forever. Promise me. Promise that I never have to live this life without you."

He kissed me tenderly. "I promise to love you all of my days, Raven. I promise to wake you up every morning in your favorite way."

Laughing, I threw my arms around his neck.

He winked. "I promise never to leave you, to marry you, always to be yours."

"Mine," I sighed wistfully.

"Baby, I have always been yours, even when I didn't know I was." He frowned as another tear fell down my cheek, leaning in to kiss it away.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

He kissed me again. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Don’t ever apologize to me.”

He always told me that, but he deserved my apologies. I’d doubted him and had no reason to. And I would spend the rest of my days making it up to him.

He gave me the biggest smile I had ever witnessed from him as I gently tugged on his hands. “Let’s go see them, baby.”

The sound of clapping had us stilling. We both whipped our hands to see Mira standing next to us.

My heat immediately sizzled against my skin, but he squeezed my waist as I took a half-step toward her.

Not here.

He was right. I couldn’t act like anything was wrong. Not until we were safely away from her.

“We’re going to let everyone find their seats. You two stand up front and look in love.”

I glared as he pulled me to the front of the tent, rubbing my back. He was trying to keep me calm, but I didn’t understand why we couldn’t just leave. “Why are we doing this? They’re on my ship. We can go.”

“If I’ve learned anything over the last year, it’s to appear unsuspecting. Give her what she wants, and then we’ll take our leave. Believe me, I will kill her, but not when it comes at a risk to you.”

The sound of shuffling feet and gasps made me turn my head as a large crowd began to gather. He kept me pressed against his chest and kissed the top of my head. “We’ll let them see you, and then we’ll leave. I want to get the hell out of this place. I want to start our life.” And as if those words registered with him, his hold on me tightened. “Our life,” he repeated. “I get to have a life with you.”

I tilted my chin up, beaming at him. “Yes, my love. I am yours.”

And then, even with a crowd forming around us, he kissed me passionately. One of his hands tangled in my hair, pulling

my head back an inch. “I need you. I need to mark you, claim you. I’ve been itching for your taste all day.”

“Then take it,” I whispered.

He skimmed along my jawline with his teeth and down my throat, and right as his teeth were about to sink into my flesh, loud murmurs surrounded us. It distracted him just enough to wrap his arms around me protectively.

She’s returned.

Can it really be her?

It’s Celestina reincarnated.

All things I heard muttered throughout the crowd.

One by one, they lowered to their knees in front of me. I put my hands over my mouth and shook my head as Mira came to my side and grabbed one of my hands, holding it in hers. “Our lost princess has returned!” she called out to the crowd.

Loud cheers echoed through the tent as I pulled my hand from Mira’s. I wasn’t their princess. Not anymore. I was the Queen of Seolia, and even though Reales was where I began, it would not be where I ended. Seolia was my home and where I belonged. My allegiance was to my kingdom, my people. I would never surrender that and would not disturb the peace for Mira’s gain.

When I met John’s eyes in the crowd, he gave me a subtle nod. His warning to me from so many months ago....

War.

I would have to fight a war.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



RAVEN

They chanted my mother's name. I wasn't her. Physically, I may have resembled her, but internally, we were complete opposites.

Overwhelmed, I turned my body into Zeke's and, when he realized I'd had enough, wrapped his arm around my shoulders to lead us through the crowd. I kept a smile but wanted to reunite him with his family. He had waited long enough.

And I wanted to get the fuck away from my sister.

But as we reached the edge of the tent, Mira called my name. The tone of her voice sent chills over every inch of my body. It sounded like glass breaking into pieces.

Zeke stiffened, and then sighed. "She knows."

"Little Bird, you're going to miss all the fun," Mira shouted.

I had a feeling nothing about this would be fun for me.

Jeanine came up beside me and grabbed my hand as John stood on the opposite side of Zeke. Even Matthew pushed through the crowd to stand behind us.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to face Mira. Jeanine dropped my hand and snaked her arm around my waist, drawing an evil grin from Mira. "I was wondering which one

of them told you. I thought it was Ezekiel, but now I see that you have wooed my lover away from me.”

“Didn’t take much,” Jeanine muttered.

“Mira, this wasn’t part of the plan,” John said. “It didn’t have to come to this.”

My heart was sorrowful for him, too. He’d spent years by my side while his family was locked away, while his son blamed him for everything.

“This has always been the plan. I just didn’t share it with you.” Mira’s sweet demeanor from the last few days had been replaced by something cold.

“Don’t react with your magic yet,” Zeke whispered, looking around. “She’s trying to drive fear into our people by using you. I don’t know why I didn’t realize it before.” He took a step forward. “Scatter,” he yelled to the crowd, blocking me from anyone trying to make their way to me. “Go back to your homes.”

I kept the back of his shirt in my fingers. I needed him to remain close and away from Mira.

“Traitor!” someone yelled from the crowd.

I took a step forward, but he held me back. “Leave,” he growled loudly. “Or you will be charged with treason.”

Empty threats, but he wanted to protect me. Protect them.

The rumors of what he could do were enough to drive the crowd back, but hearing the names they were calling him as they filtered out of the tent hurt. “Mira, you are tearing this kingdom apart. They won’t fight for you. They would rather see you fall than save what is left of Reales!” he yelled.

“Mira, I will not wage war with Perosan and Thoya. You need to let us go.” I looked around as I spoke. Soldiers in full armor surrounded us, and I grimaced. Steel. “What’s wrong, Mira?” I focused back on her. “Mommy not give you any magic?”

“Not me, Little Bird.” She looked into the darkness behind her. “Him.”

Zeke stayed in front of me, his arm across my stomach to keep me safely tucked behind him. And from the darkness, the masked man from the cathedral was stepping into the golden glow of the tent.

Mira glowered at me. I blinked in confusion.

I looked at John, who seemed just as bewildered. And then I looked at Jeanine, who shrugged and shook her head.

But it was Zeke who finally looked at me as the masked man removed his disguise.

And Zeke, whose expression was full of shock and confusion and fear, said that fateful word to me.

“Twins.”



IT WAS rare to render me speechless.

But that was what I was as I slowly looked away from Zeke and back to the uncovered stranger.

Everything about him seemed familiar.

His hair, his skin tone, the color of his eyes.

Taller but framed similarly.

Bone structure. Features.

A twin brother. With magic.

“How...” I started but couldn’t say anything else.

And like he had done in the cathedral, he slowly tilted his head at me.

He was just as uncomfortable to be around as Mira.

“The water,” I breathed. “On his mask.”

“Very good, Little Bird,” Mira condescended. “While you received the bulk of magic, our brother received the element of water.”

“Our brother,” I repeated in shock, staring into his eyes.

“How?” John repeated my earlier question. “I was there the night Raven was born. There was no twin.”

Zeke, who had been silent, stared intently at Mira.

Searching her memories, I realized.

Mira touched the shoulder of our brother gently and frowned. “Mother knew it was twins but swore the nurse and me to secrecy before she went into labor that evening. She was fearful of Leonidas finding out and taking both of them. She needed her plan to come to fruition and couldn’t do that if both of her children were snatched away from her.”

He wouldn’t stop staring at me, and it had me grabbing Zeke’s arm tightly.

“She chose to keep Raven and send River away. That night, the nurse took River with her and raised him as her own. I would send what I could to him while he practiced his elemental magic.”

“She allowed me to return home,” River said, finally turning his stare from me to her. “She took care of me since I wasn’t the chosen one to have a kingdom of my own.”

Zeke pulled me closer to him, hearing the threat in River’s voice.

“And it was even more disappointing to find out that it was my uncle who informed Leonidas of the birth of his daughter,” Mira said, looking directly at John.

And to my surprise, Zeke moved us a step closer to John, protecting the father he swore to hate.

“He deserved to know,” John replied, looking between Mira and River. “And he would have loved you, River. You’ve chosen the wrong side.”

River’s eyes slowly moved back to me. I wished I could feel some sort of connection with him. Some kind of anything.

A twin. That was supposed to be one of the most vital connections a human could have.

“River knows where his allegiance lies,” Mira answered for him.

“We could be a family,” I said, mirroring the intensity of River’s gaze. “A real family, where neither one of us has to hide. You could return with me....”

Mira clicked her tongue. “This is what’s going to happen, Little Bird.”

“Stop calling me that,” I bit out. “I could kill you right now. End this.” I lit my palms, and Zeke’s arm loosened around me enough for me to take a step forward.

Mira looked at River, and without moving a single muscle, the sound of waves crashing into ships behind us had me whipping around to watch as a wall of water slowly rose and dropped down with enough force to crack the sails of a wooden vessel against the dock.

My jaw was slack as I instantly became envious of his control over his element.

“Not only could River drown your pathetic island kingdom, but the army has strict orders to kill every single one of your people if you do anything other than what I ask of you. The ships are already loaded.”

I didn’t know how to fix this. My twin was stronger than me, and I didn’t have enough control over my magic to fight against the most terrifying element.

I turned slowly to face Mira and River again. “I have more than elements. I was gifted something else from our mother.”

“Raven,” Zeke whispered behind me. “You can’t control her yet. You’d be risking all of us.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” I murmured. “Morana.”

“Get back,” Zeke said to John and Jeanine as I shifted.

Mira’s eyes flared as she watched me, but River remained still. Unfazed. “Death,” he said. “You received the spirit.”

The spirit. A spirit?

I didn’t have time to ask questions.

I loosened the ribbons from my fingers to wrap around my arm. “It’s no wonder mother chose me.”

His eyes narrowed. It was the first reaction I had conjured from him. “It’s a neat trick,” he said, moving closer to me. “But there’s a catch with being a twin, dear sister.”

Behind him, Mira’s fear morphed into amusement, and I raised an eyebrow, taking a step back as he came closer. Zeke’s hands found my waist, risking himself against me losing control.

River grinned. “If one of us dies, the other loses their magic. Therefore, you cannot kill me, and I cannot kill you. Unless, of course, you no longer want to be a witch.”

I honestly had no way of fixing this. I refused to give up my magic. “How do you know all of this? So much about us, about mother?”

“I lived in a kingdom where magic was celebrated,” he answered, putting his hands behind his back. “I had many years to practice, to read. To wait.”

I shifted back into myself. “Then why do you even need me? If you’re my brother, Seolia belongs to you, too.”

“That’s not how the law in our realm works,” John spoke up. “Leonidas willed it to you. If Mira took over Seolia, Perosan and Thoya would have every right to declare war on Reales, and Seolia would be left in the hands of whoever won it.”

“And she knows the rulers of the other kingdoms trust you,” Jeanine said before looking at Mira. “This is why you sent me away with Zeke. You brought River back while we were away.”

“Precisely,” Mira said with a clap of her hands. “And you were so blinded by fucking him that you didn’t even bat an eyelash.”

The color drained from Jeanine’s face as she stared at Zeke, who sighed behind me. Mira had known, only furthering her contempt against the two of them.

“What do you want from me, Mira?”

“It is quite simple. You and Ezekiel will take an engagement tour around the kingdoms, gain their trust, and allow them to see how in love the two of you are.” Her condescending tone had fire bubbling under my skin. “You will build your army in Seolia. When we invite all of the kingdoms back to Reales in three months for your wedding, they will fall at our feet or die. River can drown them for all I care.”

I shook my head and tried to keep my fire from burning Mira where she stood.

“You will, Raven. Or Cade dies, as does Isla. And that little girl you’re so fond of.”

I trusted her with too much information.

“They all go, Raven. But I will start with Ezekiel first.”

I took a step closer to River. If he were planning to harm Zeke, he would be going through me first, loss of powers or not. “Touch him, and you will beg for hell.” I glared at River before moving it to Mira. “We will not join you.”

Mira sighed. “That’s disappointing to hear. Ezekiel, River was in the woods earlier today when you released the soldier to return home. As a result, I charge you with treason and sentence you to death.”

I lit my palms and was ready to burn her alive when I fell to my knees, screaming.

Screaming, screaming, clutching my chest as my soul cleaved into two.

And beside me, stumbling to the ground, was Zeke.

He was holding the hilt of a dagger jammed into his side, blood pouring from the wound. I screamed again and crawled to him just as John lowered and tried to stop the bleeding.

And behind him, panting and moving to stand beside River... was Matthew. Sweet, young Matthew, who had become my friend.

“Why?” I cried as I stared at him, my breath leaving me.

Jeanine was at my side, trying to hold me up as blood continued to gush out of Zeke’s side.

“She promised me you,” Matthew stated simply. “And I never particularly cared for our prince.”

I had trusted too many people, given too much of myself. And now, the man who had done so much for us was dying at my side.

“Heal him,” John yelled frantically, pulling the dagger from Zeke’s side and grabbing my hand.

Groaning from the ache shooting through my body, I pushed my healing magic forward and put all the energy I had into closing the wound underneath my palm. “Stay with me,” I cried.

“She’s dying,” River said while staring at his hands.

“How?!” Mira snapped, looking at River. “Why would his death cause hers?”

River stared at me, and through my pain and heart breaking, I met his eyes with determination and the knowledge that I had at least won this one small battle.

They couldn’t have me without Zeke.

“They’re twin flames,” River stated. “They cannot live if the other dies, or so the tale goes.”

There was so much blood pouring from his wound that it didn’t seem like my magic was doing anything. Everything in me was screaming as I felt his life slipping away.

I was grabbed and pulled away from him. I lit my hands and pressed them under helmets and to the necks of the men holding me. Their flesh burned underneath my palms, dropping me back down to Zeke’s side.

I leaned over and pressed my hands against his wound again, pushing more magic into him.

More hands grappled for me and wrapped around my waist. I kicked. I screamed. I balled my fists against the clunky

steel armor. I tried to find their necks, but my hands were wrapped around my back, preventing me from using anything.

Jeanine tried to get to Zeke, but a soldier yanked her back by her hair and trapped her within his arms.

“Mira,” River warned, stumbling back a step as his magic waned since I was seemingly dying with Zeke.

“Raven, you have a choice to make,” Mira said calmly. “Do as I say or lose your flame and your magic. Possibly die with him and leave your kingdom with whoever gets there first.”

“I’ll do it!” I screamed, trying to kick myself free. “I’ll do what you ask.”

The hardest choice I’d ever had to make was also the easiest.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I watched more blood spit from his wound. I couldn’t lose him. Not like this. Not after everything he had done to save his family. To save me. He was not going to die like this.

“Raven.” I heard his breathless gasps as he tried to shake his head.

Blood was sputtering from his mouth, and I screamed, shaking my head. No. I wasn’t going to lose him. “Mira, I’ll do it, but you must let me go! You have to let me heal him, or I won’t. I will not help you!”

“But you said I could have her!” Matthew shouted. “You said I would take his place!”

“There will be no place to take if she dies, you stupid boy!” Mira called back.

When I was dropped to the ground, I crawled to Zeke and drew deep breaths to stay awake. I was becoming woozier as he slipped further out of consciousness.

Pressing my hands against his wound, I willed my magic forward again. “Come back to me,” I begged, pushing every ounce of healing I had into him. “You keep the darkness away, Zeke. I’ll be lost without you.”

I fell into him as my healing magic left me to fix him. My energy was draining. His skin was closing under my hands, but he wasn't coming back.

I pressed my lips to his, and the taste of his blood coated them. "You said we die together. And I am, baby. I'm dying with you. You have to live with me." I kissed him everywhere, just like he always did when he couldn't find me. "I love you, I love you," I said between sobs.

Fire came to life under my skin.

Flames.

I shifted into Blaze with the last of my energy and stuck my palms against his chest, igniting the purple flames against him.

He started to cough, blood sputtering from his lips as he rolled to his side. I leaned over him, pushing the hair from his face. "Wildly unhinged, Zeke. You have to fight through this." I moved my palm against his wound as Jeanine crouched beside me to hold me upright.

"You will return to Seolia tonight," Mira said. "You have two weeks until we meet in Thoya. You will do as I ask, Raven, or I will let you both die next time. And no one is to know of your brother."

"He is no brother of mine!" I shouted, spitting on the ground at his feet.

River looked from the ground back to me before he turned, wordless and emotionless.

But when the three of them started back toward the castle, I lit my palm and threw a ball of fire at Matthew, covering him head to toe in flames. As he fell to his knees, he wailed in pain, begging River to help him.

River and Mira stared at him for a moment before resuming their retreat as he screamed in agony.

And I let him fucking burn.

Crumbling, I fell into Jeanine. Her tears soaked my hair as she held me, putting her hand over mine to keep it steady

against Zeke's wound. I wasn't sure I had any healing left to give him, but I would remain here until I heard his voice.

John moved Zeke's head into his lap and kept the hair off his forehead, tears streaking down his cheeks. "My boy," he kept whispering over and over.

My desperation for a family had nearly killed him.

And now I would have to invade two kingdoms. I would have to disrupt our peace.

And I had a twin — a brother.

I had always wondered why I couldn't control water — why I had received every other element.

And it was because it was living in him instead.

When Zeke groaned, I sat up quickly and pushed him gently to his back to inspect his wound. It was almost completely healed with barely any blood trickling out.

Leaning over him, I planted kisses all over his face. He tasted like a mixture of blood and sweat. "Wake up, baby. Wake up, my love."

He groaned again, but I continued to pepper him with kisses until his eyes fluttered open. He blinked a few times as he tried to focus on me. I laughed through my tears in shock, in joy.

Those haunting gray eyes were staring back at me.

"Our foreplay has gotten out of control," he grumbled, grunting as he lifted his hand to stroke my cheek.

"I've gotten us in a mess," I choked out.

"We've been in messes before." He tried to sit up, and John put his arms underneath his shoulders to assist him. "We'll get it figured out."

"We have to return here in three months to wed."

He pulled my face down to his, kissing me gently. "That doesn't sound like a mess."

“And then we have to declare war on Perosan and Thoya if they don’t recognize Mira as their queen.”

I bit my lip as he slowly leaned back to rest on the palm of his hand, holding his wound with the other. “That’s a little messier,” he sighed.

“And I have a brother who will drown my island if I don’t cooperate.” I could barely get the words out as I fell into him.

He cupped his hand around my head and kissed my hair. “We will fix this, Raven. We have something they do not, and it’s the greatest weapon of all.”

As he stroked my cheek, I pulled back just enough to meet his eyes.

“Love, baby. We have love.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



RAVEN

*B*etween the three of us, we managed to pull Zeke up until he was standing. He leaned against me heavily, but I took it, ambling with him toward the steep hill that led down to the dock. I didn't want to drag him down, but we had no other choice.

But when the breeze caressed me, I turned my head as the sound of hooves rushed up behind me. My horse slowed and paused before us, knocking a hoof against the stone.

Zeke cocked an eyebrow at me. "Any other men I need to be aware of?"

I laughed, patting the back of my horse. "This is Shadow."

His features softened as he put my face in his hands and kissed me so tenderly that tears fell down my cheeks. My fingers wrapped around his wrists as I gently pried his hands from my face. "Please let him take you to the ship."

After another kiss, he reluctantly released me and mounted the horse, grunting as he gripped his side. When John ushered me forward, I shook my head. "I need to make sure you both get on the ship."

"Raven, we're going to be right behind you." Jeanine rubbed my back. "I promise to get John on the ship, but you need to be with Zeke right now. He hasn't seen his family outside that dungeon in over a year. He's going to need you."

Zeke nodded and extended his hand, but I bit my lip and turned to Jeanine. Before I could argue, she gently pushed me toward him. “I promise we will get there.”

John didn’t give me another chance to think about it before he grabbed my hand and pulled me forward, hoisting me up to sit in front of Zeke. His legs cradled mine as he kissed my temple.

As Shadow took off in a trot, I glanced backward. John and Jeanine were following behind us, jogging down the street.

Zeke kissed my cheek. “I love you,” he whispered against my ear. “We’re going to fix this, Raven.”

I was in shock. I couldn’t form a thought. I had so many questions about River. Questions I knew I wouldn’t receive answers to any time soon.

Shadow’s hooves clunked so loudly against the wood of the dock that it sounded like it could buckle underneath his weight. And when we passed by Zeke’s ship, he reached around me to pull Shadow to a stop. “Hang on.”

I tried to grab him as he slid off, but he kissed my hand and boarded his ship, disappearing below deck. I huffed impatiently and felt he would be impossible to keep still while his wound healed.

And then I stared at the ship next to his — the ship River had destroyed with nothing but his mind. Without shifting, without lifting a finger, he had controlled water.

I wiggled my fingers in front of me. Without entirely shifting into Blaze, I could hardly contain fire, and even then it was still a struggle.

When Zeke returned to the dock, he had something behind his back and a shy grin on his lips. I couldn’t help but smile at him, especially since he was never bashful around me.

He held out his hand. Sitting delicately on his palm was one of the pink paper flowers from my hair the night we met. “I fell asleep with this in my hand every night we were apart.”

My eyes rising to his, I puckered out my bottom lip.

“Raven, it’s always been you. It will always be you.”

I wanted to lunge for him, but I couldn’t. Instead, I leaned down and pressed my forehead against his. “And it will always be you.”

He kissed me once before he climbed up behind me, but it wasn’t enough for him as he then fisted my hair in his hand and pulled me backward, tilting my chin up so he could kiss me again and didn’t let go until Shadow took a step on the ramp that led up to my ship.

I tried to dismount, but Shadow neighed, and Zeke held me still. “I can’t sense animals, but this one is protective over you. I might have competition.”

I tried to laugh as Shadow walked up the ramp slowly, my eyes bulging as the murky water sloshed against the ramp. Please don’t slip, please don’t stop, I repeated over and over in my head. An evening swim was not what we needed right now.

I released a nervous breath as we made it safely across. Shadow kneeled, allowing me to slide off. Zeke pressed his hand against his wound and drew labored breaths as he landed on his feet.

Removing his hand, I lifted his shirt and pressed my palm against the wound. It was healed, but I wanted the pain to subside. “Do you ever run out of the healing ability? It could come in handy if we have casualties.”

Casualties. War meant casualties. Casualties meant my men.

Frowning, I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never had to try it.”

He grabbed my chin between his fingers and brought my focus up to him. “War is dirty. Dangerous. But, we will prevail. You will have a happy ending, Raven.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” I stepped closer to him and kept my hand pressed against his wound while my other

snaked underneath his shirt to rest against his back. “There is no happy ending for me that doesn’t include you. Do not refer to things as singularly for me. *We*, Zeke. It will always be *we*.”

Wrapping his arms around me, he leaned down to press his lips against mine.

We had two weeks of pure bliss before it was taken from us. I had moments of realizing we were twin flames before Mira interrupted us, nearly killing him. I was tired of him being taken from me. If it took a war to keep him and Seolia safe, we would fight a war.

“Do you want to talk about River?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but as we heard his name called excitedly, we both turned our heads toward his brother and mother as they ran toward us.

Zeke released me and rushed to them, repeatedly kissing his mother’s head, tears streaming down his face. I covered my mouth as I choked back a sob, watching my love reunite with his family after months apart.

Luca practically tackled him to the ground, making me laugh through my sobs.

Hearing me, Zeke turned to look at me and beckoned me forward. I didn’t want to ruin their moment together, but when he took a step, I relented and grabbed his hand as he pulled me to him. His arm enveloped me as his mother looked at me, her face wet with emotion and tears.

We’d met, very briefly, when Jeanine and I escorted them out of the castle and to my ship, but we hadn’t been introduced.

Not officially, anyway.

And I had been shifted as Blaze.

She grabbed my hands. “You are his Raven.”

I nodded, my throat welling up. His Raven. I would never tire of hearing that.

She held up my left hand. “I told him he’d need this ring.”

Smiling, I threw my arms around her neck. Zeke mirrored me, hugging us both tightly. I could see a resemblance in their faces, but he must take after his birth father. His mother seemed gentle, whereas Zeke was a force. Aggressive in both stature and personality.

And then there was his brother, who put his arms around me. Zeke laughed as he pulled me closer to him out of the embrace. “Luca, let her breathe.” He was ever the overprotective one, only sharing me until he couldn’t take it anymore.

“Luca,” I repeated.

Luca nodded and smiled. Zeke had been correct in his description of him. There was a brightness around him that the world hadn’t taken yet. His face was similar to Zeke’s, his hair just as black, but his eyes were different. Blue with a hint of green, like the color of the sea when it rains.

And he felt like sunshine to be beside.

The opposite of the thunderstorm that inhabited Zeke.

“Luca, Alice!” John’s voice broke through as he climbed the ramp to the ship.

Luca rushed to him, embracing him tightly. I turned my body into Zeke’s, burying my face against his chest as multiple emotions flowed through me.

I was delighted that I was able to reunite their family.

But I was heartbroken that my own family had let me down so greatly — that I had a twin brother who seemed to loathe me, who seemed bitter that my mother had chosen to keep me instead of him, and that because of it, I was given a kingdom.

He kissed the top of my head. “Baby, I can’t sort through what you’re feeling.”

“Neither can I,” I whispered. “Just hold me, and I’ll feel safe.”

“Always,” he swore.

John ran to Alice and threw his arms around her, causing Zeke to stiffen. I looked up at him, but all he did was kiss my forehead and tighten his hold on me. I would need to question him further about his discomfort at seeing them together.

And then John was hugging me, despite Zeke's hold on me, and murmuring gratitude in my ear until I started to nod, trying to return his embrace. "It was my pleasure."

The number of people tugging at me made breathing difficult, but Zeke never left my side, even when Jeanine came over to hug me. We made it out alive. That was what I had to keep telling myself.

But as I looked back at the castle while Jeanine held me, tears fell again for the masked man.



WE WERE RETURNING to Seolia with more bodies than we left with, and I wasn't sure where to keep all of them on the ship. I gave Alice, Luca, and John the room where I would've slept. They needed a place to decompress — to feel safe again. I found a single for Jeanine in the lowest cabin. And I would spend nights with my love, trying to keep him still while he recovered.

Two of Mira's ships would be following us, full of half her army to guarantee that I would be building one of my own. Zeke would maintain control over them as long as he did what Mira wanted: continue to train and bring men from Seolia into his ranks.

We weren't supposed to leave until morning, and my crew was running around trying to salvage the food we had on board to keep everyone fed for the weeklong excursion back to Seolia. I was overwhelmed with trying to ensure everyone had what they needed while running around in my bloodied dress from the party.

"Queen Raven."

I turned and faced Godfrey, the captain of the small batch of soldiers I'd brought along on this trip. He was an older gentleman with a heavy accent, even after living in Seolia for years and away from his home country. His hair was the color of cracked pepper, and even though he was a soldier, something about his presence was always comforting.

"Everything is loaded. We managed to grab everything from the manor, and it's below deck in the cargo hold."

I nodded and gave him the only smile I could manage. "Thank you, Godfrey."

"If I may, Queen Raven."

I gestured for him to continue.

"I served King Leonidas and was proud to be part of his reign. I was not surprised to hear that you were his daughter." He remained a respectable distance away but gave me a warm smile. "You are like him — resilient, but you connect deeply with those around you. And while this new chapter may seem daunting, you will have the allegiance of our people. That is not something Queen Mira can say about her own."

"Thank you," I whispered, extending my hand to him.

He took it and kissed the back, squeezing once. "And the blonde woman, rather bossy. She made sure we had plenty of crates of some kind of wine."

I giggled, and his deep belly rumble made me smile wider. "Thank you, Godfrey. That may be most important of all."

A throat cleared behind us, and I knew who it was before I even turned around. He always seemed to find me, especially when another man was nearby.

Godfrey dropped my hand and bowed once. I dipped my chin to him before I turned on my heel. "You should be asleep."

"Why are you never alone?" he muttered, watching as Godfrey disappeared back below deck.

I rolled my eyes. "He's been a Seolian soldier since I was a child. We have bigger things to be concerned about now than

when men talk to me. It should be on the bottom of your list.”

“Do you know nothing?” Putting his hands on my shoulders, he pushed me backward until I was pinned against the ship’s railing, and his arms were resting on either side of me, locking me in. “Anything to do with you will never be on the bottom of my list. You think I will change because we have a little war to face?”

I snorted and shook my head at his insanity.

“I will keep men away from my fiancée, especially ones who make her smile.” He dropped his eyes to my mouth with a slight grin. “That belongs to only me.”

“And if I disobey?” I taunted, peering up at him from underneath my lashes.

His chuckle was low and purposeful. “Then you will suffer the consequences.” His lips crashed roughly against mine and I opened for him, letting his tongue push through.

These were precisely the consequences I wanted, making his request difficult for me to obey, especially if this was always the treatment I received.

When a whimper escaped me, his hand gently wrapped around my throat and squeezed. Soldiers and crew members surrounded us, but all I could think about was how this man was the only thing I wanted in the world.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” I whispered in a daze as his lips danced along my jawline.

“No.” He moved his lips down my neck and pulled down my sleeve, starting to suck on my shoulder.

“Baby,” I said with full intentions of arguing, but when he pressed his hips against mine, I felt his hard length throbbing against my stomach. It had only been a few days, but I was aching for him.

I brought his face back to mine and resumed our passionate kiss. He groaned into my mouth and reached down to grab my legs and lift me, wrapping them around his waist.

“Let me take you somewhere.” His voice was strained as he broke from me.

I smiled at his words, and when they registered with him, he smiled. “I love you.”

I rested my palms against his chest. “I love you.”

“But let me take you somewhere.”

I laughed, trying to wiggle free of his hold, but he didn’t budge. “I can’t yet.”

He took a step back, but I quickly grabbed the railing, earning a glare. “I’ll let you kiss me.”

He quickly took me up on my offer and captured my lips with his again, moving slowly and teasingly, rapidly melting away my resolve. “Remember when you said you couldn’t come with me?”

He nodded and kissed me again softly. “I don’t think I could’ve let you go. I can’t... be away from you, Raven.” He said it with such a heavy truth that I could feel it. “Even if things had worked out differently, I need you to understand that you became the most important person in my life when I saw you. When I proposed to you in our chambers, I decided that if you would’ve left to sail to the moon, I would have followed you.”

“Zeke,” I whispered, smoothing his hair back and admiring how he looked at me. “I never would’ve made you choose me. If I had known, I never would have asked.”

“I know,” he replied with a small smile. “And that’s why I am so in love with you.”

I let go of the railing and wrapped my arms around his neck. “You can take me somewhere.”

He kissed me again, and right as we turned, a voice had me smiling through our kiss.

“Don’t you two have a room?”

I snorted as Zeke broke from me and glared at Luca, sliding me down his body. Giggling, I rested my forehead

against Zeke's chest as he held me tightly against him. "Don't you?"

Luca wasn't finished annoying his brother quite yet. "Isn't she too good for you?"

"Everyone keeps saying that," Zeke grumbled before kissing the top of my head.

"Because it's true," Luca responded.

I laughed and then yelped as he pinched my sides. Luca looked at me next. "He has a brother, you know." Zeke shoved Luca's chest, but it did nothing to deter him. "I wouldn't mind seeing that fiery side again."

Zeke's jaw dropped as he looked at me. "You showed him Blaze?"

I shrugged. "I had to save him somehow."

"Come on, Raven," Luca continued. "Bring her out."

Zeke kept shoving him, and Luca continued to make wisecracks, egging him on. He finally released me to begin playfully sparring with him. I watched them with a whole heart. Zeke rarely let his guard down with anyone but me, but he was looser with Luca. Lighter.

My joy came to a crashing halt as a crew member shouted that we were ready to depart, bringing me back to my harsh reality. I whipped around to face the castle, warring with myself on if there was anything I could offer Mira in exchange for a peaceful resolution.

Zeke came to stand behind me and rubbed my arms. "We will figure this out, Raven."

I shrugged. The only way to keep him and my island safe was if I did exactly as Mira asked. Mira, and River. "Why didn't he choose me?"

He was frowning as he turned me to face him.

"He's my twin brother. He didn't even try to find me. Get to know me."

“You don’t know that, Raven.” He tilted my chin up. “You don’t know what kind of hold Mira has on him. We will return to Seolia and try to find more information on him. Maybe find out where he grew up.”

The ship groaned beneath our feet as it pushed off from the dock. Was it only a week ago that I was on Zeke’s ship making plans for our future? And now our future consisted of war and possibly losing the lives of my people if we had to fight.

“This darker version of me,” I mumbled, running a finger down his chest. “I want to learn how to control her. I want to learn how to control all of them.”

He kissed my forehead with concern behind his eyes.

“You are my sin incarnate, and I am your death.”

“Raven,” he whispered, searching my eyes. “You are fire, my love. Harness your fear and fight with your fire.”

We were going to take Reales.

And I was going to kill my sister.

PART TWO



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



ZEKE

What a clusterfuck of a day.

Was that even the right word? It hadn't been a full day yet. It was well into nightfall.

Through the turmoil, Raven finally realized what we were to one another and surrendered her heart and mind to me. She witnessed the flashes of us from previous lives, laughing and loving one another in each one. It would remain one of the best moments of my life — dancing with her, watching as her pupils dilated when it happened. The way her body immediately warmed to my touch. Our scents merging. It was everything I had been waiting for since the night we met.

And then Mira stole all of the joy from the night, nearly destroying Raven.

I thought I knew every step of Mira's plan and tried to prepare Raven for it in any way I could, but she outwitted all of us.

A twin. Raven had a twin. A brother.

How long had he been in Reales, in that cathedral? Was Matthew the one bringing him food and clothes? He'd worked at the castle for a year, and nothing about him made me suspicious though I didn't see him often. And what I mistook for genuine care for Raven was a need to own her.

But he made the fatal mistake of harming her flame, and she reacted.

His corpse was still burning when we left, and if River's magic were anything like Raven's, only he would be able to douse it.

River. Not once did I ever anticipate that. When we returned to Reales, I should have made more effort to search Mira's memories, but there was no reason to. I had Raven, and that was the only key I needed. But what I needed was to utilize my ability more often. I could have stopped this before it happened. I should have asked Mira about the masked man that night. I could have tasted her lies.

I would not make that mistake again.

And now it would linger in Raven's mind — why her twin brother had never sought her out. After constantly feeling like she wasn't enough, this was another person who knew about her and didn't try to reach out and establish any relationship.

I would fix this for her. Somehow.

Right when I thought we had come to an end, another problem was presented.

I stared at her as she slept beside me. She had passed out before we even made it to the room, cradled in my arms. We hadn't been able to sleep without one another, but all I wanted to do was stare at her. My pain from the stab wound had subsided, and now I owed her my life.

My mother's ring on her finger still made me smile. She wanted to marry me — wanted to be mine. I never believed I would fall in love with someone before I met her. I was content to find someone for a night, much like she used to, but we were just waiting for our eyes to meet. Waiting for the right person.

My little... literal demon. She had death running through her, wanting to take life from living things. No wonder I felt such emptiness from her when it took over. She was immortal. Immoral. There was wickedness in that wicked body of hers.

We would need to find a way to harness it. A war would end quickly if she could kill multiple people at once. She wanted to kill her sister, and I couldn't blame her. I wanted to kill Mira, too, but I worried that if Raven stole too many lives, all the goodness in her would slip away.

And this spirit, it wasn't like her magic. Morana seemed like darkness — an evilness. And quite the opposite of Raven.

And unless she wanted to lose her magic, she couldn't ever kill River.

And I didn't believe she wanted to.

I slipped into her mind when a broken sound came from her throat. She dreamed of me bleeding out at her feet, screaming, crying. My heart ached at the pain she experienced.

I scattered the dream. No more pain tonight.

She needed to sleep, but I needed her more.

She whimpered when I leaned down to kiss her temple, and I smiled at the sound. It had been a few hours since she'd fallen asleep, and I was growing impatient. We hadn't had time alone in days. I was more than grateful to have my family back, but Luca seemed to make a point of interrupting us every time we were together because, as my brother, it was his life's mission to be obnoxious.

But I found myself smiling when I thought about him. And she brought him back to me.

I kissed her temple again, and she groaned, turning into me. Wrapping her up tight, I brushed my fingers across her lower back. "I need you, Raven." I kissed her cheek and nipped at her earlobe.

A small, cute grin formed on her lips. "Me?" Her voice was scratchy and full of sleep.

"Always you." I brushed my lips across hers, and she caught them, the tip of her tongue sweeping across my bottom lip.

Fuck, I was already swollen for her.

It had been too many damn days.

Pushing her down to her back, I rolled on top of her and kept my weight balanced against my palms, dipping down and kissing her again. She responded fiercely, her mouth opening for my tongue to push in.

I wanted to spend every day with her like this. War or no war, nothing would stop me from burying myself in her at least once a day at minimum.

We could work out terms later.

Kissing along her jawline, I took her earlobe in my mouth, sucking until she moaned. I was drowning in ecstasy as her lust for me poured out of her like a fountain.

Her back arched off the bed when my lips worked down her neck, hungry for me.

I was starved for her.

Her fingers threaded in my hair and yanked me up, pressing her lips roughly against mine. I was taken aback by her sudden ferocity as she thrust up against me, wanting to feel the friction of my cock between her legs.

And I was about to give her exactly what she craved — what I desired — when there was a knock on the door. We both froze before I growled and hit the bed with my fist. “Be quiet, and maybe they’ll go away,” I whispered.

When she giggled, I clamped a hand over her mouth and thrust against her so she could feel how hard I was — how impatient I was becoming.

When another knock sounded, I shook my head and narrowed my eyes. “I will fuck you no matter who comes through that door.”

My eyes darkened on her as she licked across my palm. Releasing the hold on my weight above her, I shoved a hand into her pants until two fingers pushed into her pussy. Her gasp into my hand made me grin as I watched how greedily she started fucking my fingers. “You’re so wet and needy for me, Raven.”

Even as I tried to slow down, she wouldn't let me and increased how quickly she bucked against my hand. I pushed in deeper, rolling the tips of my fingers over the spot that drove her crazy. Pressing my lips against her ear while her eyes rolled back, I whispered headily, "Come for me, Raven."

I pressed my palm harder against her mouth as she screamed, coating my fingers with her cum. Her thrusts slowed, but I kept my fingers inside her, cocky that I had made her come so fast.

Her hand reached into my pants, her fingers wrapping around my cock and pumping me quickly.

"Fuck," I growled, dipping my forehead against hers. My eyes lingered on her plump lips that I had released from my hand, groaning when she ran her tongue across her bottom lip, imagining how it would feel on my dick.

When her other hand pulled my fingers out of her and brought them up to her mouth to suck her taste off, I came — hard — and moaned her name, bucking into her hand as she squeezed.

After coaxing everything out of me, she released me and brought her hand to her mouth, licking my cum off with the tip of her tongue. I watched her intently; my breathing labored just from the sight of her.

I leaned down and kissed her, tasting both of us on her lips, right where we belonged.

Our own flavor of twisted depravity.

She sighed into me.

And she was everything I would ever want.



AFTER I WAS SATISFIED with making her come, I allowed her to fall back asleep and ended up falling asleep next to her after the knocking had finally ceased.

When my eyes opened, I caught her watching me and smiling. I returned it and pulled her closer. “Marry me,” I whispered.

She wrinkled her nose, pretending to contemplate it. “I don’t know. I’m *highly* in demand.”

I laughed. “You’re *highly* full of yourself. But correct. That’s why you must marry me.”

“Must I? Why?”

“Because,” I sighed, rolling my eyes. “I can keep you safe from all those lunatics chasing after you.”

“Is that all you can do?”

I grinned. “Do you want to see what else I can do?”

She nodded and kissed me, her lips soft against mine. I would ask her every day to marry me until she was my wife.

When she crawled on top of me, I slid my hands into her pants and squeezed her ass, drawing a sweet giggle from her. “You’re going to leave bruises.”

“I want them to be permanent. Stop healing.” I licked up the column of her throat and squeezed again. “I need to fuck you.”

“Then fu—”

Another knock on the door.

I needed to get off this goddamned ship.

“We have to let them in.”

I shook my head. “We don’t. We don’t have to do anything.”

She smiled and tried to push off of me, but I held her tightly. “Raven, you’re the queen. No one can stop you if you want to stay with me for the rest of the trip. I won’t let them.”

“And if we need to eat?”

I nipped at her nose. “I think we survive pretty well off of each other.”

“Mm,” she hummed, and then her mouth was back on mine.

I deepened the kiss just as another knock pounded loudly on the door. I could tell there was more than one person.

She sighed and moved to leave me, but I shook my head again. “I can make you come again if you are still and keep your mouth shut.”

She was contemplating it.

“We can *hear* you.” Jeanine.

Raven laughed while I groaned, relenting and releasing her from my clutches. I pulled a blanket over my waist to cover my erection, and she *snickered* at me for it, causing me to glare at her as she pulled open the door.

Jeanine and Luca waltzed in like they owned the place. “We gave you hours alone. It’s mid-morning now,” Jeanine said.

Mid-morning and I had yet to fuck Raven.

I muttered a curse word as Raven took her place beside me on the bed. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pulled her back and buried my nose in her hair, breathing her in.

“Don’t be gross, please. I can smell you from over here,” Jeanine complained.

Raven wrinkled her nose. “How?”

Jeanine shrugged. “It always grows stronger when he’s touching you, which happens often.” She held up a basket in her hand. “We brought you food.” She waved it around like it would entice me away from this delicious treat in my arms.

“I don’t like that people can smell us,” Raven huffed. “Especially since everyone seems to think we smell so bad.”

“They’re supposed to think we smell bad, Raven. It deters anyone from trying to steal you away, like the gift you left for me in the forest.”

Jeanine gasped. “That’s right! What did you do to him?”

“Let him go,” I said with a shrug. “He came to retrieve his brother from the army, so I let him. He was full of useful information, like how his kingdom and those surrounding are full of magic and how odd he found it that we barely knew anything about it. He also informed me that while mates are common in his kingdom, flames are so rare that people may try and take her away from me and suggested we stop telling everyone.”

“We won’t tell anyone else then,” Jeanine said. “We don’t want anyone taking our queen.”

Instinctively, I held her tighter against me. It wasn’t irregular to want to protect her, but this feeling was unlike anything I had ever experienced. But when I looked at her, she was frowning. “Raven, what is it?”

“River saw you in the woods freeing him. It’s what got you stabbed. I did that to you.”

“Whoa,” I said, sitting up on my elbow to lean over her. “You did not do that to me. That was a choice I made. Mira is the one who did that to me, not you. I committed no treason. That army was under my control. Mira was looking for a reason to kill me.”

“She thought you would be easier to control with him gone,” Jeanine said, grabbing Raven’s hand.

“That’s the only reason she let you save him,” Luca said. “She needs you. And as long as she does, she won’t touch Zeke again.”

She was still frowning as she looked at me, and I kissed her softly. “You did not harm me, Raven. You saved me.”

“But if I hadn’t—”

Shaking my head, I put my fingers against her lips. “No. She would have found another reason to charge me with treason. I will not let you blame yourself for this.”

“None of us will,” Jeanine said. “There have been times when we’ve all wanted to stab Zeke.”

Raven giggled against my fingers as I glared at Jeanine. “You realize that when we return to Seolia, you will not be able to bust into our bedroom, right?”

Jeanine cackled. “We’re all going to live there, so I could. And I will.”

I stared at Raven with widened eyes. “What did you do?”

She grimaced. “Well...”

I groaned, pushing my face into the pillow.

“The castle is big, and we have a lot of spare rooms.”

“So you decided to invite all these annoyances into our life?” That castle was going to get small real fucking quick.

Jeanine and Luca bounced on the bed while Raven laughed, shoving me to roll over. I sighed into the pillow and lifted to my palms. She stuck out her bottom lip, and I cocked an eyebrow, unimpressed with her begging. “It’s your castle,” I grumbled, sitting up and pulling her into my lap. “But they’re your pets. You have to clean up after them.”

“It’s presumptuous of you to assume that you’re living with Raven,” Luca said while pulling things out of the basket, hitting me with a loaf of bread.

I yanked it out of his hand and took a bite.

“Oh, he has a room to himself,” Raven said.

I stopped chewing to frown at her.

“I’m extremely old-fashioned.” She couldn’t even say it without laughing.

“Don’t do that,” I mumbled, resuming my chewing.

“I have wine!” Raven squealed, climbing off me to pull a crate of bottles from underneath our bed.

I rolled my eyes. “Did you go into the cargo hold to get a crate?”

Ignoring me, she pulled one bottle out, and Jeanine grabbed it, trying to uncork it unsuccessfully. I pulled it from her hand and did it myself, taking the first swig. Jeanine took

it back and took one of her own, passing it to Luca. Raven stood there, pouting as the bottle began to empty.

She looked down at her crate, and I smiled while watching her. “This isn’t going to last a week, is it?” She kicked the box back under the bed and took the bottle from Luca, cradling it in her lap as she sat.

“I guess Raven is finished sharing.” I reached for her and pulled her to me. I couldn’t — wouldn’t — stop touching her.

Reaching into the picnic basket, she pulled out a pear and put it against my lips. I leered at her while I bit down and sucked the juice out, scooting her down to cover my lap so no one would notice my erection pressing up against the blanket.

She cleared her throat and leaned into me, sighing softly as it pressed against the small of her back.

While Luca and Jeanine were distracted in conversation, I took her hand and placed it on my cock through the blanket, grinning as she stroked me behind her back. “I would like to be done sharing, too, if you two would just....” I waved my hand toward the door.

Both of them rolled their eyes. “We want to see Raven as Morana,” Jeanine said.

“No,” we said in unison.

Luca looked between the two of us. “Why not?”

“I haven’t learned how to control her,” Raven said. “Zeke said she doesn’t have memories. It’s not like my elements — she’s... different.”

“You’ll need to learn how to control her,” Jeanine said. “No better time than now in a small, contained room like this one. I saw what River can do, and even though you can’t kill him, you’ll need every weapon at your disposal.”

Raven looked at me. I sighed as I ran a hand down her back. “I still don’t think it’s wise, but she’s right. It’s better to practice shifting here first instead of Seolia.”

“I need something alive that’s not human unless one of you would like to die,” Raven said.

Luca stood and disappeared into the hallway without a word.

“I guess he doesn’t,” she said with a shrug.

She fed me another bite of pear, biting her lip as I pulsed against her. I shook my head slightly, bringing her wrist to my mouth and kissing it. “Stop.”

A stubborn little grin appeared on her mouth as she took a bite of pear and leaned down, shoving it into my mouth with her tongue — brazen little demon witch. “Raven,” I said, swallowing the bite that now tasted more like her instead of pear. “You’re playing with fire.”

Her grin became cocky as she shifted into Blaze. “I am the fire.”

Fuck, Raven.

I was about to kick Jeanine out when Luca suddenly returned with a fish flopping around in his hands, tossing it down on a small blanket that Jeanine had spread out on the bed.

“Not a fish,” she whined.

I snorted. “Either this or a crew member, baby.”

When she scooted back, I cleared my throat. She stopped moving and smiled.

We were being sickeningly obnoxious, but I didn’t give a fuck. We waited months to have this time together, and I enjoyed playing with her. Her personality was infectious, and I wanted to make her laugh as often as she screamed for me.

She drew in a nervous breath as she whispered that deadly name. “Morana.”

Her black hair became darker and longer, and when she blinked her eyes, her green morphed into the black that had haunted our dreams.

We all stared at her, mouths agape. She *was* death.

Beautiful but deadly. And I felt panic in her as she allowed Morana to inhabit her being.

Sitting up behind her, I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back to settle right against my chest. “I’m right here, Raven. You can do this.”

“I’m so cold,” she whispered, her palms clammy as she put them against my arm.

I nodded, moving her hair to one side and kissing her neck. “Your fire is still in you. I feel it.”

Staring at the fish, she extended a shaky hand toward it. Luca and Jeanine scooted back and nearly fell off the bed as two ribbons came from her fingertips, delicately wrapping around the fish. And like they had done to me in her nightmare, they danced around it, coercing it to relent its life.

And I couldn’t look away. It was... enchanting. Mesmerizing. Death seemed so peaceful, so alluring.

When the fish stopped moving and stopped breathing, the ribbons twisted back into her fingers, and her head tilted back as I felt something hum through her.

Life. Death brought extended life to her.

“Wow,” Jeanine said from the edge of the bed, staring at the lifeless fish.

And then, nothing.

Nothing was brimming on Raven as she slowly lifted her eyes to look at Jeanine. “You,” she whispered, cocking her head to the side.

“Raven,” I said quickly, grabbing her wrists and pinning them to her sides. “No.”

Jeanine looked at me; her eyes widened in fear. “Why is she looking at me like that?”

Raven tried pulling her arms free from my grip, and I growled, keeping them steady at her sides. “Morana only knows you from her nightmares. And her nightmares include you and me... doing things.”

Jeanine stood from the bed. “Do I need to leave?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. Let me talk to her. Luca, stand in front of Jeanine.”

Luca stood from the bed and moved in front of Jeanine.

“If I tell you to run, run.”

They both nodded, and I drew in a deep breath before I put my lips right against Raven’s ear. “Baby,” I whispered, fighting to bring one of her hands to my mouth and kissing the back of it. “Raven, you need to shove her down. Come back to me.”

“Liars,” Raven seethed, bringing her elbow back against my chest to try and wrangle her hand free.

She wasn’t fighting me with her right hand — only her left.

I released her right hand, much to the protest of Jeanine, as she cowered behind Luca. “She can’t hurt you with this one,” I explained, nodding to how Raven rested it against my leg. “The ribbons only come out of one hand. That’s why she’s fighting me so hard with this one.”

“I have to try and go into her mind to bring memories forth of you, Jeanine. I’ll hold her hand down, but if something happens like last time, you’ll need to grab her.”

“Let me go,” Raven growled, bringing her elbow back harder against my chest.

Chuckling, I kissed the side of her head. “You know that’s not going to happen. Be still. You’re making this more difficult for me.”

“You’re a liar,” she whispered, her body temperature dropping.

I rolled my eyes and pushed into her mind, ignoring her irritated protests.



STEPPING into the black pit that Morana always created when she inhabited Raven, I looked around and sighed. “Morana,” I called out, kicking at the black mist on the ground. “You can’t keep me from her.”

She appeared out of thin air in front of me, the black mist leaving the ground around my feet to create a shield around her while she grinned at me. “I am her.”

You know you might be too obsessed with a person when they even look appealing to you as a spawn of evil.

I shook my head and took steps closer. “You’re not her. Raven doesn’t hurt the ones she loves.”

“I do not love her,” she gritted out angrily. “You do.”

“I love you,” I replied, putting my hands on her arms. “And I can help you if you’ll let me.”

She seemed to want to touch me as her hand rose to my cheek, but then she curled her fingers loosely to stop herself. “You do not fear me?”

I took the initiative and leaned down to press my forehead against hers. She flinched but let me stay there. “I do not fear any part of you. I’m in love with all of you.”

“You love me,” she repeated back slowly, word by word.

I brushed my lips across hers. “I love you.”

“Then...” she whispered and took a slow step back. “I must protect you.”

“Goddamnit,” I yelled, unable to move my arms as the black mist created shadowed chains around them, tethering me to the ground. “Raven, I need you to light Blaze,” I shouted, trying to rip my arms free of the mist.

“I’m afraid your lover must go,” Morana sighed, flexing the fingers of her left hand.

“She’s not my lover,” I argued. “You are. She’s your best friend. Let me into Raven’s mind, and I’ll show you.”

She ran the back of her hand down my cheek. “You are a beautiful man. So many shadows.” She tilted her head as her

eyes ran down my throat and chest. “I can see them inside of you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Come here and let me kiss you. Let me show you our past.”

“Mm,” she hummed, raising to put her lips against my cheek. “Maybe later.”

“Raven,” I yelled, earning a sharp glare from Morana. “Let me go. It’s only a matter of time before she pushes through.”

She took steps backward and raised her left arm. “I don’t need much time for what I’m about to do.”

“You’re going to kill Raven,” I shouted at her. “Taking the lives of the ones she loves will destroy her.”

“And then maybe she’ll let me free more often.” She turned away from me and started fading into the mist. “Ta-ta, beautiful stranger.”

Growling, I pulled at the tethered mists holding my arms and shouted for Raven again. Closing my eyes, I pulled from my memories, casting one forward to meld with the black despair. Mist tried to wash it away, but I held it steady. “This is our first night at Duck’s,” I explained. “Look how I watched you — I was completely mesmerized by everything you did, down to how you drank from a glass.”

The floor underneath me rattled, causing me to stumble to the side. A little more, and I could throw myself out of here. I pushed ahead in the same memory. “This is us walking to the spring. I could hardly wait to get my hands on you. I’m still surprised I made it to the spring without touching you.”

I slipped through the ground as it cracked open, throwing myself out of the pit of her mind, and gasped as the room came back into focus.



“GET OUT!” I shouted as Raven stood from the bed and drew her arm toward Jeanine.

Luca pushed Jeanine out the door as I jumped up from the bed and tackled Raven. She screamed as she thrashed, crawling toward the door. I grabbed her ankle and pulled her back, putting her flailing arms against my chest. “Look at me, you evil little witch.”

Her black eyes snapped to my face, scowling. I chuckled and leaned in, pressing my lips against hers. She fought me, pushing up against my chest, but when a breeze slammed the door shut, I pulled away and realized that it wasn’t Blaze trying to fight through it — it was Terra.

I looked back at her, smiling as gold flecks shined behind the black. And I kissed her again, whispering nothing but words of love against her lips as she finally started reacting, her arms loosening and stilling in my hold.

And then tears were pooling against my cheeks as her legs wrapped around my waist. Her mouth melded to mine in comforting familiarity, and I released her hands, letting her wrap them around my neck. “Raven,” I whispered against her lips and brushed her violet hair back as it stuck to her tears. “You’re okay. You pushed through.”

“Because of you,” she squeaked, pulling me down again. “If you hadn’t been there...”

“I will always be there. You can’t shift as her without me around. Do you understand?”

She nodded, tugging at my hair. “She wants you for herself.”

“You’ve never been good at sharing.”

“Love me,” she whispered and kissed me but then sighed as the door cracked open a sliver.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her irritation. Luca peered inside. “She’s purple,” he said. “What does that mean?”

“Let me in, you fool,” Jeanine said, pushing the door wider. Relief washed over her face as she looked at Raven. “Let’s unpack what just happened. That was not okay.”

“I told you not to bother her,” Raven said. “We tried to warn you.”

I climbed off her and pulled her up, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Morana doesn’t hold Raven’s memories, and when I try to enter her mind, she traps me each time. It’ll take time to adjust to her, but Raven cannot shift as her unless I’m around.”

“Maybe a small room wasn’t the best idea then,” Jeanine said.

“No, we need to be on the island and around bigger animals to satisfy her.” I rubbed her back. “Are there any on your island?”

“Deer, but I can’t kill one.”

Jeanine laughed. “Why not? We would use it for meat.”

“Have you *seen* a deer?”

We all nodded.

“They stare at you with those big eyes....” We all laughed at her, and she shoved my shoulder, causing me to drop my arm from around her. “They do! They’re asking you to please not kill them.”

I asked, “You talk to deer now?”

“You talk to cats,” she replied dryly.

Jeanine looked at me. “You talk to cats?”

“I don’t talk to cats.” Just one cat.

“You’re not as cool as I remember,” Luca said.

I shoved him into the bed. “I don’t talk to cats.”

“You *thanked* the cat.”

I glared at Raven. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“He talks to caves, too. Yells at them.”

I glared at Jeanine now.

“Caves and cats?” Luca tried to stand back up.

I shoved him down again.

Raven asked, “Why do you yell at caves?”

I groaned. “I don’t talk to anything. I am never talking to anyone ever again.”

“Do you want me to kill the cat then?”

“I…” I looked at her sheepishly. “No.”

She grinned. “Because you talk to it.”

“Someone get the dead fish off our bed,” I cut in, biting down on Raven’s shoulder while she laughed at me.

She yelped and pushed my face away. “You spilled my wine.”

I looked down at the bottle on the floor and the puddle of leftover wine beside it, shrugging. “You tried to kill Jeanine.”

She covered her face with her hands. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Jeanine dismissed her apology with her hand. “Don’t worry about it. It’s been a long time coming.”

Raven started giggling at that, which made me laugh. Jeanine and Luca followed us, laughing at how hard we were, and soon, the heaviness of the last few moments was washed away.

Raven released a long sigh and sat on the edge of the bed, scrunching her nose at the fish, but then looked at me. “I have more to worry about than just Morana. I have to tell Cade everything.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Jeanine suggested, crouching in front of her. “The things about war, yes. River, probably. But Zeke? Maybe not all at once.”

“I won’t hide him,” Raven said, shaking her head. “Hide us. Zeke will be in my chambers.”

I sat beside her on the bed and grabbed her hand. “I don’t believe you would be hiding me. I think we must approach it carefully, especially with Cade’s past instances of lashing out at you. Yes, he will know we’re together and forever — that I

will not compromise on. But us being flames? We need to protect that.”

“You’re returning home a lot different than when you left,” Luca said, shrugging a shoulder. “I don’t know Cade, but I would take it slow with as much information as you’re bringing with you.”

“Patience, baby.” I ran a hand down her hair. “We will, of course, follow your lead. If you want to tell him, then we’ll tell him. But, depending on his reaction, you cannot ask me not to keep you safe.”

She gave me a small but sorrowful smile. “I’m sorry that hiding it is something we even have to discuss. I wish things were different....”

“Raven,” Jeanine said, tugging at her hand. “Stop apologizing for the actions of other people.”

Eight simple words and something changed in Raven’s posture as she sat up a little straighter. I kissed her temple and then her cheek. “You are the queen, my love. You only hold yourself accountable.”

“Raven, I would like to pledge my allegiance to Seolia and its queen,” Luca said, dipping into a bow.

“Luca, you don’t—” she started to say, but then Jeanine stood.

“My allegiance is to my queen.” And she, too, bent into a bow.

I stood with them without a word, swatting her hand away as she reached to keep me still. “To our queen,” I said as I bowed, my voice soft. “We will protect you, and we will fight for you.”

“*With* me,” she whispered. “You will fight with me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ZEKE

It took two hours for Jeanine and Luca to leave us alone after that. And when they wouldn't stop fighting over who would carry the dead fish out, I grabbed it so they'd go. It never dawned on us that Raven could have turned it to ash, but then it would have left a pile of ashy fish on our bed, and I needed to get out of that room after what happened.

Morana worried me — and it wasn't something I would ever tell Raven. She needed me to guide her through this, always to be there to bring her back, but each time I got stuck in her mind, it was becoming more difficult not to panic. If Morana managed to get free without me there to stop her, it would be catastrophic, and the more people harmed by this spirit she couldn't control, the more likely the Raven I loved would wither away from guilt.

After I tossed the fish overboard, I leaned against the ship's railing and let the cool air calm me down. Just weeks ago, my biggest concern was keeping Cade away from her, which was something I could've done in my sleep. His reaction to us being together was also worrisome, but it was something I could keep control over. But Raven was fearful of hurting him. To her, he was still her Cade, not that man who had harmed her and tried to force her into something she didn't want.

Her heart was so big and forgiving that it seemed even more fragile in the palm of my hand.

“She will be just fine,” a voice said beside me. John patted me on the back. “She’s strong.”

I nodded once, staring at the open water ahead of us. “She is, but...” I sighed and turned, leaning against the wall and crossing my arms over my chest. “Did you know about River?”

Frowning, he shook his head. “No. I was there that night. I was one of the first ones to hold Raven. It was a secret that Celestina held until she died, and one Mira kept from everyone.”

“It hurts her that River wants nothing to do with her. She wants him in her life, despite how angry she is now. I don’t know how to make this right for her.”

“You and Raven will always be stronger as pair. Don’t try and control the outcome of every situation to keep her away from pain. Raven grows from the pain she experiences. This will be no different.”

“I don’t want her to feel any more pain, John. That’s all she ever feels.”

“Your only responsibility....” — he grabbed my shoulder — “is to love her and keep her safe. The rest will work itself out. Time will heal all wounds.”

I nodded once. “Me, Luca, and Jeanine just pledged our allegiance to her and Seolia.”

“Ah, damn,” he groaned, rubbing his forehead and drawing a grin from me. Even when I was a child, he rarely cursed unless I had done something to stress him out. “It’s a law in our realm to have you sign a declaration and for me to send a letter to Mira letting her know that you are no longer a resident of Reales.”

“Firstly, she wouldn’t be surprised. Secondly, you don’t owe her shit.”

“You are second in line to the throne. That complicates your switching allegiance. You are in Rudolf’s will to inherit the throne after Mira, and it’s something she cannot change, even as queen.”

“Wouldn’t I be third in line now after Raven? Fourth in line with River?”

He shook his head. “Technically, with Raven, yes, but she doesn’t want that throne. She’ll give up her position to give it to you. Without legal documentation stating that River is a descendant of Celestina, he cannot become king. Mira would need a lot of proof to move him ahead of you.”

“Whatever you need to do, do it. I am a resident of wherever Raven is.”

“I’ll take care of it, but I need signed declarations. Mira can’t charge you with anything if you’re not one of her subjects. I need documented proof.”

Chuckling, I uncrossed my arms and shrugged. “She already charged me with treason.”

“Raven can drop that. As her subject, she can excuse you from any prior charges.”

I slapped his back. “See, all of this will work out splendidly. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a queen to take care of.”

He called my name, and I paused, looking at him over my shoulder. “I would like us... to work out our differences maybe someday. Repair our relationship.”

I dipped my chin as I thought about his words and then continued walking back toward the staircase before calling over my shoulder, “Time heals all wounds.”



I RETURNED to our hallway when I saw my mother walking toward me. Quite a family reunion I was having. “Should a pretty lady like you be walking alone?”

Her eyes lifted at the sound of my voice, and a smile erupted across her face. She came to me for a hug, and I wrapped my arms tightly around her. Having her here didn't quite feel real yet. I spent the better part of almost two years trying to keep them safe, and now they were, and it was because of Raven.

"It's been a long time since you were on a ship."

She laughed as I released her. "A very long time. They weren't quite this large yet."

"I just kicked Luca out of my room."

"Some things never change," she said with a sigh. "She's exquisite. Raven, that is."

I looked down the hall toward our door, grinning as I nodded.

"We are forever in her debt."

"She doesn't want your debt, mom. Raven does things with no expectations. All she wants is a family, people who love her for who she is." Creepy personalities and all.

"She's created her own family. This group the two of you have; that's her family. We're her family. Luca is already crazy about her. He keeps going on about how it's unfair that he didn't find her first. He's wholly convinced he could have snatched her up."

I gave her a sly grin. "Great, I always need another reason to kick his ass."

She rolled her eyes. "Why couldn't I have had a daughter?"

"You can have Raven," I offered.

"How is she holding up?"

I sighed, hanging my head. "Not great. This thing with River... she's beating herself up about it. She'll forget for a second, but then she falls back into her pain. And her magic is... out of control. I'm worried for her. I don't want her to get overwhelmed. Pressure is not something she's used to."

“John said she’s strong.”

I nodded. “He just told me the same thing upstairs. How are you and John?”

“You need to learn how to forgive, son.”

I stared at the floor, the wound that needed to heal still raw.

“He did it to protect you.”

I scoffed. “That worked out well for all of us, didn’t it?”

“Mira was going to kill all of us.”

“He had no way of knowing that.”

“John knew her thirst wouldn’t be satisfied until she controlled everyone. When he went to Seolia after Raven was taken, he told Mira about you beforehand. It was the only way he could guarantee our safety. He didn’t want to return to Reales to find all of us dead. She didn’t have use for you until she became queen, but she knew you had something she could use for her gain, and it kept us alive.”

“He left you,” I countered. “And Luca.”

“For Raven.”

My face twisted. “That can’t change anything.”

“He kept her safe, Zeke. He made sure she became queen. It changes everything.”

I glanced up as Raven came out of our room. She was in my shirt, but she had knotted it at her waist and slipped on a pair of tight leather pants that made me salivate. Her hair was mussed, and I wanted to fist it in my hand and make her scream. And then I wanted to kiss her until she felt no pain again.

She was my heart beating outside my chest. Everything about her sent every instinct I had into overdrive. If John hadn’t kept her safe, I might not be staring at the most beautiful woman in the world.

My mom followed my gaze, smiling as she noticed Raven. “It changes everything, son.”

She was right, but it didn't make anything less complicated. Since he left us, I'd held a grudge against John, and letting something go after a quarter of a century was hard. But it was my goal to be the best man I could be for Raven, which meant providing a family for her. And she wanted to be part of mine.

For her, I would have to learn to let go of grudges.

"Go on." She waved toward Raven, who was walking down the opposite way.

I had been in a daze staring at her.

I kissed the top of my mom's head and took off down the hall, lightly jogging after my girl. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I dragged her backward. "You can't escape me, little mouse."

"You were gone so long," she pouted, raising her hand to cup the back of my neck and tilting her head up to catch my lips in a kiss.

"I promise I thought of you every second," I whispered before pulling back and licking across her lips. "Did you open another bottle already?"

She smiled as she nodded.

"I can't tell if you're more addicted to me or the wine."

"I am always drunk on you."

I wrapped my hands around her waist and lifted her until she was coiled around me. Pressing her back against the wall, I kissed her neck and didn't give a fuck who was passing behind us. She didn't seem to mind either as she tilted her head to the side, exposing more of her throat to me. "What do you want, baby?"

"I want you to make me forget," she breathed.

I pulled back at her slurred words.

"Make me forget everything but us."

She dipped her forehead to rest against mine when I shook my head, turning and walking back to our room.

Shutting the door with my foot, I sat on the bed and scooted back with her in my lap.

And then, she allowed herself to feel it.

Her body shook with silent sobs. I rubbed her back and stayed silent, wrapping her up with as much love as possible while my heart broke for her.

“He wants nothing to do with me,” she whispered. “And I trusted the wrong people. I nearly got you killed because I was too close to Matthew. And I don’t regret killing him, Zeke, I don’t, but he was my friend. I thought he was my friend.”

Her words were quick and sloppy, but I caught enough of them to draw her chin up with my finger. “You love everyone, Raven, and they took advantage of that. It is not a reflection of you. We need to be more cautious of who we let in our circle. As far as River goes, he doesn’t understand what he’s missing. We will figure all of this out when we get home.”

She sniffled. “Home?”

Resting my hand against her cheek, I wiped away her tears. “Wherever your home is, it’s mine.”

“You’re my home,” she whispered.

I swallowed at her words.

“My heart rests in you.”

And then I made her forget by drowning her in my passion for her, my desire.

My soul-wrenching love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



RAVEN

With two days left on our trip, my nerves were at an all-time high. I'd spent the majority of time making up for lost time with Zeke. He didn't want to let me go, and I hoped he never would. It wasn't an ideal situation we were in, but we deserved time together — time to fall deeper in love, time to get to know one another better.

And though I hadn't known him long, it felt like he was a piece of myself that I had been missing. I always felt out of place and different, but he made me feel like I would always have a safe place in his arms — that maybe the world around me didn't have to feel so intimidating. I didn't have to feel alone.

But best of all, he encouraged me to follow whatever instinct I had. To allow me to freely *feel*, while promising that he would love every piece of me I could offer him.

And while making sure I never felt alone, he spent every second of the day with me that he could, as did Luca and Jeanine when Zeke would allow them to. They were insistent about eating with us for every meal and would show up with food baskets. Zeke grumbled every single time, but he would smile when he saw Luca. And he had been lighter these last few days, like maybe the weight of the world didn't have to rest solely on his shoulders. He could give some of it to me.

He left me to spend time with his mom, Luca, and John. I was surprised to hear that, but he informed me that he was working on his forgiveness. He wanted me to go with him and begged me to join them, but they needed time to reacquaint themselves. We had plenty of time for them to get to know me because we were forever. Nothing would ever take me from him again.

Leaning over the railing, I stared at the water beneath us. We would be returning to Seolia sooner than anticipated. The water had been calmer and without any storms, which Zeke was grateful for since he didn't trust me not to try and stop it; we would be home two days earlier.

I could tell he didn't want us to leave the ship. He had become used to having me locked away with him so he could have his way with me.

He wanted to help me forget.

But I thought of River frequently. How could I not? He was my missing element — a part of me that had been roaming outside our realm. And he knew about me. That was the most painful of all.

He knew he had a twin sister and glared at me like I had taken something from him — like I was somehow at fault for this.

I wanted to master my elements as he had with his.

I needed to practice. Now that I knew it was possible to move elements with my mind, I would need to split my focus on building an army in Seolia and relearning my magic.

It raised the question: how could we grow our army when hers would be watching our every move? How could I keep her from killing my people, from River drowning my island? Why was the idea of war so foreign just four months ago?

Groaning, I rested my forehead against the railing. My reign had been way too simple.

While staring at the deck, a pair of shoes came up beside mine. "You didn't prepare me for any of this."

John laughed softly and rested his forearms against the railing. “I didn’t know it was going to come to this. If I had, I would have done things differently. Or, not at all.”

“You knew she wanted us to get married.”

He nodded, looking back toward the cabins before looking back at me. “I did. I didn’t see any harm in it. It was a peaceful resolution, and it’s always been the plan. You would have married whether Leonidas had found you or not.”

I snorted. “Zeke barely talked me into it. What makes you think I would have agreed if I didn’t love him?”

“You’re motivated by the wellbeing of your people, and having a kingdom as large as Reales behind us would have been a good argument.”

He was right about that. If it had secured a brighter future for Seolia, I would have at least agreed to talk about it. “You told Leonidas about my birth.”

He was quiet for a moment, wringing his hands together until he finally sighed. “I did. I knew of the affair. It seemed like Rudolf was the only one who didn’t. It wasn’t right — Celestina trying to hide you as she did, but you ended up being hidden anyway.”

“What did you think was going to happen?”

“I didn’t know. I thought Celestina could have left Rudolf and taken you somewhere else. Somewhere peaceful. Shared you with Leonidas. I never imagined it would bring her death.”

I was exhausted from talking about my family, or lack thereof. Nothing I learned would ever satisfy me. “Aren’t you supposed to be having family time?”

“Zeke and Luca started arguing. They’re very loud.”

“They’re grown adults. What could they possibly be arguing about?”

John’s smile was soft. I imagined it was the kind of smile one would get when talking about their child. “When they were kids, they used to fight over their mother.”

Why didn't that surprise me?

"They would wrestle, and whoever won would get an extra kiss from their mother when it was time to go to bed. Zeke would always win until Luca shot up about a foot." He laughed before he continued, "Suddenly, Zeke had competition. They argued about who won the most, which turned into their wrestling. Alice yelled at them to stop; the rooms on this ship are too small. Or the boys are too big."

I was smiling so broadly that it hurt my cheeks.

"They never knew that both boys would always get the same amount. She just needed a way for them to get their aggression out." He looked at me, clearly exasperated by the memory. "They were very annoying."

I laughed and nudged his shoulder with mine. "Do you know anything about his birth father?"

His smile slowly disappeared. "I met him once. He left when Zeke was a baby but returned when he was around four. He wanted to see Zeke, but Alice didn't want to confuse him. I was his father, as far as he knew. We didn't tell him the truth until he was older."

"How did he take it?"

At my question, he chuckled. "About as well as you'd think. I believe that's partially why he holds so much resentment toward me. I have a connection to Luca, but not to him. Or, that's how he saw it. But, I adopted him. I love him as much as I do Luca. He's just more stubborn and won't let me."

Stubborn was a generous description. And now I knew what bred his need to possess. He wanted me to himself. He wanted two kisses every night from me. He would wrestle for it, kill for it.

"Does he look like his father?"

"Spitting image. Except for the eyes."

I smiled. Those were only for me.

"They're both soldiers — or were. I don't know what happened to him. He never came around again."

“He and Luca are identical, though I see some of you in Luca.”

“They’re both handsome boys, and they know it. They gave their mother plenty of heart attacks when they realized how easily they could get away with things by their charm.”

I giggled at that.

“I think you’re the only one who can tame that boy.”

“Tame is a strong word,” I argued. “Nothing will ever tame him.”

“You’re right about that, I suppose. As long as you exist, he’ll always be fighting someone.”

I rolled my eyes. “He doesn’t need to fight anyone. I’m completely wrapped up in him.”

John sighed. “He’s lost a lot, Raven. I fear he’d rather die than lose you.”

I frowned as I watched the soft waves pass under our ship. “I’m afraid I would, too.”

He patted my back gently. “That’s why we’re not going to let that happen.”

Luca appeared on my other side, pressing his fingers against a bruised eye. “You should see the other guy,” he grumbled.

“You’re both idiots,” John said.

I threw back my head in a laugh while pressing my hand against Luca’s bruise, starting to heal it as Jeanine came up and scooted between John and me.

John asked, “Where’s your brother?”

Luca shrugged. “Talking to mom about how obsessed he is with Raven.”

I grinned and pulled my hand away once Luca’s bruise was healed. “I was talking to John about how obsessed I am with him.”

“He’s a dick,” Luca mumbled, smiling.

Jeanine squeezed his shoulder. “He’s done it to all of us, Luca.”

We all grumbled in agreement before we laughed.



STANDING in the cargo hold with Godfrey, I was going over each item I had brought back with me from Reales and where they needed to be delivered once we docked in Seolia. I wanted Alice to feel at home, and I was hoping the portraits from their manor would assist her with that. I was pleasantly surprised that my crew was able to take everything I had requested and couldn’t wait for Zeke to see his things again.

Godfrey flipped the lid of a trunk, and I peered inside, smiling at the childhood relics from Zeke’s old room. Leaning over, I dug to the bottom and frowned. “There was a plush monkey I wanted, but I don’t see it here.”

“Hm,” Godfrey hummed, walking to another trunk and opening the lid. He sifted through a few things until he pulled the beloved, ragged monkey and held it up by its arm. “This the one?”

Giggling, I nodded and took it from him. “Yes, thank you. These two trunks can go in my chambers. All the larger portraits need to go in John’s chambers.”

He nodded toward the two giant racks of clothing. “And those?”

“The racks with the men’s clothing also go in my chambers. The one with the dresses....”

He held out a dress as I said it, looking from it to me. “Doesn’t seem like your color.”

I smiled at the dress he was holding. After Jeanine told me about Alice’s partner nearly closing down from lack of funds, I made her take me into town so I could buy the entire stock. I wasn’t sure what I would do with them since they came in many different sizes and styles, but now her partner had the resources to buy all new fabrics and hopefully remain open.

The dress he was holding up was deep pink with gold detail on the skirt. “It’s not, I suppose, but they are beautiful. I have no plans for those yet, but you can bring them to the castle, and I’ll make Cade find a place for them.”

“Cade,” he repeated, dropping the dress and writing the notes on his list. “Before he departed, he left us with the impression that you two were still together. I assume he was wrong.”

“He was wrong about many things,” I muttered, holding up a different dress in a bright teal. “You really couldn’t see me wearing some of these?”

“I’ve seen you sneak out many times, Queen Raven, and never in something like that.”

I clicked my tongue. “So you did know it was me.”

“You may have looked different, but your smile was always the same. And even when you were upset about something, you always smiled at whoever was at your gate.”

“I doubt I will be sneaking out anymore, so I will thank you now for always keeping my secret.”

He chuckled. “I highly doubt that. Old habits die hard.”

“She won’t if I can help it.”

I turned my head to see Zeke leaning against the doorframe, his eyebrow cocked. I put the plush monkey behind me and gave him a bashful grin.

“I will have these ready to unload after we’ve docked. As for your horse—”

And on cue, like he could hear us from the cargo hold next to this one, he whinnied, causing me to laugh. “Shadow,” I finished for him. “I’m aware we have no stables. I will get one built for him upon return.” Or perhaps he would like to remain free to roam around the forest. “Thank you, Godfrey.”

He bent into a slight bow. “My queen.” And nodded once to Zeke as he departed, leaving us alone.

Zeke looked nowhere but at me. “Is it too much for me to ask that you not be alone with men in dark places?”

I rolled my eyes. “I am the ruler of a kingdom. I will have many meetings, not always ones you may be pleased about. I’ll be with Cade often while you’re training soldiers.”

That answer didn’t please him as his stare turned into a scowl. “And I suppose it’s also too much to ask that you consider how that may make me feel?”

“Zeke, all I do is think about you—”

“And how if it were me with, for the fuck of it, let’s say, Jeanine, having clandestine meetings when you’re not around....”

“Clandestine,” I interrupted. “That’s what you think my meetings are? Secrets that I hold from you?”

“You didn’t inform me of this one.”

“You were with your mother,” I argued. “I wasn’t going to interrupt that, and—”

“And you couldn’t have waited?” he interjected, causing me to sigh out of frustration.

“And,” I shouted, throwing the monkey at him. “I was going to surprise you with things I brought from your childhood home! Look around you, jackass. This room is full of things to make you and your family feel at home.” Tears burned my eyes. “I wasn’t having a clandestine meeting. I was waiting for you to find me so I could show you.” I balled my fists at my sides. “And for you to throw Jeanine in my face like that after everything we’re going through with my nightmares is really fucking unfair.”

“Raven,” he said as I walked past him.

He followed me and reached for my hip, but I shoved his hand away. He growled and wrapped an arm around my waist, lifting and dragging me back.

He kicked the door shut as I pushed away from him and crossed my arms, standing on the opposite side of the room. “Raven, I’m sorry. I didn’t think before I said that.”

“Clearly,” I bit out, averting my eyes from his.

“Do you know how hard this is for me?”

The desperation in his voice had the tension in my body loosening at his question.

“Our moments are never light like that, Raven. We have all of the heavy things.” He sat on the edge of the trunk and rested his elbows against his thighs. “All of your smiles, your laughs, I want those to myself. And I know how fucking insane that is, how possessive of you that makes me, but you’re mine. I fought so fucking hard for you, Raven, and I want to be the one who makes you happy. I want those moments. I don’t always want to be pulling you out of nightmares or pissing you off.”

“Zeke.” Moving to stand before him, I threaded my fingers in his hair, tugged until he looked at me, and straddled his lap. “Baby, you are always the one making me smile.”

He shook his head, but I stopped him with my hands on his cheeks. “You are. I find myself smiling at times when I shouldn’t. I couldn’t survive an entire day without you before I was back in your arms. No one else gets my pain, my brokenness, because it belongs to you. I belong to you. Me laughing with him or anyone else is not even a blip in the raindrops of our universe.” I placed a hand against his heart. “You’re the only one who gets two kisses every night.”

His lips parted slightly in surprise.

“And if you want to have fun, we can have fun. You are my favorite kind.”

His forehead dipped against my shoulder, and he kissed my collarbone.

“I’m sorry I made you jealous.”

“I’m not jealous,” he mumbled against my skin.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, you’re not jealous. This is a completely *normal* reaction.”

“Maybe I’m jealous. And I’ve never had a reason to be jealous before. You bring something out in me.”

I tugged his hair again, and he rose to look at me. “You have no reason to be jealous. Ever. I’m marrying you. I am binding myself to you for all eternity.”

“Now?”

I laughed. “I wish we could.”

“We can, Raven.” He kissed me before he smiled. “The captain can marry us. We can make it ours, baby, instead of some grand affair Mira makes us do.”

My smile was as bright as his. It was something we would have just between us, and I wouldn’t have to wait three months to be his wife. And as I stared at this man asking me to spend forever with him — my broken man, who had sacrificed so much of himself, never wishing for his happy ending in fear of never getting one — I realized that there was nothing I could ever want more than to call him my husband.

“Marry me under the stars,” he whispered.

The stars — where we began.

I nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, in every way you could ever ask me.”

“Right now?”

I laughed again, biting the tip of his nose. It wasn’t even dark yet. “It needs to be small. Your parents, Luca and Jeanine. We don’t know who we can trust right now, and you’re not something I want to risk.”

He looked at me like he was in a dream — like this couldn’t be happening. Neither one of us ever envisioned falling in love with someone like we were with one another — if you could even call it that. It felt like so much more than love. “We can do it tonight after everyone retires to bed,” I offered.

I kissed the tip of his nose as he closed his eyes. “Then, when all this is over, we’re going to go away somewhere, just the two of us.” I would marry this devastating man and promise him forever. It had been all I wanted since we met.

He had always been my dream.

He squeezed me tightly, his eyes lined with silver as he opened them. “You are going to be my wife.”

That sounded so sweet coming out of his mouth. “All yours. Only yours. Forever. Can you handle it?”

When he pressed his lips to mine, I felt a tear against my cheek. “Baby,” I murmured, pulling back to wipe it away. “What is it?”

He swallowed. “Wildly unhinged. I didn’t think... didn’t know...” he sighed while he tried to regain his composure. “I wasn’t sure we would ever reach this point, but we have. Through all of it, you still love me.”

My heart warmed at his words, and I kissed him again, gently pushing my tongue into his mouth. He inhaled a sharp breath and stood with me in his arms, pressing me against the wall of the cargo hold. “Tell me you’re going to marry me.” His voice was low as he leaned in and kissed along my jaw.

“Mm,” I purred, tilting my head as he sucked on the spot underneath my ear. “I’m going to marry you.”

There were goose bumps on his skin from my words as he lowered me, slowly pushing my pants down and off my legs. “Tell me you’re going to be my wife,” he whispered, never breaking eye contact.

I had given this man every inch of my body, and he still had the power to intimidate me.

My breathing was hitched as I grabbed his shirt’s bottom, raising it over his body. “I’m going to be your wife.” And as he finished removing his shirt, my fingertips brushed across the tattoo on his chest. “Your wife,” I repeated, the words sinking in like an anchor in the water.

He started at the middle of my shirt with both hands and shredded through it.

My eyes widened as I was pulled from my trance. “Your wife is going to need new clothes.”

His chuckle was scratchy as he unbuckled his pants. “Good thing there’s an entire rack of dresses down here then.”

“Those aren’t for me—” was what I started to say, but he trapped my mouth in a kiss again.

“Stop talking,” he said against my lips as he took my hand and wrapped it around his cock.

Stroking, I whimpered at how his vein swelled in my palm, showing me how desperate he was for me. “I want you in my mouth.”

“I want to be inside of you,” he countered.

“You said you’d always give me what I want,” I twisted his words.

His laugh was more of a sigh, but he nodded and backed up until he could sit on a trunk. “Get on your knees then, witch.”

Biting my lip, I lowered to my knees in front of him, but right as I was about to take him in my mouth, he placed the tip of his finger delicately under my chin and lifted it until I had to look at him. “Take all of me, Raven.”

Demands. And it was surprising how much I wanted to please him.

When he removed his finger, I wrapped my fingers around the base of his cock and slowly took him in my mouth, dragging my tongue down the inches my lips covered. And he was so swollen that my teeth grazed across the length as I kept pushing downward, earning a sharp breath from him.

Fisting my hair, he used the grip to push me down, thrusting once and using his free hand to massage my throat. “You can do it, Raven.”

Could I? He seemed to underestimate his length.

Relaxing my jaw and throat, I released his base to steady my hands on his thighs as I drew more of him into my mouth.

“Good girl.”

I froze. That was new. And it was then that I realized how I ached for his praise.

“Do you like that, Raven?” He pushed in until the tip hit the back of my throat, causing me to gag. “Do you like when I tell you what a good girl you are?”

Fuck, I really did, and I didn't enjoy behaving for anyone.

When I squeezed his thighs in response, he bared his teeth, looking nothing short of savage as he slowly began to fuck my mouth. “Do you want to choke for me, Raven?”

I tried to dip my chin in a nod. He grinned and pulled me off of him. I pouted until he released my hair and put his hand around my throat, encouraging me to stand and switching spots with me until I was the one sitting on the trunk. “Lie down.”

I did as he asked. He positioned me until I was partially hanging off the trunk, everything upside down in my vision.

He positioned his legs on either side of my head and bent down to place his palms on the trunk. Grabbing my hands, he put them on his hips. “I'm not going to pull out until you come, Raven.”

I didn't have time to ask questions before he sank into my mouth again and spread my legs with his hands. I drew in quick breaths through my nose, gagging each time he touched the back of my throat. He groaned from the noise before his tongue brushed across my clit, causing me to squeeze his hips. “Fuck, Raven. Yes.”

He pushed two fingers into my core and flicked my clit again with his tongue, his breathing unsteady as he thrust slowly into my mouth. Blood rushed to my head, intensifying each sensation. I was buzzed from the high of his taste and how he was devouring me like I was his last meal.

I hadn't realized that his fingers were squeezing the trunk, and when the wood of the lid splintered from his grip, I couldn't control the choked laugh that came out of me, causing me to gag again.

“I need you to come before I shatter this entire thing.” He steadied his movements into my mouth but continued to suck and lick my pussy until my legs were trembling. When I tried

to bob my head for him to move again, he pulled his head up and kissed the inside of my thigh. “You have to come before I do, Raven. You’re going to choke when I come, and I want to hear it.”

I used my only advantage and started to suck him until my jaw hurt. He growled and pushed his tongue into my core unforagingly, repeatedly sweeping across that sweet spot.

As I came undone, my moan was a muffled sob. He pushed back up to his palms again and thrust twice more into my mouth before coming, crying out my name as I gagged on the warm release shooting down my throat.

He pulled out quickly and put his hand under my head, bringing me up until I sat. I coughed and pinched my nose, drawing in raspy breaths. My eyes were watering, and my throat burned, but he was staring at me like I was a goddess. And when he pulled me into his lap, he kissed along the column of my throat, muttering my name repeatedly. “You did so well, baby.”

Smiling, I nuzzled against his neck while my cheeks reddened from the praise.

He chuckled and ran his hand down my hair. “Are you okay?”

I cleared my throat and smacked my lips, which made him laugh. He tipped my chin up to him and ran his thumb across my bottom lip. I was absolute goo in the palm of his hand. “This mouth is mine. No one else will ever feel that tongue.”

I sat up on my knees in front of him. “Tell me what you feel when you see me with someone else.”

A mischievous grin lifted on his lips. “Why tell you when I can show you?”

I silently begged for him to make it hurt.

“It starts slow, down in here.” His fingers brushed across my lower stomach.

I watched his fingers. “What does?”

“Mania,” he growled.

His deep voice tickled my ears, and I shuddered as shivers shot up my spine.

He dragged a finger up my stomach and lingered around my ribs. "And then it's tight here." His finger circled one of my nipples, his hand splaying between my breasts to slide up until he could wrap his fingers around my throat. "I start being unable to breathe," he mumbled as his fingers squeezed around me. "Everything begins to burn, Raven. A fire that I can't control."

There was a darkness in his eyes that I wanted to get lost in.

My pulse throbbed against his fingers while his other hand slid down my stomach, his middle finger slowly rubbing my clit while continuing to squeeze my throat. My brain begged for more air, but I didn't want him to stop. "You look so beautiful like this." His voice was distant. "Dying for me."

I craved this twisted part of him.

He pushed two fingers into my core, my moan vibrating against his palm. "Do you want to feel the peak of my rage?"

"Yes," I managed to say on a breath.

He put his mouth against my ear. "Do you want to know how good it feels when I think about taking their life?"

I whimpered at his question while his fingers worked inside me, slowly moving in and out. I was so wet for him that I could feel it dripping down his fingers.

"Can you feel what you do to me when you drive me mad?" His teeth clamped down on my earlobe as he built me higher, stealing every breath I had left in me. And then he released me all at once and gripped my waist, flipping me over and bringing my hips up until I was on all fours.

He bent over me and filled me with one tight thrust, wrapping his hand around my throat again and squeezing as he pounded into me. "Feel it, baby. Come while thinking about how I want to kill someone for looking at you."

I tried to pull in air, but his fingers only tightened as I built. My body shook from the lack of oxygen and how good it felt to know he wanted to take life for me. I wanted to come from how fucked up we were together.

This part of us wasn't love.

It was obsession. It was dangerous.

His mouth was by my ear again. "You will see me spill blood for you, Raven."

And I came, screaming as I shattered around him.

He released my throat but stayed inside of me and continued to thrust through my climax, drawing out this vile part of our souls.

My face was buried against the ground as I tried to draw in air, but his hand slid up my spine, slowing his thrusts as I trembled underneath him. "Come again," he demanded.

I shook my head, my entire body spent.

He drew out to the tip and slammed in again. "Sit up, Raven. You have one more in you."

I shakily rose back to my palms and his fingers tangled in my hair, pulling my head back. He was suffocating me in his shadows. And I was just as fucked up as he was for loving it.

I could barely hold myself up as he thrust into me, my body threatening to break underneath him. He yanked on my hair, and I cried out, pushing my ass against him.

"Be still. I didn't say you could fight me."

I rarely was allowed to enjoy this side of him.

I would have fallen over if it wasn't for his death grip on my hair. He shifted behind me and pulled me backward, leaning back until his shins rested against the ground with me on his lap.

Arching my back, I rested the back of my head against his shoulders and forced his face to mine.

Our kiss was sloppy but passionate.

His hand slid down my chest and cupped my breast, kneading the skin underneath his fingers. “Your tits,” he mumbled against my lips. “I couldn’t stop staring at them the night we met.”

When he relinquished some control back to me and allowed me to roll my hips against him, I grabbed his other hand and moved it to my chest to hold both breasts. “Say more.”

He licked along the shell of my ear, sending goose bumps across my entire body. “The first night we fucked....” He had to stop to pull in a breath. “Seeing your body made me harder than I’d ever been.” He rested his forehead against my shoulder to watch us. “Just from seeing you.”

“More.”

“Fuck,” he whispered, his hands sliding around to squeeze my ass. “I refused to come until I could have you again. I was hard thinking about how you tasted.”

“Baby,” I breathed.

He pulled me up only long enough to turn me around and slide back into me. “You’re beautiful,” he said, his eyes falling to watch me grind on him. “But seeing your pussy on me like this....”

Our bodies were covered in sweat, my hair clinging to his shoulders and neck as he held me close to him.

“I could live like this,” he finished, meeting my gaze again. “I want to come inside you every day.”

“Tell me again.” I kissed him wildly, nearly coming from it. “Tell me how good I am.”

He grinned while squeezing my thighs. “So good, Raven. You’re such a good fucking girl.”

I couldn’t scream anymore, so his name was scratchy on my tongue, which sent him over, mixing with me. Our movements stilled, but he stayed buried inside me and kissed me again.

It was deep and slow, lessening his frustration.

All of this was from a meeting that I hadn't informed him of.

He slowly lifted me off of him and pushed my hip gently. I twisted to my back while he leaned over me, inspecting every inch of me to assure I was okay. I could see him through the colors in my eyes lingering as my lungs tried to disperse oxygen to the parts begging for it, but I had never been better.

He could have all my breaths.

“That’s how it feels.” His voice was hoarse, his chest heaving.

I wiped some of the sweat away that beaded on his forehead.

“Choked, but the release is sweet.”

“You’ve been pushing down your natural instinct. You haven’t found release.”

He shook his head as those thunderstorms rolled in behind his eyes, always making them darker. I took a moment to study his face — how his jaw clenched as he tried to push down his brand of darkness. The way his lips parted as he stared at me, his desire to possess me threatening to drown him every moment.

My hands brushed over his shoulders, my fingers constantly moving over his muscles and their indentions in his skin. My eyes roamed down his chest, lingering over the tattoo he inked on himself as a constant reminder of how I burned for him, the moon above my flames caressing, always loving me best in the dark. The lines in his stomach hardened from the months of training an army to keep his family safe, to stay alive without living.

And my name permanently marked on his hand — reminding anyone who dared speak to him that he was spoken for already.

And as I met his eyes again, the smoky ash color continued to confirm that he was made only for me — that our souls had been ripped apart before every dawn of a new universe,

destined to roam the earth, never fully satisfied until we found one another again.

“I’ll stop choking you,” I whispered while wiping the pad of my thumb over his cheekbone, desperate to clear his gloom.

He dipped his forehead to mine and gently kissed the tip of my nose. “There will always be men who want you and enjoy your company.” He moved to lay beside me, and I twisted again, propping up on my elbow to face him. “As they should. You are enchanting.”

I rolled my eyes, but he gripped my chin between his fingers and shook his head. “You are. You are easy to get addicted to. And men want to lose themselves in you. You’re lethal, Raven.” His thumb grasped my bottom lip and pulled at the flesh, staring at my mouth. I knew his mind was still in a frenzy to claim me as his, but he didn’t need to.

I was wholly his.

“This... mating, whatever this is, Raven, it’s hard to push down. It’s making me a little crazy.”

He needed to know that he was safe. I owed it to him to be more mindful. I needed to respect his shadows the same way he protected mine.

He released my bottom lip but didn’t tear his gaze away from my mouth. I leaned into him slowly and pressed my lips to his, kissing him tenderly — the same way he had kissed me so many times.

My fingers tangled in his hair gently as I broke from the kiss and touched the tip of my nose to his, the invisible bond between us tightening. We beat only for each other. The breath in our lungs keeping the other viable. Alive.

I needed to show him.

Closing my eyes, I felt him gently push into my mind seconds later. I pulled from my memories and showed him glimpses of us from other lifetimes, allowing him to see what I had.

His breathing quickened on a particular one, his fingers pushing into the skin of my hip and putting deep pressure on my bone.

In a quick flash and not even a full second, we were smiling at a tiny bundle in our arms with hair black as ebony.

My eyes opened, and he searched my face, his lips parted at what he witnessed. That glance of us wasn't from another lifetime. It was from our future. Our happy ending.

Silver lined his eyes as they settled on mine, and a slow smile spread on my mouth. "We will get there," I promised, wiping away a tear that slipped down his cheek. "Wildly unhinged."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



RAVEN

*I*t was mid-afternoon, and we had hours left until we snuck to the deck in the dead of night to promise forever to one another. And now, we were staring at the door and waiting for Jeanine and Luca to bring us food. We had started becoming hungry on cue.

After finishing our wildly passionate fucking in the cargo hold, I explained everything I had taken from Reales. Still, when I offered to show him all of it, he gently told me that he wasn't ready yet — that he loved me for grabbing everything but that there were things from his past that he wasn't quite prepared to reconcile yet. And when I pushed for more on what he meant, he simply kissed me and promised to talk to me about all of it one day.

And I left it at that because I respected that his life before his family was taken may be painful for him to revisit. And though I was desperate to know more about him, it would take time to peel every layer of ourselves back for one another, and it made our time together that much sweeter.

But the Zeke with me at this moment was not sweet; he was brooding.

Jeanine and Luca were late, and he was muttering obscenities from hunger. For food, for me. Not in that order. He had become used to stopping his assault on my body when we knew it was getting close to time for them to join us. It

never dawned on either of us that we could have left to get our food.

Because, quite frankly, we didn't want to. We only wanted each other.

He sighed as he fell back against the bed, muttering something. Another string of filthy words, I guessed. "They've been annoyingly on time every day, and now you've managed to pull me off of you, and they're nowhere to be found."

He sat up and slowly trailed down my body with his finger. I shook my head, but he lunged for me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "It will fill our time while we wait so patiently." He slowly pulled me to him, a wickedly handsome grin on his lips.

And I let him because you never reject a masterpiece like this one. He was my sin, and since my soul was already damned, I would let him have me every time.

I straddled his waist and leaned into him, our mouths colliding in the same fiery passion we always had, never tiring one another, never having enough.

I teasingly ground my hips against him, and he groaned at the friction between our bodies. Just as we were about to eliminate all the fabric between us, there was a knock on the door.

He growled. Loudly. "You have to be fucking kidding me."

He held me against him, even as I tried to pull up. "No, they need to be punished. We don't reward bad behavior."

"All we do is reward bad behavior."

"Our kind of bad is the only one that deserves rewarding."

The way he said it, so confidently, so hoarse, had me kissing him again. I pushed his shirt over his head, and he was flipping me over to take control when Jeanine began to yell while banging on the door. "Get off of her, Zeke!"

He growled another curse word, and I sighed, his grip loosening enough for me to climb out from underneath. I wasn't sure how I could still stand from how often he had been

buried inside me this week. I wondered if we needed to be studied because this was not human consumption.

I grabbed his shirt and tossed it to him. “Put this back on.”

My forehead drew in at my unexpected demand.

He tilted his head with a slight grin.

I wasn't sure why I did it since both people behind that door had seen him shirtless, but I felt protective over him — possessive. I had always been, but this was heavier.

And maybe it was what he had always felt — this intense feeling of... claiming.

“Why?”

He was only asking because he wanted me to verbalize what I was feeling, even though he could feel everything I was — confusion riddled with envy for any set of eyes that had ever seen him.

“Because,” I said quietly, walking to the door. “You're mine.”

“Hang on!” he called out and stood from the bed as he pulled his shirt on. “Come here.”

I walked into his arms bashfully, trying to duck my head against his chest, but he caught me and made me look at him. “I've never been claimed before by anyone.” He kissed me once. Twice. “That felt fucking good to hear it from you.”

“You'll hear it so often that you may get sick of it.”

He backed me into the wall next to the door. “Your entire existence, little mouse, enralls me. Nothing you do or say will ever tire me.” He leaned in and kissed me again while reaching out to open the door.

Jeanine and Luca filtered in as he pulled me from the wall with his arm around my shoulders. Jeanine dropped the basket of food on our bed. “We're late because I couldn't wake Luca. He jumped into the channel today, and water apparently wears him out like a child.” She dug through the basket and tossed me a pear.

Zeke grabbed it from my hand and took a greedy bite as he returned to the bed. “You’re lucky he even knows how to swim. All thanks to me.”

Luca rolled his eyes. “You learn a lot when your brother tries to drown you in the channel.”

I gasped as Jeanine handed me a loaf of bread. “You tried to drown him?”

Zeke’s only answer was a shrug.

“That better not be how you teach our children how to swim.”

His smile was warm as he looked at me.

“I will be teaching all nieces and nephews what they need to know,” Luca interjected.

I smiled as I broke the loaf into four pieces and handed one to each, keeping a piece for myself. I had grown to love our picnics. We had a calming rhythm together, giving me a small ounce of hope that we could keep this tradition alive when we returned to Seolia.

My smile slowly flipped upside down as I stared at my piece of bread. Two ships were following us full of men, and I wasn’t sure where to put all of them. Our island was already crammed full of happy residents, and I was about to unleash an army full of angry men on them.

I would need to meet with John before we dock to have a plan in place before going over it with Cade for anything we may have missed. Cade. Zeke. Cade and Zeke.

Fuck, living in harmony with both of them may be as difficult as bringing an army in. Cade hoped I would return to Seolia and into his arms when it was quite the opposite. I would be returning married and madly in love with another man.

Our island of peace was about to be disrupted very quickly.

Luca stood beside me and slid his arm around my shoulders, garnering a small smile from me. “It always seems worse than it is,” he said softly.

I exhaled a soft sigh and let my head fall against his shoulder, watching as Jeanine smacked Zeke with a loaf of bread as he tried to dodge it. When his dodge became a little sharper, the bread hurdled toward us. Luca turned me into him and slapped the bread with his hand. “You almost hit my sister!”

My fire spread and warmed my body as tears sprang to my eyes.

A brother — one that wanted to be on my side.

A brother — not by blood, but by fate.

He gave me a boyish grin. “Want me to kick his ass?”

I laughed and blinked away my tears, nodding. “Absolutely.”

Zeke watched us with a comforting grin and didn’t notice Luca bending down to grab the discarded loaf. He threw it at Zeke and knocked him on the shoulder. The beast of a man didn’t budge in the slightest, but his eyes slowly moved to Luca and narrowed.

One look between them had Jeanine standing, extending her palms toward them as she shook her head. “No. You’re both gigantic, and you’re not breaking any more furniture.”

My jaw dropped. “What did you break?!”

They dropped their eyes sheepishly as Jeanine answered, “They broke the table in John and Alice’s room. Apparently, Zeke thought it would be a good idea to bodyslam Luca, and then Luca kicked his feet out from underneath him. They both landed on the table, and it cracked.”

“You are grown men.”

They both snickered as we rolled our eyes. “You are not breaking anything in my castle, so you’ll need to find somewhere else to battle it out.”

“I thought you said *your* castle is *our* castle,” Zeke mocked.

I glared. “Would you like to sleep alone? There’s a room for you downstairs, far away from me.”

He returned my glare and was about to say something when Jeanine clicked her tongue. “Watch it. She may choose the better brother if you push her too hard.”

Luca started beating his chest while Zeke watched him in annoyance. “She’s marrying me tonight, so he doesn’t have much time to change her mind.”

Their mouths fell open as they stared at me. I shrugged, and Zeke reached for me, but Jeanine bounced over and wrapped her arms tightly around me to spin us around. Luca sat beside Zeke on the bed and nudged his knee, grinning.

“I would like you...” — I snaked my arms around Jeanine’s waist to stop the bouncing — “to be my maid of honor.”

She looked at me with the biggest smile, and I returned it, squeezing her as she pulled me into another hug.

“I guess that makes me best man,” Luca said.

Zeke nodded and punched his arm, causing me to roll my eyes. While Jeanine and I celebrated with affection, they responded by hitting each other. “Zeke will tell Alice and John after we eat, and it will only be the six of us. I don’t want to risk it getting back to Mira. We’ll have the captain marry us on the deck while everyone is asleep.”

Jeanine pulled me into a corner of the room and leaned over to whisper loudly in my ear, “He’s going to expect *that* after the wedding.”

I giggled as Zeke nodded his head.

“But you only have to do it once,” she continued.

“That’s a huge relief. Have you seen him?” I stuck out my tongue in disgust.

He shook his head with a goofy grin on his mouth while he chewed.

“He’s depraved.”

He winked at me with the full knowledge that he absolutely was.

“And I’m about to leave him.”

Stopped chewing. Stopped grinning.

“He can’t see me until the wedding, so I’ll be in your room.”

Jeanine grabbed my hand and tugged me to the door.

“Wait, I didn’t agree to this.” He stood quickly and grabbed my other hand.

Jeanine smacked his hand away. “It’s only a few hours. You can live without her.”

He shook his head, pouting. “I can’t.”

Luca hopped between us as he tried to grab me again. I tried not to laugh, but it escaped me anyway.

“At least let me kiss her.”

A simple request, but I knew better. I tried to warn them not to, but the second they moved out of the way, he grabbed me and lifted me. Carrying me to the far corner of the room, he cradled the back of my head and brought it down to his, colliding our lips together in a passionate kiss.

Jeanine and Luca sighed loudly.

“This will be the last time I ask you, Queen Raven.”

I wrinkled my nose. It felt strange to hear my partner call me that.

Sensing my discomfort, he chuckled before he kissed my nose. “Marry me? Be mine?” His eyes were endless pools of thunder and dark clouds and desire. I was in the arms of my entire future, and I didn’t want him ever to let me go.

And the love we shared was strong enough to overwhelm Jeanine as she linked her arm through Luca’s and watched us with silver-lined eyes.

And for the last time, my answer was full of complete honesty and not a single doubt. After swallowing the sob

rising, I nodded. “I’ve always been yours.”

Through the months of pain and heartbreak, the days of missing him, of never knowing if I’d see him again — I was getting the one wish I had wanted more than anything.

Him.



THE REST of my afternoon was spent on deck with Jeanine, laying down and letting the sun’s warmth wash over our bodies. Spring was putting winter to sleep, and I was anxious to see if any flowers had begun to bloom in Seolia. It had been almost three weeks since I left, and Keaton was already starting to grow the prettiest flowers I had ever seen.

And it would be bittersweet returning. I wouldn’t be able to spend days dragging Zeke through my village and introducing him to the home I loved. It would be straight back to work, missing him while he was gone training. “I want you to help him,” I said.

Jeanine rolled her head against the deck to look at me.

“If you want to, that is.” Freewill needed to stay a priority in my kingdom. If I forced others to do as I said, I would be no better than Mira. “He’s going to need help with Mira’s army under his control while also trying to train my soldiers who have never seen any battle or hardship.” I looked at her and shielded my eyes with my hand. “You’re strong. He trusts you, and he’s going to need someone there with him. I trust you.”

There was warmth in the way she looked at me. “Of course, I’ll help him, Raven. I am honored that you asked me.”

Reaching for her hand, she linked her fingers through mine. “You and Luca seem to be getting close. He’s cute.” And, of course, he was; he looked like my fiancé. “If I wasn’t engaged...” trailing off, I grinned at her.

Smiling as her cheeks reddened, she turned her head from me. “He is.” Her voice was soft like she didn’t want him to hear her, even though he was nowhere around us and had the

unfortunate task of keeping his brother away from me. “Wouldn’t that be weird, though?”

My eyebrow arched in curiosity.

“Because of... you know.”

When I realized what she meant, I snorted. “I think we’re way past weird. You’re my maid of honor and you, you know’d, with my fiancé.” I squeezed her hand. “I think, right now especially, the only thing that matters is finding happiness wherever we can.”

“And...” I continued, grinning. “You could compare notes. Tell me which one is better.”

She howled in laughter and shoved my shoulder. “You are just depraved as he is.”

I couldn’t even deny that.

“Maybe I’ll explore it. But I...” Her grin widened a little. “I’ve been with one person for so long that I might like to explore... multiple options.”

Giggling, I nodded. “I understand. I think Luca would, too.”

Mirroring my laugh, she said, “Maybe multiple options at once, and he could join.”

“And you say *I’m* depraved.”

“You can join, too.”

I snorted. “It wouldn’t be Morana that killed you. It would be Zeke.”

“He can watch.”

We burst into a fit of giggles all over again.

Warmth. Light. It was what we all deserved. The woman I was staring at, who I believed was my enemy for four months, was my sister. She was the one I needed to protect.

I would not allow Mira to keep us from experiencing any moments of joy we could conjure up for ourselves. I would not allow our pasts to prohibit our futures. Returning to Seolia

with each other would be a rebirth for our relationships, our friendships. We were coming back stronger than when we left.

When a shadow suddenly blocked our sunlight, it pulled me from my thoughts, and I tilted my chin up to see John standing over us. While sitting on our palms, he lowered to sit in front of us and held out a gold band. I looked at it as I extended my arm, inspecting it once he dropped it into my palm. “This is mine. It seems fitting for him to have it since you have Alice’s.”

I stared down at the ring in my palm, knowing how much it meant for him to give it to Zeke.

“You don’t have to tell him,” John continued with a frown. “He may not want it if he knows, but I want him to have it. He’s my oldest boy.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, sliding the ring on my finger for safekeeping.

“You’ve always been like a daughter to me, Raven, even though you had no idea. And I’m sorry we went about it the way we did — keeping your identity a secret for so long. You didn’t deserve that. Leonidas wanted it, and I promised him I would protect you, but we should’ve told you. I know that now.”

“Yes,” I agreed but gifted him with a warm smile. “But I am grateful for your loyalty and for keeping me on the throne against the ones who doubted.”

“I am honored to have you as part of my family.”

Those words hit me like a tidal wave.

Jeanine put her arm around my shoulders. “We all love you, Raven,” she said softly. “And we’re going to protect you.”

I’d spent many years trying to keep what was mine, always guilty for being so possessive over the people in my life, but now I had some who loved me as much as I loved them.

I had people who accepted me, promising to always stay by my side.

The answers I had been seeking — it was them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



RAVEN

Mirrors weren't included in these small rooms aboard, so I trusted that Jeanine was telling me the truth when she said I looked beautiful. We'd gone down to the cargo hold after our sunbathing to flip through the dresses from Reales to try and find one for the wedding. I'd tried on all the wildly loud ones, and the crazier they were, the more we laughed. But, sitting in the back of the lineup was a hidden gem.

I had learned from the dresses Mira made Alice craft for me that their style was like nothing I had ever seen, and the ones her partner made were the same. The one we chose had a dark-emerald velvet strapless bodice with a golden floral accent connected to the skirt, which was a masterpiece. It was a two-toned glittery tulle made of emerald green and ivory with multiple layers, so many in fact that Jeanine had to call on Alice to come downstairs to remove two of the inner layers so I would be able to walk in it.

With tearful eyes, she sat at my feet and hemmed the skirt with the box full of sewing kits that were sent with the dresses. And while doing so, she explained that while the dresses may seem loud and out of place for the gray dullness of Reales, it was once a place where grand balls and events were frequently held and that women had to join a waitlist to have a dress sewn for them.

And then she looked at me, face full of emotion, and told me that she never believed she would have a chance to create a wedding dress for a future daughter — that she never thought Zeke would ever entirely give himself to someone after what he had been through, but knew he was waiting for me. And that she believed that once he found me, it would all seem worth it to him.

She also informed me that when he spent the morning in her room, he told her just that; that everything he had gone through, all the pain and never knowing when the sun would rise again, was worth it just to look at me.

And through my tears, me waiting for Zeke to bust in and carry me to the deck himself, and Jeanine sitting me down once we had returned to her room so she could do my hair, I begged them to tell me something about him since he refused to.

It was Jeanine who gave in first. “I grew up around him and Luca, though I wasn’t close to either. Reales is large, but not so big that you don’t recognize everyone. They were known for their titles but spent most of their time raising hell in town.”

I smiled, unsurprised, especially about Zeke. “Luca doesn’t seem like a hell-raiser.”

Alice’s laugh was soft. “Luca is the gentlest of the two, but he’s always looked up to Zeke. They are only three years apart.”

Which led me to the question as I tried to turn my head to Jeanine. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” she answered, which surprised me. She seemed much older with the life she had already lived. “I was nineteen when I joined court.”

“Luca was never on court?”

Alice shook her head. “Life of royalty never appealed to Luca, and it wasn’t required of him. Instead, he would spend his days following his brother around until....” Alice trailed off, looking at Jeanine.

I could tell that they were both questioning how much they could tell me without upsetting Zeke.

“Please,” I whispered.

“Until Mira became queen and locked Luca and Alice away,” Jeanine finished in a sorrowful whisper. “Something in him snapped.”

Alice stood from where she had been sitting beside Jeanine and walked to the far wall, casting her eyes down to the ground. “Zeke became harder to control. He was still young when Mira became queen and wanted to live his life, not be in charge of hundreds of men.” Her eyes rose to meet mine. “A man, while responsible for providing for his family, should never be *forced* to carry the burden of a vengeful queen.”

Her tone of voice carried one of a protective mother, and even though Zeke was strong on his own, both in stature and personality, he was still someone’s son.

I swallowed, unable to respond to that type of fierce protectiveness — one that I had never been privy to for myself.

“He was twenty when Rudolf became ill and realized his time was running out before Mira sank her claws into him,” Alice continued. “The pressure was too much, and there would be days when we didn’t see him at all.”

I didn’t want to know what he spent his time doing. Or with whom he did it.

“When Mira started rising to power, she needed him,” Jeanine lamented. “When he refused to show up on time or at all, Mira moved two beds into that stone dungeon. And then she locked it.” She brushed her fingers through my hair. “When he found out, he threatened to kill her, but he couldn’t access them. She wouldn’t allow him to see them unless he performed his job perfectly, which was nearly impossible to achieve when your leader is someone like her.”

“Your marriage to him had always been planned, but Zeke didn’t know that, and she never told him, even after he found out he was going to Seolia,” Alice said.

“Why is Zeke so upset with John about all of this? Their relationship is so strained.”

“Zeke stopped agreeing to see John years ago,” Alice answered. “He blamed him for all of this. John is the one who told Mira of Zeke’s abilities, and he believes that if he hadn’t, none of this would have happened. But Mira would have found a way to you whether or not she had him. She would have killed him if not for his abilities. John was protecting all of us, but Zeke couldn’t see it that way.”

“Mira was always threatened by him,” Alice continued. “Even when they were children. Zeke is a born leader and loves Reales, even when he pretends he doesn’t. It killed him daily to be part of its downfall, but he had no other choice.”

“I’ve always believed part of the reason Mira locked them away is that she’s frightened of him,” Jeanine said. “He would kill her instantly, but I don’t believe he wants to be king now. I don’t believe he thinks he deserves it.”

He deserved everything. I wanted to give him everything.

“I was clueless about all of this until six months ago. I had been with Mira for over a year when she started talking about the lost princess. I had heard of you, but you were taken two years before I was born. You were more or less a tale to be told. Mira informed me that she wanted to know you, to bring you home, but that I needed to go to Seolia to tell your village of your magic. She said it was to protect you, and because I didn’t know you or particularly care that she had a family—” trailing off, she sighed.

I gently squeezed her ankle. “It’s okay. It doesn’t upset me.”

“I agreed to go. By that time, I had enjoyed the idea of being alone with Zeke. He was a decent distraction from the evil that was blossoming in Mira. I always found it strange that he suddenly had an interest in me, but I didn’t care. It got me away. And we were trying to stop the bleeding from our cut hearts.”

“But there was a gloom that encased him that I would never have been able to help,” she continued. “He never talked to me about anything other than Mira.”

“When she finally allowed him to see us after he returned to Reales, I showed him the memory of him meeting you the first time,” Alice said with a smile. “I knew he would see you in Seolia and realize what the two of you are to each other. He begged me to let him tell you what was happening, but I didn’t want to risk either of you.”

“He didn’t tell me about the memory,” I said softly, wondering if he could somehow show it to me.

“When Zeke met you, something in him changed,” Jeanine said. “That irresponsible, angry boy turned into a man. It was overnight; that growth. And when he left you, he was shattered. I didn’t realize it at first, but you had bewitched him. He would be gone all hours of the day and through the night to see you, watch you. It became an obsession, and he fell more in love with you every time he watched you interact with your villagers. I would go with him often toward the end, and I also fell in love with you.”

I smiled when she kissed the top of my head.

“You are the complete opposite of Mira, and I felt a need to protect you, along with him. John enlisted my help then, trusting that my intentions were pure. Even though you hated me.”

“Hate is a strong word,” I argued. “It was always jealousy. Have you seen yourself?”

She tugged my hair. “As soon as he saw you, that was it. You spent a matter of days together. All of it was unexpected, and it shook him. He devised a plan very quickly, wanting to spare you from the pain, but it made him sick. Mentally and physically. I tried to make him stop and tell you, but he wouldn’t. He was too fearful for his family.”

Of course, he was. I could never blame him for any of it anymore. And now we had found one another, freed his family, but we had a war to fight. Would it ever be easy?

She rested her hands on my shoulders. “What are you going to tell Cade when we return?”

I closed my eyes, sighing. “I don’t know. Do you think...” I opened my eyes and bit my lip. “Do you think I’m being selfish? Marrying him without telling Cade first?”

“No, Raven,” she answered bluntly. “You are your own person, but Cade has done an excellent job making you believe that you need his permission to do anything on your own. You deserve this. Zeke definitely deserves this.”

“He’s going to be so upset...”

Alice said, “Then maybe he’s not the person you thought he was. You do not need to respect his reactions if he cannot respect your decisions.”

I wish I’d had that advice months ago, but I nodded. “I will decide how and when to tell him.”

“Decisions we can make later,” Jeanine said, pulling on my hair. “Tonight is about your happiness.”

When her hands left my hair, mine rose to feel what she’d done with it. The wavy curls were gathered into a loose, oversized braid, with smaller pieces curling around my neck and shoulders. Alice had found floral embellishments in one of the sewing kits, which Jeanine intertwined into the braid. I hadn’t wanted a diadem and refused the offer for her to fetch one out of my trunk.

Tonight, I was just Raven. Not a queen, not a witch, not an orphan.

Just his Raven — the most crucial title I would ever hold.

Alice, brushing tears from her cheeks, smiled brightly at me. “You look lovely. Positively radiant.”

Laying my head back in Jeanine’s lap, I peered up at her while she stroked my forehead with her fingers. “Thank you for loving him when I couldn’t.” And I meant it. I would never have believed I could reach a point of trusting both of them, especially together, but they had a history together — just like

Cade and me. It wasn't in my right to try and take that away from them.

And when she kissed my forehead, she said softly, "Thank you for letting me. Because even in the darkness, Raven, he belonged to you."

"Just love him, Raven," Alice said before drawing a shaky breath. "That's all I want as his mother. Love his stubbornness, his sorrow, love him when he seems impossible to love because there will be times when you feel like he is."

Not loving him would be impossible. "I promise," I whispered.

As we all stood together, wrapping one another up in a tight embrace, I silently vowed always to cherish him — to love every piece he wanted to give me.

I would spend the rest of my days doing exactly that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



RAVEN

With Jeanine holding my hand as we walked up the stairs to the deck, I was jittery, and I didn't know why — I had never been more sure of anything in my entire life, and I had lived a life full of uncertainty.

It was dark, both inside and outside. Only the six of us and the captain were awake for the magic that was about to happen.

Barefoot, we took the stairs one by one, only the sound of my dress surrounding us as it swished and swayed.

So much happiness was waiting for me at the top of the stairs.

And when John appeared at the top, he took my hand as I paused on the last step. “Raven, I was wondering...” — his eyes watered as he looked at me — “I would be honored to walk you to him.”

I whimpered as I nodded, moving my hands to cover my face as my chest caved. Jeanine's arms wrapped around my waist while his arms wrapped around my body, holding me against them through my crying.

I never had the nerve to dream that this would happen to me — that I would ever have a mother or a father or someone to accept who I was and rule beside me.

In a matter of weeks, I had found it all.

“We love you, Raven,” John said through my tears. Through his own.

“I love you, too,” I rasped, accepting that I did. After months of doubting him, doubting his loyalty to me, he had shown that it was never him I should’ve been questioning. And he raised the man waiting for me on the other end of the deck — he had protected me, stayed by my side, watched me grow and become a queen. He lost his wife and sons but never wavered from his place at my side, keeping Seolia out of Mira’s grasp.

Jeanine kissed my cheek and let me go. “I’ll be there with him, waiting for you.”

I coughed out a tearful laugh of joy, of restlessness. And we waited for her to depart before he took my hand and rested it in the crook of his arm, pulling me up the last step.

The final step.

This was the beginning of our new chapter together. While always looking for where one ended, and another began, life tended to move so quickly that it was hard to catch something as the page flipped. I was wide awake and focused, wanting to live on this page with him. I wanted our story to be one of the fairy tales found in libraries. I wanted everyone to know how much we loved one another.

Because our story was infinite, it was endless, painful, and wonderful. It was a melody of rolling keys and could sometimes be so loud and thundering that logical thoughts couldn’t be heard over it, but that was where our passion lived. In the chaos, in the sounds that surrounded us. In the indecision and the memories, the snow-covered ground, the sun rays, the flowers that pushed through the dirt and rocks, only to bloom stronger and more beautiful than before. He inhabited and lived in every part of me, every thought, every decision; my days and nights consisted of him from now until eternity.

Ahead, Luca smiled widely at me, and through pure joy, I felt a pebble of sadness for the brother I had that wouldn’t experience this with me. But Luca’s pure wonderment and

charm washed it away until it was practically nothing because he was my brother. He would be there for me, tell me stories of his childhood with Zeke, and protect me the way a brother should.

And then... him.

Zeke was beside him; his back turned to me as he leaned over the ship's railing, his knuckles white from how tightly he held on while looking up and into the sky. And wearing all black, his long-sleeved shirt untucked from his fitted pants, his wild hair smoothed back, the muscles in his back straining against his shirt, his shoulder blades shifting as he moved to rest his forearms against the railing, he was made for the night, for the darkness.

Just four months ago, he was a stranger. I had no idea someone like him could exist. Now, he was here, and he wanted to be mine forever. He wanted to belong to me the way I belonged to him.

The stars shimmered above brightly for us, the moon illuminating the water that appeared black. It *was* us. We were the dark — the stars in one another's sky. We began in the night, and we would end just the same — leaving this lifetime to burst into another, forever burning for only each other.

And that was a significant promise that the universe had given us — that no matter how this life may end, I would always have him in the next one.

The breeze from the sea caressed him, mussing his hair. He lifted a hand to push it back again, his body shaking from a laugh because even my elements loved him, surrounded him, teased him.

I watched — amazed, entranced.

And then the breeze circled me, pushing me toward him. Impatient, these elements of mine.

And when I inhaled a deep breath and looked at John, he dipped his chin to me.

My first step toward my future widened Luca's bright smile. I tried to return it through the constant flow of tears

rolling down my cheeks. Jeanine wiped tears from her eyes as she watched me take light steps closer.

Two broken people were coming together after living a life of feeling nothing but loneliness from being ripped apart from one another. And we were all aware of that heaviness — of how lucky we were.

When Luca nudged Zeke and nodded toward me, he slowly straightened, slowly drew in a deep breath, and slowly turned to face me.

When our eyes locked, the same way they had that fateful night we met, everything stilled.

And just like then, it was just us.

He swallowed hard while watching me walk to him, never dropping his gaze from mine.

How are you mine? I wanted to shout because it was all too good. He was too good. Too beautiful to be only for me.

I felt selfish hoarding this man to myself, but he would never be something I had to share.

His intense stare finally dropped from mine to lower his eyes down my body and dragged even slower up, sweeping the tip of his tongue across his lips. I smiled at him, his desire, the love pouring out of him — his deep, deep well of love that I could drink from, and it would sustain me.

The gap between us closed, and John leaned over, kissing my cheek before holding my hand out to Zeke, which he grabbed quickly and pulled me to him. We both itched to kiss each other, but the captain cleared his throat as he came to stand in front of us, and I wondered if our desire for one another was loud enough for anyone to taste.

Zeke took one tiny step away from me with a sly grin, holding both of my hands in his.

As we recited vows to one another, Jeanine sniffled behind me, and when I glanced over at Luca, he had tears streaming down his cheeks. Zeke cleared his throat, and my gaze

traveled back to him, unprepared for the heavy emotion I was about to experience.

“Baby,” he began. “You make me so wildly unhinged.”

I shook my head slightly, fearful I wouldn’t survive this.

“My promises to you are simple, not only for you but for me. Because if there is one thing I’m certain about in my life, it’s these: I promise never to leave you, never to let you feel abandoned.” His voice quivered. “To be by your side every single day, listening to you ramble your thoughts aloud.”

Jeanine laughed softly behind me, and I rolled my eyes, smiling.

“I promise to love you with my entire being, every part of you, drowning you in it. To love your darkness, your fury, to never ask that you hide any part of who you are. To protect your heart. And to cherish you, Raven, to love you in this lifetime, and all others.”

The blurriness of my tears made it hard to see anything, but the captain looked at me next. Even pushing warmth to my skin did nothing to calm my shivering, but Zeke squeezed my hands to steady me.

“Zeke,” I began, my voice scratchy from the number of tears I’d already shed. “You are everything I already knew I needed but never dreamed I would find. And I learned to stop trusting promises and not to give any of my own out because nothing was ever certain.”

He nodded, wiping a tear from my cheek.

“Until you,” I whispered, kissing the palm of his hand. “Your promises are ones I know I can trust, and mine are ones I will keep. And if you let me, I will love you as much as you love me because this is what I can promise you: I promise to cherish you, always breathe for you when you feel like you can’t.”

He tilted his head back toward the sky as a single tear rolled down his cheek before he looked at me again.

“I promise to love every broken piece of you and to spend a lifetime putting you back together. To keep you safe, wrapping your heart with mine. I promise to beat for you, only you, every second of every day, never faltering, never skipping. To love you in this lifetime and all others.”

And as I grabbed his left hand and slid the ring on his finger, his eyes searched it before he slowly turned his head to John, who stared back at him. Years of hatred started to chip away at that one look shared between father and son.

When the captain told Zeke he could kiss me, he smiled and rested his gaze on my mouth. “Gladly,” he whispered and leaned down, cupping my face between his hands. “To you, my love.”

“To us,” I responded in a breathy whisper and lifted to the tips of my toes as our lips came together in a tender kiss.

Jeanine squealed as everyone else clapped. I threw my arms around his neck while his arms wrapped around my waist to lift and spin me around.

The captain officially declared us husband and wife.

And I had never heard anything sweeter.

The second he set me down, we were wrapped in a hug from everyone.

It was the happiest moment of my life. Nothing in our lifetimes together would ever top what I was feeling right here, in his arms and the arms of the people I loved.

The sound of a popping bottle had me clapping my hands together as Luca handed everyone a glass and poured from a bottle of my wine. A worthy cause.

“To Zeke and Raven Audovera,” Luca exclaimed, holding his glass up.

A family name. I had a family name. One that I could give our children someday.

We knocked glasses together before we took a sip, and then his lips were on mine again. More cheers surrounded us, which made me smile through our kiss.

When John came over and tapped on Zeke's arm, he kissed my nose before releasing me and embracing his father. Alice hugged me and kissed my cheek before they left us, disappearing below deck. Luca came next and hugged me tightly as Jeanine and Zeke embraced.

For once, there was no jealousy coming from me.

Luca and Jeanine switched, and she attacked my forehead and cheeks in kisses. I laughed and buried my face against her neck. "We will leave you two to your depravity," she whispered.

I winked at her as she stepped back and linked her arm through Luca's, tearing him away from his brother and leaving us alone for the first time as husband and wife.

And while I expected him to whisk me away and carry me downstairs, he grabbed my hand and smiled while pulling me over to the ship's railing.

Standing behind me as he faced me toward the open water, he pointed up into the sky at the mass of twinkling stars. "Light is easy to love, easier to trust and simplistic," he whispered against my hair. "But we fell in love under dark skies, and mine was pitch black before I met you."

He kissed my temple, moving his hand across the sky. "The night you came into my life, Raven, I started seeing the light. Slowly, the black lightened enough for something else to shine through."

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

"You, my love. You shot across my sky like a burning star, and I needed that fire because I felt so cold and lost without you — so hopeless and full of despair." He slowly turned me to face him and wiped the tears from my eyes. "Never underestimate the magic you hold; I am not speaking of your elements or ribbons."

He put his hand against my heart. "I am talking about this. You are magic; your very being, your soul, and as dreadful as you may believe it to be, you are a light, Raven. You are my light."

He then moved my hand to his heart, tears betraying him as they left his eyes. “You are this. You have put me back together and allowed me the ability again to wish, to believe. And I will spend every day, Raven, every night, giving you the same. Nothing about you will ever change that.”

My eyes closed as tears continued to fall, as his words released something in me that I hadn’t realized I was still carrying — fear. The fear of never being enough, of being too much.

Because even though I couldn’t taste the truth or lies as he could, I believed him. With every shattered piece of me, I believed every word he spoke. And all I could reply to those beautiful, marvelous words was truly the only thing he cared to hear: “I love you.”

Kissing me once, he picked me up, cradled me against his chest, and walked swiftly across the deck. I rested my hand against his cheek and turned his face to mine, pressing my lips to his. Stumbling down the dark stairs, I laughed as his teeth nipped my bottom lip and used my hand to guide us along the wall until we were at our door.

Grinning, he opened it and took a dramatic step across the threshold.

I smiled. He’d been so fearful that we would never reach this moment.

Tulle and all, he laid me down gently on the bed and crawled over me, propping his elbows on either side of my head and brushing a thumb across my cheek. “My wife,” he whispered. “My beautiful, enchanting wife. You are mine.”

“My husband,” I murmured, my voice breaking as I said it aloud for the first time.

His forehead dipped against mine as he kissed me gently. I tilted my head, wanting more. More of him, more of this. I worried it would never be enough, that I could never have enough.

But he always gave me what I wanted.

His tongue tangled with mine, and we stayed like this for a long time, locked in a deep and passionate kiss until he slowly rose and looked at me once more in my dress. “Every memory I make with you seems to end up being my favorite, but this one...” — his eyes settled on mine again — “Raven, I don’t think anything will ever match up to this one.”

“I need you,” I begged in a whisper.

He slowly bunched the tulle of my skirt in his hands and gently pulled it off me — the one piece of clothing I owned that he would never destroy.

He removed his shirt, and I unbuttoned his pants, watching as he rolled to the side to kick them off. And then he was back to me, his weight pressing me firmly into the mattress as I wrapped my legs around his waist. “My wife,” he repeated while slowly pushing into me.

Everything tingled. My spine, legs, and every inch of my body were awake.

My fingers twisted in his hair, and I returned his head to mine, not wanting an inch spared between us. His strokes were slow and savoring while my other hand ran down his back, tracing the lines of his muscles. I wanted to memorize every inch of him. I never wanted to forget how he felt.

This was safety. Comfort. Everything I had always tried to find, and it was right here, loving me. I was so overwhelmed with emotion that he could sense it as he broke our kiss to stare into my eyes. “I’m just so in love with you,” I breathed through a cry.

He nodded because he felt everything I did. I would never have to doubt him because our hearts beat as one.

“You are my perfect world. You are my perfect everything.”

He touched his nose to mine.

“My husband.” More than a husband. More than anything words could convey.

He planted soft kisses against my throat. “I am going to do something that I’ve been craving.” He nipped across my collarbone. “I don’t understand. I don’t know if I ever will, but I have an overwhelming urge to do this.”

“I trust you,” I whispered.

“You’re mine,” he said as if the declaration needed to be spoken out loud. And then he paused his thrusts, staying buried deep. His tongue skated across his bottom lip as he grabbed my chin and slowly turned my head until my cheek was pressed against the pillow.

Slowly, he lowered his mouth to my neck. And slowly, his lips danced until they landed on the spot where he’d bitten me before, right between my shoulder and throat.

“I don’t know why,” — he whispered against my skin, licking over the spot — “why I need this so bad.”

It was gentle at first, his teeth sinking into my skin. He’d bitten me many times before, and each time had been more intense. Each bite had gone a little deeper; he’d drank a little more each time. Each time, I’d healed because his bite hadn’t been deep enough. But as his teeth sank lower, it became more desperate. And as I felt flesh split, my fingers dug into his arms as I cried out from a mixture of pain and pleasure, as my pulse beat wildly from the intrusion.

He didn’t stop, his tongue moving over the torn skin as he sucked the blood out, groaning so loudly, it was like I could see his ecstasy and pleasure.

And then something unexplainable happened.

Every molecule in my body merged with his. Our breaths connected, and our hearts raged in their skeletal cages. We were making a mark as a permanent force, forever bound. No one could have me without him. I felt wholly connected to him, and as his fingers dug into my hips, I knew he felt it, too.

I was light-headed, but he continued to suck, his cock throbbing inside me. He drank like he’d been thirsty for me for centuries.

When he stopped sucking, he kept his tongue pressed flat against it to slow the bleeding. I blinked rapidly to clear the colors from my eyes that appeared more like flashes of something.

Trees, mountains, gone as quick as they came.

“I don’t understand,” he said again, licking my blood from his lips as he rose to admire the bite. He released his hold on my chin, licking across it again like he wanted more.

I didn’t either, but we had both felt the binding, whatever it meant, unsure of how it was possible.

“Love me,” I whispered, every one of my limbs still wrapped around him. “Don’t try to understand it right now. Just love me.”

His gaze tore away from the bite and moved back to mine as he resumed thrusts into me. “Always,” he swore. “Raven, I am always going to love you.”

He kissed along my jaw and took his time with me, exploring all the places he had already been many times but now as my husband — as my true partner.

When I whimpered, he caught the sound with his mouth and kissed me, and that was all it took for me to moan through our kiss and come together as one.

This — this was our love. This was what kept life thrumming through our veins.

This would be how we survived what we were about to face.

He stayed inside of me while he rested his cheek against my heart. “I love you,” he repeatedly said. “This feels like a dream.”

I couldn’t help but laugh ironically at his words. “You would know if it was. Try and scatter it.”

He lifted his head, a sated grin on his mouth, and I smiled at how boyish he looked. “I don’t want to.”

“Because you can’t.”

His eyes closed briefly before he looked at me again. “It’s real.”

I giggled. “I can’t believe you tried.”

“Because there’s no way you’d love me like this.”

I frowned. “Baby, I’m real. I’m right here.”

“Forever?”

I shrugged. “Until you’re old and unattractive.”

His mouth fell open, and he pinched my sides, causing me to yelp and shove his hands off. “I only married you for your looks. Did I not tell you that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop.”

I scoffed. “Don’t give me that. You know you’re sexy. You *use* it.”

A slight grin lifted on the corner of his mouth. “I use it?”

“Yes, you use it. You charm people with it. When you do that thing with your sleeves....”

He started to laugh. “That thing with my sleeves?”

I shoved his shoulder. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

His cheeks reddened, and he buried his face against my neck.

“I knew it. You know what you do to people.”

“Only you now.”

“Just because you’re married to me doesn’t mean others still won’t melt when they see you coming.”

His body was shaking in silent amusement, and I shoved at him again. He lifted his head again with an embarrassed grin. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you noticed that.”

“Of course, I noticed that. Why do you think I fucked you? That and your hair.”

He smoothed his hair back while his grin turned smug. “This hair?”

“I hate you,” I groaned, shoving his face away from me. “You’re too beautiful. I’m going to annul our marriage.”

He gasped. “Take that back.”

“I have all the power, baby.”

He pouted, puckering out his bottom lip. I pinched it between my fingers and shook my head. “I’ll keep you for the sex, I suppose.”

“Let me get this straight: you married me for sleeves, my hair, and the sex?”

I counted on my fingers as he named them off and nodded. “That’s correct.”

He raised his hips against me again, and I sighed softly. “Well, Raven Audovera, I better give you what you came for then.”

And he did — over and over until the sun broke over the horizon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



RAVEN

The day was torture.

If I wasn't bouncing off the walls with nervous energy, I was running around the ship to ensure everyone was up to date on what had happened. They were, of course, because most of them had witnessed it, and I was sure there wasn't a person around for miles who hadn't heard my screams when Zeke was stabbed.

I checked all of our things and our family's trunks to ensure nothing would be left on the ship. It would stay in our harbor, but I didn't know what else to fill my time with.

Zeke had given up on following me because I was running off again as he thought I was about to settle. Some first day of marriage this was turning out to be.

I had to be prepared. My villagers would be frightened when they saw us docking with two larger ships full of soldiers. John and I had an impromptu meeting and decided that the land behind our farthest mountain would be the best place for Mira's soldiers to train and sleep. I didn't have roofs to put them under or any supplies for housing the abundance of bodies.

We also agreed that we would allow our people to join our ranks. I would never force them to do anything, despite Mira's threats. I was still a queen with beliefs of free will, and the

threat of demise — or being drowned — from that would be a cause worth dying for.

We would give our current soldiers a chance to exit, which weren't many, but they needed a choice, too. We started with Godfrey, who simply laughed as he walked away. We took that as his refusal to leave us stranded, and since our soldiers respected him, we had a feeling they wouldn't leave either.

Whoever decided to join would train with Mira's army daily under Zeke's control. That was a bright spot in all of this — her soldiers still had to follow his lead, and as long as his lead fell under Mira's orders, they couldn't touch us.

And in a little over a week, we had to be in Thoya to see Mira again for our engagement tour.

And between then, I had to inform Cade of all of this and hope his reaction would be calm, or else Zeke would toss every responsibility to the side and channel his aggression on Cade, which I had a feeling was something he hoped happened.

As the evening began to awaken, I paced the deck while Zeke, Jeanine, and Luca tracked me.

Jeanine asked Zeke, "Can't you calm her down?"

"Would you want to try and calm death?"

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"She has death ribbons that come out of her fingers. I am not testing that right now."

I didn't want these blasted ribbons.

"She needs a scythe," he mumbled.

At that, I walked to him and shoved his shoulder. "Would you like to keep going?"

"You're just a little wound up."

I shoved at his chest.

He grinned at my frustration. "Get it all out, witch. You know I love it."

I let out an irritated growl, and he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to him. I rested my forehead against his chest while he brushed his fingers through my hair to soothe me. “It’s all going to be okay, Raven.”

I was responsible for an entire kingdom, and none of this was okay.

“Stop disagreeing with me.”

At that moment, I hated that he sensed everything I felt.

“Aw, there’s that hatred. So nice to feel that, thank you.” I started to laugh in his arms, and he tilted my chin up, kissing the tip of my nose. “I love you. You can hate me.”

“I don’t hate you. I hate this.”

His arms dropped from around me, and he grabbed my hand, pulling me to the side of the ship and nodding toward the water. “Light it up.”

I shook my head, but he nodded. “Light it up, Raven. Get out your frustration. Feel it.”

I sighed and shifted into Blaze, holding out my hands as I lit them with flames. Curling my fingers over my fire, I hurled my arm over the side and watched as balls of fire hit the water below us.

“Whoa,” Luca said, bending over the ship’s side as he watched the flames sink in the water.

“Ice it.”

I shifted into myself to wield both and created the balls of flame again, shooting ice to encase them as I shot them over the water. Pushing out a gust of wind, they twisted higher in the air, colliding together before they fell into the water.

I was smiling as I spun the balls up so high that we couldn’t see them anymore, and it became a game to see who could find them first as they dropped.

Zeke was smiling at me when I looked at him. “Thank you,” I whispered, pushing up on my toes to kiss his cheek.

He kissed my forehead in response.

“Raven, Zeke, Luca, Jeanine.”

We all turned to John, who was beckoning us to follow him. I shrugged as they all looked at me. “I don’t know,” I said, following John down the stairs and to a small gathering room with one single table in the middle.

On top of the table were five separate pieces of parchment, and the four of us lined up along the table as he stood on the opposite side. “These are official documents stating that Zeke, Jeanine, and Luca are switching their allegiance from Queen Mira to Queen Raven.” He looked at Zeke. “I must caution you that you are risking your title as Prince of Reales by signing this. Mira could contest Rudolf’s will.”

I shook my head. “No. He can’t do that. Reales needs to go to someone like Zeke. It can’t be left to River while he’s on her side.”

“Raven,” Zeke said, grabbing the quill. “My allegiance is to you.”

I grabbed his wrist to prevent him from signing. “I know it is. I know you are loyal to me, but I am beseeching you not to sign this. When I kill Mira, Reales has to fall to you. It cannot fall into my brother’s hands, and I will not take that throne.”

John motioned with his hand to clear the room. Jeanine grabbed Luca and pulled him out of the room, with John closing the door behind them.

“Raven, I want to rule beside you, not away from you. Not in a kingdom days away from Seolia.”

“I understand that, and that is something we can discuss when that day comes, but you will not risk your crown for me.” I rested my palm against his chest. “I need your title. Reales needs your title. Our children need your title.”

Zeke took a step away and shook his head. “Do you realize what you are asking of me? You ask me to keep my allegiance to Mira, Reales, and not my wife. Not to the place where we will raise our children.”

“I am simply asking you to consider what this could mean if Reales falls to River. He is under the assumption that I am

his enemy. When I kill Mira, we will still be fighting against him. Not only that, but he could decide to drown Seolia.”

“She has declared treason on me. She could have me killed the second I set foot in Reales again. If I pledge allegiance to you, you can dispel that. All charges against me will drop.”

“She will not touch you as long as she needs me.”

He growled and slammed his fist on the table. “My allegiance is to my *wife*.”

“And I *know* that,” I repeated. “No piece of parchment will prove that more than your love for me.”

He paced the table length, staring down at the piece of parchment he desperately wanted to sign. I watched him, fully aware of what I was asking him to do. His loyalty to me was not something he wanted to compromise, but declaring himself to Seolia would risk his entire future, and that wasn’t something that *I* was willing to compromise.

“Zeke,” I said, but he wouldn’t stop. “Zeke, please. Please understand.”

“No, Raven. I will not understand. My title means nothing compared to you.”

I sighed and went to the door, opening it and calling for John to come in. I waited until he was inside with the door shut before speaking. “I need him to understand why it’s important that he not sign that. I need him to realize what he’s risking by doing so.”

John looked at Zeke, his eyes moving with him as he now paced the length of the room. “Son, you are the prince of the largest kingdom in our realm and currently second in line to take the throne should Mira fall.”

“I know that,” he snapped, pushing his sleeves up to his elbows. “I know all of that, but you are asking me to stay under the rule of a queen who locked away my family, nearly killed me, almost killed my wife, who hid that Raven had a twin brother from us.”

“That is not what we are asking you,” John explained. “We ask that you keep your title for when she falls and keep River off the throne. When she falls, we will discuss options then. No one is asking that you leave Raven or return to Reales without her. You will still be involved in decisions regarding Seolia and regarding your heirs. Nothing about your allegiance to Raven or Seolia changes; we simply ask that you not force me to disclose that to Mira.”

“Don’t disclose any of it!” Zeke shouted. “Fuck the rules, the laws. Mira doesn’t deserve a goddamn thing and certainly does not deserve the respect of knowing who our allegiance is pledged to.”

“I can’t do that,” John argued, raising his voice. “It puts Raven at risk, Seolia at risk.”

“Zeke, we will have two kingdoms under our rule when she dies,” I said. “We won’t ever have to face anything like this again with both of us as leaders.”

He stopped pacing and stared at me, his chest moving quickly at the rapid intake of his breaths. “I need it on paper that I will not ever be forced to go to Reales and be without you — that me not signing this will ever result in us being apart.”

Unexpected tears sprung to my eyes. “How could you ever believe I would force that upon you?”

“You are forcing *this* upon me now.”

My eyes fell to the parchment, realizing that he was entirely correct. I licked my lips before chewing on the inside of my cheek. “I apologize,” I whispered, lifting my gaze. “You are right, and I will not take that choice away from you.” I took a step away from the table. “I will support your decision.”

John followed my lead and took a step back, standing beside me as Zeke looked between us and then to the parchment, waiting for his signature. And then he turned to face the wall with his hands loosely on his hips, quiet for a long moment.

I wasn't staring at my husband when he turned to face us again. I was looking into the eyes of a leader. "I will keep my allegiance to Reales on paper, but I want a will drawn up immediately that if and when I become king of that godforsaken kingdom, any children we bear will be heirs and have the freedom to resign when they please." He took the parchment and ripped it into two. "They will not have their choices torn from them like they were from me."

"I will prepare a will when we return to Seolia and have it ready for you to sign tomorrow," John said quietly, pushing another piece of parchment forward. "Your marriage declaration."

Zeke took one look at it and signed before throwing the quill down on the table, not sparing me a glance as he left the room. I wiped away a tear that fell from my eye as Jeanine and Luca shuffled back inside and silently signed their allegiance to me. John rubbed my back while I signed their declarations and my name next to Zeke's.

"He will understand," Luca said softly, grabbing my hand.

I nodded, chewing on the inside of my lip. I could only hope that was true, but I couldn't help feeling like I had broken his heart by asking him not to give me his allegiance in every way, even when it came at risk. But the gamble didn't matter to him when it came to me. He would risk everything to give me his devotion.

Squeezing Luca's hand, I nodded. "I need to go find him. I am honored to have you both as civilians of Seolia. Thank you for your allegiance to me and our kingdom."

After hugging each of them and exchanging a look of understanding with John, I bypassed our room, descended another staircase, and opened the door to the cargo hold.

He was sitting on one of the trunks and staring at the rack of his clothing made of greens and blacks, not even looking up when I shut the door behind me.

"I didn't want to be the prince," he said after moments of silence. "I asked Rudolf not to make me the prince. The title

doesn't rightfully belong to me. It belongs to Luca, but he wasn't put in the will." He twisted his hands in front of him as he stared so hard at his clothing that he could've set it on fire if I had given him mine. "I contributed to its demise. The people believe me to be a traitor. And it's fucked up, Raven." He dropped his head then. "It's fucked up that I felt relieved when I realized who River was."

I frowned but understood. Though, that didn't make it any easier to digest.

"I thought, for only a second, that maybe it was over for me. Maybe I wouldn't have the weight of that responsibility any longer, that I could be free of that kingdom. Those memories." He stood and walked to his clothing, grabbing the sleeve of a garment I had never seen him wear, one that was much nicer than he could have worn during training or hunting, and I realized it was from when Reales was a better place to be. "But I will never be free of the things I've done. I will always carry it with me."

"Zeke," I whispered, taking a step toward him. "You are not that man anymore. You have a chance to start anew in Seolia and be the leader you want to be. Be the man you want to be."

He dropped the clothing and gave his head the slightest shake. "I will always be that man, Raven. I will always be the man who betrayed my kingdom. And now, I can't even give my wife my loyalty."

"I have your loyalty." I grabbed his hand and brought it to my lips, kissing his fingers. "I love you for who you are and what you've overcome." My hand rose to dust across his cheek. "I want the man behind the mask you wear, but you won't allow me to scatter your shadows."

Finally, he looked at me, but his eyes were hollow. Sunken. "Those shadows are not able to be scattered, I'm afraid. They will always find their way back to me." He kissed my forehead. "Come. We'll be docking soon."

When he moved to take a step away, I caught his hand. "You're not supposed to walk away."

His tongue swept across his lips as he stared at the door for a second before he dipped his head to rest his forehead against mine. “My love for you could move oceans, little demon. Never doubt that.”

“Not once,” I promised. “Not once will I ever doubt your love for me.” Dragging a hand down his chest, I hooked a finger in his waistband. “Love me now. The way you want to. I need to feel your heart thundering with mine.”

And as he kissed me, and lowered me to the ground underneath him, our bodies connected, and heartbeats raged.

I prayed to whatever gods were left that one day this stranger I was hopelessly in love with would let me all the way in.

CHAPTER THIRTY



RAVEN

Once we entered the harbor, everyone but us dispersed to wait at the ramp. Zeke wrapped me up so tight that I thought I might stop breathing. I groaned from the pressure, and he grinned, kissing my cheeks and forehead. “Feel this. All the time. I want you overwhelmed by the amount of love I’m projecting onto you daily.”

I was melting, and the lack of oxygen didn’t seem so bad anymore. “Why are you so fucking cute?”

A smug grin. “It’s the hair.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved at him, but he lifted me and kissed along my jawline. “Baby, I love you. You can do this. It’s going to be hard. I won’t try and sugarcoat that, but you will prevail.”

“*We* will prevail,” I said. “I won’t do this without you.”

“I will be around that mountain every day and loving you every night.”

“Love me every minute.”

“Every second.” He kissed me then, and I wished we could stay like this. I didn’t want to face what I was about to, but I had to. I needed to be the queen my people deserved. But his lips felt soft and welcoming, and we could stay here. We could leave again, hide in the corner of the world where no one

could ever hurt us again. “Stay with me,” he said, drawing me back out. “Don’t lose yourself in there.”

“The only place I want to lose myself is in you.” I gave him a small smile as his fingers brushed across the mark on my neck that had healed but left behind a tiny scar in the shape of his bite. “Kiss me again. Kiss me, and don’t ever stop.”

He slid me down his body and backed me until I was against the ship’s side. Cradling my face in his hands with concern behind his eyes at the panic he felt rising in me, he kissed me softly. And then desperately, like maybe this kiss could save everything. Reverse time. Fling us into another reality.

And he kissed me through Jeanine yelling at us that we’ve docked, through my crew disappearing below deck to start unloading, until my skin was raw from his. But when we heard the groan from the ships carrying Mira’s soldiers as they skidded along the farthest docks, he sighed and rose to turn his head toward the noise. “Cursed,” he lamented, looking at me again. “We must be cursed.”

I mirrored his frown and brushed my thumb across his lips. “We’ll break it. Somehow, we will find a way to end all of this.”

Wordlessly, we walked hand-in-hand down the ramp. I looked around but only saw our family waiting for me at the end of the dock. He would wait for Mira’s ships to unload to bring the soldiers around the mountain while I helped our family settle in the castle before meeting him again with Jeanine.

“Just weeks ago, you hated me.” His smile was sorrowful as he pulled me along the dock until we stood in the place where I had boarded his ship weeks ago, unsure of our future and unaware of how deep his love was for me. “We got through that, Raven.” He threaded his fingers through my other hand and stood facing me. “And you’re right: we will find a way through this because we always do.”

“Close your eyes,” he demanded softly, and I did. “You are the Queen of Seolia, the rightful heir to the throne. You are the

daughter of King Leonidas and the granddaughter of the kings who came before you.” Chills rose on my skin as his hoarse tone carried the confidence we both needed. “And you are capable of changing the world, Raven.”

As my eyes fluttered open, I couldn't help but smile at the desirous look on his face. “I love you. I am grateful to the fates for giving you to me.”

He leaned in and kissed me tenderly, resting his hands against my cheeks. And when he pulled away, I chased him and held him there for another moment. Or two, because when I walked away, all of this would be real.

When he pulled back again, he nipped at my nose to prevent me from grabbing him again. “I have to let you go, or I won't be able to.”

I pouted but nodded. “I'm going to go be queen now.”

He nodded and released me, watching as I took a step back. He remained still, sliding his hands into his pockets to keep from reaching for me, and flashed his charming smile.

“Miss me yet?” I teased, turning on my heel and walking back down the dock. I couldn't resist glancing back at him; he stared after me, his gaze traveling down to my hips as he watched me walk away. I bit my lip in a small smile. All the confidence he continuously pushed through me daily would make me the most arrogant woman in the world.

Jeanine held out her hand and linked our fingers together. I gave her one last timid look, and she winked at me, nodding toward the village. I drew in a deep breath and took my first step.

Luca, Alice, and John followed behind us over the grassy knoll. As the roofs of the shops and cottages came into view, my breathing became jagged, and a nightmare-like state came over me.

I could do this. I could keep them safe.

My knees nearly buckled as we approached the cobblestone road; everything inside me felt heavy. Luca came to my other side and wrapped his arm around my waist to keep

me standing. I was inhaling but not exhaling fast enough, which caused me to become dizzy.

This had to be a nightmare. This couldn't really be happening. I couldn't truly have a twin hellbent on drowning my island if I disobeyed Mira's orders. I couldn't be spending my first months of marriage preparing for a war I didn't want to fight.

My mouth was dry, and my stuttering breaths were doing nothing to help it.

The town was empty and dark, and I imagined the worst. It was like I could see our future after we'd lost a war and everyone had either died or moved on. The quaint cottages and shops would be rubble on the ground. Empty howls of the wind would replace the loud laughter of my people.

"Someone is coming," Luca said.

And while I had expected it to be Cade, a much smaller form was charging at me. "Let me go."

Luca and Jeanine released me, and I fell to my knees just in time to catch Eva. I wrapped my arms around her tiny frame and buried my head into her mess of blonde hair, inhaling the smells of home. "I missed you," I rasped. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"She saw your sails from her window," Theodore explained as he caught up to her. "I didn't know she was still awake, but she came hurtling downstairs and said she promised to greet you."

The concern was written across my face when I nodded at him. He matched it with an expression of his own, his eyebrows drawing in. "What is it?"

I lifted Eva in my arms and stood, closing the remaining distance between Theodore and me. "Nothing good." I dipped my chin toward Eva in my arms. "I can't talk about it right now."

"Does it have to do with that?" He motioned behind me with the tip of his chin.

Sighing, I turned my head just enough to see Mira's men walking over the grassy hill led by my husband. He noticed us standing in the road and gave me a sad smile, and I missed him even then. One full day of marriage, and he had already been taken away from me.

And even though he had a job to do, even though he was supposed to lead men around the mountainside, he shouted for them to halt and jogged over to us.

Running a hand down my hair, he extended his other to Theodore. "Zeke," he said, and though his grin was kind, he was clearly making his presence known.

I resisted rolling my eyes but also felt girlishly giddy about his obsession with me.

"Theodore," Theodore responded, giving his hand a shake. "This is my little girl, Eva." He nodded toward Eva in my arms.

"Raven has spoken of Eva frequently." Zeke ducked a couple of inches to grab Eva's gaze. "She said you're her best friend. Is that true?"

Eva perked up, nodding excitedly. "She's my butterfly and has purple hair and gold eyes and dances with me and...."

"She could go on all night," Theodore said with a chuckle.

Zeke pretended to be shocked. "Purple hair? I dreamt of a girl with purple hair once. Do you think it could've been her?"

My heart warmed while watching his interaction with her. I had never seen him with children before.

Eva's gasp was tiny and adorable, her eyes widening as she looked at me. "Maybe..."

I mirrored the shape of her mouth, my lips parting in equal surprise. "Maybe if you return home and sleep, she'll appear in your dreams, too."

Eva excitedly reached for Theodore. "I have to go to sleep!" she shouted at him, causing all of us to laugh as he took her from my arms.

I brushed my fingers through her blonde hair. “Sleep, little love. I’ll have gifts for you tomorrow.”

As Theodore left to take her home, Zeke kissed my temple, and I looked at him, possibly falling more in love with him than I had been just moments ago. “Thank you.” For keeping me from collapsing, from crying to the five-year-old girl about how her life was about to change drastically.

He truly was my other half.

He winked at me. “See you soon, butterfly.”

John patted my arm before he and Luca jogged with Zeke back to the army. It would take at least an hour to lead them around the mountainside.

Jeanine tugged my hand. “Let’s get Alice to the castle.”



I LED Alice to John’s chambers. She looked exhausted; it would be her first time sleeping in an actual bed after nearly two years. “I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” I said, rubbing her back. “You go rest. There will be a big breakfast in the morning, and you’re free to go wherever you wish. Seolia is your home now.”

She pulled me into a tight embrace and kissed my cheek. “Thank you for everything, dear girl.”

I shook my head upon releasing her. “Please never thank me for anything. If anything, I should be thanking you for giving me him.”

Placing her hand on my cheek, she gave me a warm smile. “Go to him. He’s going to need you.”

I nodded, and she dropped her hand from my cheek, disappearing into John’s chambers and closing the door behind her. Out of all of us, she deserved a restful night’s sleep, knowing she was safe now.

Turning, I rested against the wall and blew out a deep breath. Jeanine did the same and grabbed my hand. The night

hadn't even started yet, and we were both already over it.

“Do you want to wake Cade?”

I looked down the hall, though we were on the complete opposite side of the castle from his chambers, and shook my head. “I don't believe bringing him around the mountainside to an army is the best way to inform him that I've gotten us into a large mess. I need to tell him separately and without Zeke over my shoulder.” I laughed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Fuck, Jeanine. How am I going to handle the two of them together? They can't stand to be near one another, and Cade is my adviser. I have to be with him every day, and Zeke won't be able to stand it.”

“No, he won't,” she replied. Lying to me to spare my feelings would be pointless. “I feel I'll be babysitting him on top of the men from the army. But he will understand. And you realize he won't be able to stand it not because of jealousy but fear?”

I looked at her with a furrowed brow.

“He isn't envious of Cade, Raven. He knows you don't want him. He's known that since he left you. He fears Cade will harm you, especially once he finds out that you've chosen Zeke.”

I was about to deny all claims that Cade would ever hurt me but realized I would be lying. Because Cade had harmed me and I couldn't say with complete confidence that he wouldn't try it again if his anger got the best of him. “I burned him last time he tried to touch me. I won't hesitate to do it again if he gets out of control, but with Zeke with me, I highly doubt he will try anything.”

“For the sake of his life, I hope you're right.”



WE APPROACHED the training yard an hour later. Yard wasn't the correct way to describe it. It was land situated behind mountains. I had explored the entire island but didn't come out

here often. The mountains were gorgeous — there was one large one in the center, nestled between two smaller ones, a rocky valley stretching out between them. We had considered building cottages there at one point, but I feared rocks falling down the mountainside and pummeling roofs.

The men were located behind the mountains on large, patchy land. Small trees were placed sporadically, which provided them with little cover. Next to their pathetic excuse for a workspace was a grassy hill that led to an even smaller patch of land. The water's waves took up most of that area and created nothing but muddy grass. But, it was the only place I could put them. There were too many trees in the forest, which was sacred ground. The rest of our island was scattered with cottages and shoppes or land reserved for more of the former, which was not something I was willing to sacrifice.

As we circled the smaller mountain, Zeke's shouts echoed off the rocks as he yelled at the men who didn't seem to be listening. Brawls were breaking out, and I groaned, a headache already forming. I couldn't deal with this — this was never going to work on our peaceful island.

Jeanine asked Zeke, "What's going on?"

His face was hardened when he looked at us, running a hand through his hair, his soft demeanor from earlier replaced by irritation. "They won't fucking listen is what's going on. It's because we're in a new place. They're going to test their boundaries, and it's like I have to fucking train them all over again." He looked me up and down. "And why do you look so fucking good?"

I glanced down at my clothes, tugging on my loose shirt. I hadn't changed since he saw me last. "What are you talking about, you buffoon?"

His gaze settled on the scarred bite on my neck, his tongue running across his lips. I shook my head, and his eyes snapped to mine, narrowing. I didn't understand his sudden need to drink from me all the time, but whenever we were apart, he seemed absolutely starved for it when we reunited.

“He’s just irritated,” Jeanine said. “It’s making his protective instincts kick in.”

He pulled me to him and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, muttering curse words under his breath. Luca was a few paces away, his feet planted and hands clasped behind his back. I wrinkled my nose as I looked at him. “What is Luca doing?”

Zeke sighed. “He wants to join.”

“But he doesn’t want this life.”

“He wants *this* life.” He nodded back toward the mainland. “He wants to fight for it.” And then he looked back at me. “Where’s Cade?”

“I didn’t want to wake him yet. I’ll do it when I return to the castle.”

“Do you want to wait until I can be with you?”

I shook my head and double-checked my emotions to make sure I had no form of fear in me to prevent any further concern from him. “No, I can handle it. It will be better this way.”

He looked like he wanted to argue but seemed to have stopped himself and instead kissed me. But when another fight broke out, he growled through our kiss and released me, shouting again as he walked to the men to pull them apart.

John came to stand next to me and nodded once, signaling me to take charge. What the hell was I supposed to do about this? But Zeke needed me.

Sighing, I willed my fire forward, putting my palms out toward the group. I threw two balls of fire against the ground and used a gust of wind to fan the flames into straight lines.

That seemed to grab the attention of some men as they stopped brawling and tried to find the source of the fire. I waved my hands around, moving their attention to me and creating another line of fire. Slowly, they started to gather in a circle around me. Zeke watched me as I snapped my fingers

and extinguished the flames, murmurs of awe circling through the group.

“I need all of you to listen to me,” I shouted. I had so many eyes on me that I couldn’t meet all of them. “You’re in my kingdom now, and I don’t allow this bullshit. You’ve heard the rumors of how we handle crime in Seolia, and it’s not tolerated here.”

Zeke came to stand in the circle, his arms crossing over his chest as he studied me. I knew he loved me, but damn. He was intimidating when he stood tall as a commander.

“You will listen to your commander, or you will have to deal with me.”

“What the fuck are you going to do about it?” someone shouted from the crowd.

Men around me laughed, and I rolled my eyes, scanning over their heads. “Come here and find out,” I challenged.

One of the burliest men I had ever seen made his way through the crowd with a smug smirk on his face. I took a page from Zeke’s book and kept a bored expression on mine. “What’s your name?”

“Whatever you need it to be.” His cocky grin was disgusting as he drew out more laughs.

I started a slow circle around him while looking at the faces of the men who were already annoying the fuck out of me. “We all know what Zeke can do. It’s why most of you cowards are here.” Low growls and grumbles came from the men. “He can shred your minds. Learn what means the most to you and destroy it, and I am more than happy to help him do it.” I lit my palms again and drew a circle of fire around me and the burly man. “As charming as I may seem on the outside, I am a witch and love bringing men to their knees.”

A slight grin appeared on Zeke’s mouth.

I snapped my fingers, extinguishing my fire. But when a hand slapped my ass, I stopped moving and slowly turned to the man in the middle of my circle. There always had to be one that didn’t listen.

Zeke made his way toward me, but I held a palm up to him. "I've got it, baby."

He halted but cursed, his chest rising and falling quickly. He wanted to kill him, but I wasn't finished quite yet. Instead, I stood before him and exhaled an annoyed breath from my nose. "Did I say you could touch me?"

"I can do whatever fuck I want to. I don't need your permission." He stepped forward and grabbed my chin between his fingers.

I remained still, except for the palm I held out again toward Zeke.

"Raven," he growled in warning.

"Give me a second, my love." Wrapping my fingers around the man's wrist, I began to burn through his skin and smiled as he cried out from the pain.

He yanked it from my grasp and backhanded me across the face. Zeke and Luca started to enclose him at that, but Jeanine got to him first. Before she could touch him, Luca caught her and dragged her back while she hurled out a line of curse words and insults.

Zeke came to stand beside me, pushing me a step behind him.

"Control your bitches," the man said.

Zeke chuckled and glanced back at me, anger shrouded in his features at the blood dripping from my lip. Rolling his neck, he slowly turned back to the man, and before I could blink, his fist was flying. I winced as bone cracked, watching as the man stumbled back a few steps. Pinching the bridge of his nose as blood gushed from his nostrils, he zeroed in on my husband.

Without realizing what was happening, I shifted quickly into Morana. The black magic moved up my body, spreading through my belly and arm until I felt ribbons wrap around the bones in my fingers. He stopped moving when he saw my form change, my green irises morphing into black. Gasps from

the crowd caused me to grin as I extended my fingers toward the jackass.

Never dropping my eyes from his, the ribbons stretched out from my fingertips and danced their delicate pirouette, slowly wrapping around his body. He tried to flick them off, but that seemed to anger death as the ribbons tightened around him. Even I was entranced as I watched them seek revenge.

After grunting and trying to shove his arms through, he suddenly stopped thrashing as his eyes fluttered closed, his head rolling forward. My ribbons slowly uncurled from him as his limp body fell to the ground. I kept my fingers extended until the ribbons seeped back into my skin, my head rolling back as I felt his life cling to mine, my pulse thrumming from its extended timeframe.

When I dipped my chin, Zeke was standing in front of me.

Running a finger down his chest, I cocked my head to the side. "Hello, beautiful stranger."

Cradling my face in his hands, he leaned in and kissed me. "You look ravishing as death, my love, but we can play later. Let Raven come back out, please."

"Mm," I touted, shivering at the remembrance of how wonderful it felt to take life. "I want to play now. Raven wants to play."

His smile was mesmerizing as he stared at me, searching deep into my eyes. "Eva looked so happy to see you."

An uncomfortable warmth crept across my skin, and I bared my teeth, trying to wash it away again with the cold emptiness. "No, beautiful stranger. You cannot keep hiding me."

He whispered against my lips, kissing me again, "I would never hide you, but I don't want to share you. You must let Raven come back out if you want to protect me." Wrapping his hand behind my neck to keep me from moving, he kissed my forehead and shoved his memory into my mind despite my best efforts to block him. "Look how beautiful you were on

our wedding night. Flushed and in love. I would have given you anything you asked for that night.”

“You,” I whispered, shifting into Blaze. “I only want you.”

He looked visibly relieved as he nodded and took a step away. “Finish what you started.”

Glancing down at the corpse, I snapped my fingers and turned it to ash at my feet; everyone silent as I kicked at it and gave them a bright smile. “I think your commander told you to fall in line.”

One by one, in a swift rush, men found a place to stand and planted their feet, silently waiting for Zeke’s orders. Jeanine came up behind me and smacked my ass as she walked by, holding her hands up in defense before she went to stand in front of the men. I smiled after her before Zeke returned to me, running his thumb across my bottom lip. “I’m okay. Go handle those men and come back to me all sweaty.”

“I cannot properly verbalize how bad I want you right now.” He pulled me flush against him, catching my mouth in a kiss. “She was easier to shove down that time.”

I threw my arms around his neck. “The large life seemed to satisfy her. The hungrier she is, the harder it becomes to shift away from her.”

“We can bring her out again later. Maybe play.”

I grinned. “Play? With death?”

“Death wants me.” He nibbled on my bottom lip before sucking it between his. Releasing, he moved my hair off my neck. “Just a little bite?”

I snorted and put my fingers to his lips as he started to lean in. “You can have any part of me you want when you come home.”

“Home,” he repeated with a sweet smile.



I STOOD at Cade's door, nervously twisting my fingers together. I hadn't knocked yet, and though I kept repeating words of encouragement in my head, they didn't seem to be helping. I had not the slightest clue how I could break all of this news to him, and I honestly wasn't sure which part he would be more upset about. Would it be the upcoming war I had agreed to? Me choosing Zeke? My twin brother, who possessed the ability to drown our island? The fact that I had a twin flame and married him?

Filling my cheeks with hot air, I knocked on his door thrice and rested my forehead against it. Maybe he wouldn't hear me. Maybe he wouldn't wake up. And perhaps all of this could wait until tomorrow. It hadn't been a full minute yet, but my cowardice had me turning away to return to my chambers when the creak of his twisty doorknob had me silently cursing.

And as the door peeled open, I stood too awkwardly to see the man I had spent weeks sleeping next to and plastered on a slight grin. He squinted one eye as he finished pulling on a shirt, blinking as he tried to focus on me — like maybe I was a dream. And then his eyes widened, and suddenly, I was being pulled into his arms and tugged into his room, the door shutting behind us.

“Raven,” he muttered against my hair, squeezing me tightly against him. “I thought you wouldn't be back for two days, or I would've been at the dock waiting for you.” He grabbed my shoulders and smiled as he looked down at my face. “Fuck, I missed you.” And then, as I dreaded he would, he leaned in to kiss me.

I quickly put my fingers against his mouth, clearing my throat and praying Zeke did not bust through the door. “We have... so much to talk about.” I patted his waist with my hand and gently pried myself away from his clutches to grab his hand. “And you should be sitting.”

He was frowning as I pulled him into his sitting room — the same one where he had told me many months ago that someone had left a note on our gate stating that I didn't belong here. Whomever it was, I would like to slap it across their

forehead and tell them how utterly and completely wrong they were.

I pointed to one of his chairs, and he hesitantly sat, perching his elbows on his knees as he stared at me. “You’re making me nervous, Raven.”

I gnawed on the inside of my cheek and nodded, running a hand through my hair. Where to start? “First off, I missed you, too. There were multiple times when I really could’ve used your advice.”

He slapped the seat of the chair beside him. “You have me now. Why don’t you sit?”

“Can’t.” I began a slow pace in front of him, my hands resting loosely on my hips. “I’m so fucking tired.” I covered my eyes with my hands. “I wish we didn’t have to do this tonight.”

“Lie down, then.” He waved his hand toward his bedroom. “We can talk about it in the morning.”

I laughed, imagining my husband’s reaction to finding me asleep in Cade’s bed, and then shook my head. “No, we need to talk about it. I’m just going to... okay. I have a twin brother named River who controls the element of water and has threatened to drown our island.”

He stared at me, mouth agape.

“Mira wants us to go to war with Perosan and Thoya if they don’t agree to make her the sole ruler of our realm. She has sent half of her army here for Zeke to train, along with raising an army of our own.”

“Raven...” he said, standing.

I was too buzzed on adrenaline to cry, so I kept vomiting words. “Zeke was stabbed when I said I wouldn’t do that, and Mira threatened to send River to our island to drown it, leaving me with no choice. I can’t kill River because if I do, I lose my magic, too. I had to agree to it. Two of her ships followed us here full of her men, who are now around our mountainside with Zeke and Jeanine.”

“I need some fucking light in here,” was not what I expected him to say, but he did.

I walked to the tables scattered around the room and lit candles with my fingertips, biting my lip as I stared at him staring at me. In confusion, in shock. “Zeke and I will be traveling to Thoya in a week to convince them that our engagement is for love and not for Mira’s gain to get them to agree to travel to Reales in three months for our wedding, where Mira will give them an ultimatum.”

He turned without saying a word and walked out to his balcony, leaning over the wall and staring down below into our village. I followed him outside and stood beside him, resting my hip against the casing of the wall while waiting for him to digest, flip out, and tell me how much I screwed up.

Instead, he simply looked at me and nodded once. “Start from the beginning.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



ZEKE

*M*y attention was split. I needed to settle these men, but I couldn't stop thinking about what I had witnessed Raven do. She was incredible. And frightening — incredibly frightening. She handled everything so calmly, and it was almost like she wanted him to push her too hard so she could unleash on him. Her protective instinct when he came at me seemed to waken Morana, and though I was fearful every time she shifted into her, I felt like her love for me was so deep that even her shifts could feel it. And now, all my men listened to every word I said, afraid of the Queen of Death.

They may come to our side simply out of fear.

It had been two hours since she left, and I was desperate to get back to her. Anxious to find out how her conversation with Cade went and if she had even decided to wake him up. I had felt her nervousness, despite her trying to wash it away for my benefit.

The men were finding places for the night or the next three months, and I waited until all of them were down before I took my leave. I would return in just a few hours and every day after that.

I sighed inwardly, frustrated that my first few months of marriage were already full of things to do and still under Mira's control. I needed that woman out of my life.

But I was married. Forever bound to the love of my life. She was mine, and that night would always remain my happiest — watching her walk across the deck toward me in that green dress, flowers in her hair. We made promises always to be there and love one another with everything we had.

And that bite — that claim. It almost seemed like a dream, the feeling that came over me. It was like somehow my body reacted to having her, to finding its equal. Being flames, the mating, the bond... it was still mysterious to me, but whenever I missed her, I craved a taste of her, as if to remind myself that she belonged to me and only me.

Luca came to stand beside me as we waited for Jeanine. Even though he was a soldier, he didn't want to stay here with the others, and I wouldn't have let him. After signing his allegiance to Raven, he officially became a Seolian resident and didn't belong amongst these men.

I twisted the ring around my finger. I shouldn't be wearing it, but she gave it to me. I never wanted to take it off. We could tell anyone who asked that I wore it because I didn't want to lose it before the wedding. I doubted she would tell Cade tonight. She was very protective over what we had, and the thought made me smile as I stared down at my finger.

John's ring.

That was unexpected. She was bringing my family back together after years of grief. "Do you think we can go?" I asked Jeanine as she approached. My desperation was turning into a hungry urgency. "They look settled. We'll be back in a few hours."

We both knew she would have to lead me, though I was supposed to be in charge. Being away from Raven would be difficult, and I needed Jeanine to keep my mind focused.

She looked around, nodding. "Raven insists we all have breakfast together for our first day, but then we can head back here."

I smiled again. I felt lovesick, but she wanted all of our family together for our first day in Seolia. It was endearing.

As we walked back toward the castle, Jeanine nudged my arm. “She’s going to tell them tomorrow.”

Them meant the village, and I doubted she would sleep from her nerves. “She can do it. She quieted a group of over two hundred heathens. Her village will be no problem.”

Luca sighed. “Her village means something to her, though. Those men don’t.”

He was right, but she was strong. Sometimes, she may not feel like it, but her stubbornness always won out over everything else. “She thrives on fear. It’ll help her.”

“If she can handle Cade, she can handle everyone else,” Jeanine said with a laugh.

“From what you two have told me, he sounds like an asshole,” Luca said.

“He is an asshole,” I grumbled. “But he’s her adviser. She values his opinions.” However, I wasn’t sure why. From the times I’d been around him, he didn’t seem to do anything but stare at her or try to intimidate her. I would have to keep a close watch on him and their interactions.

One of Raven’s greatest strengths was her heart, but I feared it could also lead to her downfall.



I SMILED as the castle came into view. She was in there waiting for me—my wife.

I looked down at myself. She wanted me sweaty, but I hadn’t worked out. “I’m going to run ahead. I’ll see you two in the morning.” I waved over my shoulder as they shouted their goodbyes and began to jog, not stopping until I reached the castle doors where two guards were stationed. I nodded to them as I passed through, realizing that I needed to make a point of meeting each one of them and reiterating how vital her safety was, especially now since her twin brother was only a kingdom away and may want to seek retribution for being cast to the side by their mother.

I walked the halls and up the stairs that led to Raven's chambers, pushing open the door. "Baby?" I called out, moving from room to room, but she was nowhere. I walked onto the terrace and looked over the balcony wall, but I didn't spot her below.

I wasn't going to panic.

I looked toward the Black Forest. She wouldn't have snuck out already. I walked back through our room and looked at the door that led into her secret corridors. She wouldn't have used those for anything. Now that everyone knew of her magic, there was no use for them anymore.

And then it dawned on me.

I walked back into the hallway and jogged up another set of stairs and into Cade's corridors. His door was closed, and I clenched my teeth, grinding them at the thought of her being in there alone with him. We might need to establish an open-door policy if she was insistent on being in his chambers.

Knocking on the door, I rested one hand on the doorframe and another on my hip as I waited. I rolled my neck as his voice drew closer from behind the door.

Everything about him set me on edge.

When he pulled open the door, I was met with the glare he always had whenever I was around.

I had grown rather fond of how envious I made him.

"Raven here?"

He shrugged. I could kill him. Surely she'd eventually forgive me.

"Is that Zeke?"

I heard her sleepy voice from behind the door and saw her peeking out from behind him as he ineffectively tried to block her from me. She gave me a bashful grin, and my previously irritated scowl grew into a smile. "Hey, baby."

Cade dropped his hand from the door and moved to the side so Raven could come out from behind him. He looked

from me to her and then back to me. “Wait,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “This engagement that Mira is forcing upon you....” He looked at her again. “It’s real? You two...”

“Are together, yes,” I finished for him. Like I’d told her, hiding that she had chosen me wasn’t an option. The rest could come later, but he would have no doubts of where her heart belonged.

“We hadn’t gotten to that part yet,” Raven said meekly, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“Let’s get to it then.” I grinned, looking at Cade as he continued to stare at Raven. “I proposed to Raven in Reales before we knew of Mira’s plan, and she accepted.”

“Mira put a damper on the joy, but that is what happened,” Raven confirmed, glancing up at Cade.

I felt jealousy coming out of him as he swallowed and blinked, his head bobbing in a slight nod.

Before he could say anything idiotic, I reached my hand toward her. She took it and moved toward me, maintaining eye contact with Cade. “I’ll see you tomorrow, and we can continue discussing what to do after addressing the village.”

As a sliver of anger passed through him while he continued to stare at her, I dropped her hand and moved my arm to drape over her shoulders. “Come on, Raven.”

She bit her lip and gave him a small wave before turning from him, allowing me to lead her down the stairs. I didn’t hear his door close until we were out of sight and standing at our door.

Sighing, she opened the door and walked in. “We were discussing River and Mira’s demands. I didn’t have a chance to tell him about us.”

Nodding, I followed her out to her terrace. “Can we discuss the closed door?”

She groaned and turned to face me, resting her hands on the balcony wall behind her. “Really? That’s your biggest concern right now?”

“That my wife was in a room with her abuser? Yes.” I was speaking through my teeth with forced restraint because she didn’t deserve to be yelled at her for how easily she forgave others.

“He isn’t...” she trailed off, drawing a deep breath through her nose. “That’s not how I see him. He’s my adviser. I need him.”

“You *need* him?” I coughed out an irritated laugh. “That’s fucking fantastic to hear.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she snapped. “I told you there will be a lot of meetings I have to take and not ones that you’re always going to *approve* of.” Her tone was a bit condescending, which caused me to glare at her. “But you have to trust me.”

“I do trust you,” I argued. “This isn’t about trusting you, Raven. It’s about him. Cade is not good for you to be around by yourself. How have you not picked up on that yet?”

She pushed past me to go back inside. “Do not talk down to me.”

“What if this was reversed, hm? What if I had frequent meetings with someone I had a past with? Touched? She touched me?”

“Stop!” she partially shouted, walking to the far side of the room like that could somehow keep me away from her. “Stop throwing that in my face. It’s unfair. You will be with Jeanine every day, which was *my* idea. Why can’t you give me that same respect?”

“All I’m asking is that you keep the goddamn door open, Raven.” I was starting to shout now, and I didn’t want to. I never wanted to fight with her like this. “Why even meet in there at all? Don’t you have an office in here?” I left the bedroom and walked to the office beside it, dramatically moving the door back and forth. “Looks like it works.”

She followed me and put her hands on her hips. “You’re being a child.”

“You are *mine*,” I bit out. “I have the right to ask this of you.”

“Jeanine said you weren’t jealous of him, but I am starting to doubt that.”

“This is not jealousy, Raven. I am *fearful* for my *wife*.” That was the truth. Nothing about Cade made me envious. Angry, worried, but not jealous.

I stepped into the office and ran a hand through my hair. I was starting to shake from irritation and desperately wanted to kiss her. “I have to be away from you every single day while worrying that he’s going to touch you, harm you somehow.”

She opened her mouth to say something but stopped and was quiet for a moment. Finally, she sighed and scratched her forehead. “Okay,” she said. “I promised to stop choking you. From now on, I will meet here with the door open or in the dining hall.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Can I kiss you now?”

She shook her head before she left the doorway of the office. “No.”

My jaw fell open as I followed her back into the bedroom. “Why the fuck not?”

“Because you irritate me,” she answered simply.

“*You irritate me*,” I chided back. “Where all has he touched you in this castle?”

She scowled. “Excuse me?”

“Answer the question, Raven.”

“Just his chambers,” she lied. And when I raised an eyebrow, she rolled her eyes. “And the kitchen.”

I closed in on her quickly and leaned down, picking her up and throwing her over my shoulder. She smacked my ass with her hands, and I slapped hers to keep her still. “Where’s the kitchen?”



FOLLOWING her directions as she pointed to a final set of stairs, I hopped down each one and laughed as she squealed the entire time.

When we walked into the kitchen, I set her down on one of the long islands and grabbed the collar of my shirt, pulling it off. “Let’s get this out of the way.”

Her eyes raked over my chest and stomach, causing me to grin rather smugly and run my fingers through my hair. She laughed and looked utterly exasperated with me. “I can put my shirt back on if you want me to pull at the sleeves.”

“We could go to sleep instead,” she taunted.

I gasped at her suggestion and stuck my hand into a bowl of flour sitting on the island across from her, scooping up a handful.

“Don’t you dare—”

I hurled the flour at her, coating her clothes and hair. I laughed as she blew it off her lips, flour flying everywhere. Hopping down from the island, she walked to the end of mine and gathered a handful of eggs in her arms. I shook my head but then raised my arms to try to block the eggs thrown at me with surprising force. “You angry, little demon?”

“Irritated,” she repeated.

My arm was dripping with yolk, and I walked to her, rubbing it all over her flour-covered hair. “Yeah? Well, me too.”

She gasped and shoved me off, grabbing another egg and quickly cracking it against my forehead, snickering as the yolk slowly dripped off my face. I grabbed her and wiped my face all over her neck, the yolk mixing with the flour to create a thick putty on her skin.

When she tried to shove me off, I crashed my lips against hers and plied my tongue into her mouth. She responded just

as fiercely, throwing her arms around my neck as she tried to climb me. I loved how small she was — how desperately she wanted to close our space all the time.

She was covered in flour and more slippery than usual, but I caught her and lifted her to sit again on the island, pulling the shirt over her head. She lifted her arms and coughed as flour flew off with it.

I waved my arm around to try and clear the dust, but she cupped her hand around my neck and brought me down to her again. Fumbling with my pants as I kissed her and shoving them down, I worked on hers next. She wiggled her hips just enough for me to yank them off, the bowl of flour next to her tumbling to the ground and creating another storm of dust as it coated us.

She giggled as she stared at it, grabbing some leftover flour from the table and dumping it over my head. “Now your hair matches your age, old man.”

“Old man?” I wrapped an arm around her waist and carried her until her back was against the wall. “Am I too old to fuck you against the wall?”

I had fucked her against many walls, but she grinned. “I guess you’ll have to show me,” she challenged.

Her legs hooked around my middle, and I fisted my cock in my hand, sheathing her fully in one thrust. She moaned, her head rolling to the side as I shoved into her over and over, never giving her time to breathe. I was going to claim her all over this damn castle until I replaced her memories with anyone else.

I stilled my thrusts and stayed deep inside her, keeping her balanced with one arm while my other hand brought her face back to mine. “Look at me while I fuck you,” I demanded.

“Can’t,” she whispered, resting her gaze on mine. “Too good.”

My cock pulsed at her words. I needed to taste her.

Leaning in, I bit down on her shoulder until I felt her flesh split between my teeth. She cried my name as I sucked

droplets of her blood, groaning as it covered my tongue — this feeling — every single time. There wasn't a word for it, but I went feral, my bucks into her resuming until tears lined her eyes from the force.

I wanted her to break from my touch so I could put her back together with my desperation for her — with how much I fucking loved her, with every ounce of my being.

She owned me.

Mind, body, soul, whatever the fuck she wanted.

As she rocked her hips against mine, I looked down between us, watching how well we moved together. Her body was mine — she belonged to me. “Tell me again, Raven.” I lifted my eyes to hers. “Tell me again how you thought about me.”

What a sly little grin she had on her lips. “When he was fucking me?”

I bared my teeth at the thought. “Finish that sentence.”

“When he was fucking me,” she said again. “I couldn't come unless I thought of you.”

I pulled her from the wall and carried her until I could sit in one of the chairs around a small wooden table. “Show me, Raven.” Resting my hands on her thighs, I leaned back in the chair and took in the perfection that was her. “Show me what I do to you.”

“What you've always done to me, you mean.” She put her hands on my shoulders for balance as she began grinding her hips against me. I watched her face first, how her eyes rolled back every time her pussy clenched around me. And then her tits, how they bounced as her speed increased.

And as blood dribbled from my bite on her shoulder, I didn't give myself a chance to think about why she hadn't healed yet as I leaned forward and grabbed the drops with my tongue.

I kneaded her tits with my fingers before dropping them down her stomach, across her thighs, and around her back. I

wanted to touch every single inch of her. I wanted to own her.

I needed her cum.

Pulling her from my lap, I spun her and bent her over the table before reentering her. Furiously fucking her from behind, I kept my hands around her waist. “Come for me, Raven. Show me how good it feels when it hurts.”

I pounded into her until she tightened around me, thrusting twice more before she was screaming my name. I pushed through her climax, wanting my dick covered in her warmth.

She cried my name again, which triggered my release, slapping the table from the force of how hard I had come. She was panting — broken whimpers coming from her mouth as she squeezed tightly around me. She wanted to coax everything out of me — wanted me dripping from her.

My head fell against her shoulder while she tried to catch her breath. She was still gasping, and I grinned through my breathless rasps, moving my hand to feel the pulse in her throat. It beat wildly against my palm, matching my own.

She looked dazed, half of her face resting on the table, sweat mixing with the flour on her body. She was divine. “One room down,” I gritted out before trying to inhale a breath.

She responded with a breathy laugh while I gently pulled out of her, pulling her up to face me. “I hope this doesn’t offend you, but I’ve never come that hard,” she said, falling into me.

I tipped her face to mine, and she gave me a satisfied grin. “It is always my mission to make you come harder than before.”

“You’re going to kill me.”

“What a way to die,” I teased, dragging her back to grab our clothes. “You seem a little weak, baby.”

She dressed, frowning as she shimmied her pants over her hips. “I will always be weak for you.”

I pulled up my pants before tipping her chin to me again.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed.

“Baby, we worked it out. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I didn’t tell him about us; it wasn’t intentional. I don’t want you to think—”

“Raven,” I interrupted her, putting an arm around her waist. “You would have. I didn’t think anything about that at all. I know you weren’t trying to hide us.”

“I would never,” she swore. “Please don’t ever doubt my complete devotion to you. I hurt you, and I’m not supposed to hurt you.”

“You did not hurt me,” I promised her. “We will struggle sometimes, but look how good it is when we make up.”

“Even though I may die from flour inhalation.”

I smiled. “I think you’re exhausted. And I think you’re nervous about tomorrow, but I am not upset with you. You said things; I said things. We’re both passionate people, especially regarding each other.” I kissed her softly. “I want you to hate me and miss me. I want you to love me and not want to be around me. We’re never going to be the fairy tale. If anything, I am the villain in your story.”

She shook her head. “You’re not. You try to be, but you have never been. And you need to work on forgiving yourself.”

“Then I need you to consider something.” I cradled her face gently in my hand. “I need you to realize that you can do things on your own. I know you think you need him, but you don’t.” Brushing back her flour-covered hair, I kissed the tip of her nose. “When your magic was paralyzed, it was not Cade who brought that back. It was you, Raven. Keeping me alive in Reales, freeing my family? All you. You don’t need anyone, Raven.”

“I need you,” she said softly.

I chuckled, already prepared for that response. “For support? Pleasure? Absolutely, and I am happy to provide

those to you. To be a queen and make decisions for your kingdom? You need no one.”

Something in her features changed after that. I was the complete opposite of what she was used to. She had always felt she needed to seek permission for her decisions, and Cade had let her believe that. But she was the ruler of this kingdom, and it was her alone that made the people who dwelled within fall in love with her. It wasn't Cade; it wasn't John; it wasn't anyone but this delicate creature in my arms.

She needed to realize that her decisions should never be questioned — that her worth, mind, and thoughts required no approval from any man, even me.



RETURNING TO OUR ROOM, I pulled her into the bathroom. She was still dowsed in flour and yolk. I smiled as she looked down at her body and tried to run her fingers through her yolked hair.

Turning on the water, I watched as she slowly stripped out of her clothing and stepped into the tub, immediately sinking until she was submerged under the water. She worked her fingers through her hair, trying to pull the yolk out and detangle her strands.

And then my eyes moved down her body.

How easily she turned me on after I'd just finished defiling her made me uneasy. I was constantly hungry, and when I wasn't touching her, I was starved. How had I lived without her for so long? I would never have touched anyone else had I known she was here — no matter how long it would have taken. No one had ever given me pleasure as she did from just looking at her.

When her body stilled, and she remained submerged, I cocked my head. It reminded me of the night she stayed in the spring and never came up until Cade found her.

Take your first breath without him, Raven.

Her arms came out of the water, and she pulled herself up. Her wild mane covered her face, and I grinned, watching as she smoothed it back off her face and head. Water splashed behind her as it whipped off her strands, flinging on the wall and ceiling.

And I stood there, gawking, completely enamored by everything she did.

Using her grip on the tub, she slid forward, which was my cue to join her. I discarded my clothes and climbed in behind her, wrapping my hand around her waist and pulling her back until she was against me. Her fragile frame seemed so small when I covered her like this. I had to find the irony of the fates choosing us to be mirrored souls amusing. Our souls may be the same, one half of a whole, but all her power was wrapped up in a petite little body that I could crush under mine. Every time we made love, it was an effort not to put all my body weight on her in fear of her lungs collapsing.

Her pear-scented aroma filled the room as I washed her hair, causing her to sigh while my fingers massaged her scalp.

Cupping my hands under the water, I filled them and poured them over her head, washing away the soap. All I wanted to do was eat her. I started with her neck, biting down gently. She made a little noise that was a cross between a giggle and a yelp as I nibbled on her skin.

She was practically buried under the mounds of bubbles, and she'd make a smacking nose with her mouth every time she popped one with her finger, causing me to laugh.

I tried to grab her back when she sat up, but she pushed my hands off and turned until she straddled my lap. Gathering soap in her hands, she scrunched it through my hair and slicked it back, drawing her hands down the back of my neck after each run-through.

I was smiling so wide that my cheeks hurt. No one had ever bathed me before. It was intimate. She was taking care of me, and I felt safe for the first time in a long time.

"I wish I had rum and pine needles," she sighed.

I laughed as she cleaned the dried yolk from my face.

“Now you’re going to smell like me.” Her bottom lip puckered out while she dumped water over me with her hands until I was free of soap.

My hands slid up her thighs. “I already do, my love.”

She studied my face, and I wanted to know what she was thinking, but when I tiptoed to the edge of her mind, she wasn’t pulling memories. She was creating a new one. She was sketching this moment into her mind.

I brushed the back of my hand down her cheek. “Do you know how much I love you?”

Slowly, she nodded. And slowly, she lifted just enough to sink onto me. I pulled in a sharp breath as I filled her again. I wanted to touch her, but she wanted control. My hand left her face, and I rested my forearms against the tub’s rim while her eyes thirsted across my chest and stomach.

“You said I’m your star,” she whispered, her fingertips dusting across my jaw.

I nodded, barely able to focus on anything other than the way she was circling her hips. She was going to make herself come and wanted to use me to do it. I throbbed inside her but remained still, unable to look away from how her lips parted from the feel of me.

“If I’m your star, then you’re my night sky. You surround me. Caress me. I burn only for you.”

I was speechless, my throat welling up from her words. Maybe she could love me as much as I loved her, and perhaps I could let her.

She ran her hand through my hair. “So, yes, my love. I know how much you love me, but you must know that I love you more than words convey. More than the universe would ever allow. That is why we’re transcendent — why we need so many lifetimes together.”

“Raven,” I whispered, shaking my head. There was nothing I could say to top that. I was overcome with emotions,

which only happened when she was near — only happened when she completely let her guard down with me, allowing the full scope of our love free.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip as she rocked against me, broken gasps escaping her throat. My fingers gripped tightly around the rim to keep from touching her, and when she noticed how intently I was watching her, flames tried to escape from behind her irises. Her heat bubbled under her skin, and it had been so long since I felt it that a low growl erupted from my throat as I allowed her fury to overtake my senses.

I could burn castles down with this fire she shared.

Her raspy whimpers had me nearly unleashing into her, but I didn't yet, keeping my gaze on hers. She was getting off from looking at me and how deep I was buried inside her. The power she felt from having control. But I was concerned the tub marble may crack under my fingers if I had to hold out on touching her any longer.

When she rolled her hips again, I relented my self-control and fisted her hair in my hands, yanking her head back and licking up the column of her throat. I felt the vibrations of her moan against my tongue and pulled her hair again, making her skin stretch taut. Another moan tickled my tongue as I circled her pulse and then started sucking.

My other hand wrapped around her waist, moving her faster against me. I was frantic for her while I began to buck into her. After making a mark on her throat that would frustratingly fade soon, I moved my mouth down to one of her nipples and sucked it between my lips.

Gasping as she tightened around me, her entire body shivered as she shattered. I released into her seconds later, groaning her name as my body went numb from how hard I released.

I didn't release her hair yet and licked her throat again with the tip of my tongue. She whimpered, and the second wave of warmth spread into my lap. Releasing my hold of her hair

allowed her head to dip and rest against my throat while she reheated the water to stop her trembling.

“I hope this doesn’t offend you, but I’ve never come that hard.”

I knew she was rolling her eyes without having to look at her.

“You look so good when you ride me.”

Goose bumps prickled her skin, and I grinned, pleased that I could turn her on again with just my words. It was only fair since she drove me into a frenzy just by existing.

And when she lifted her head and stared into my eyes, I couldn’t understand how anyone else could claim to love someone when they didn’t have what we did. It was ethereal. There would never be anyone else in existence to feel for someone what I felt for her. “You are my everything.” Even my voice sounded enchanted as I said it, but she was.

She was the fabric of my universe.

“I am yours.”

Three words. That was all it took for my pulse to race.

And I lost myself in her again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



RAVEN

Walking hand-in-hand to the dining hall with Zeke was, for lack of a better word, bizarre. It wasn't unwelcome in the slightest, but how did we get here? Just weeks ago, he was scaling my balcony to watch me sleep, and now we were married and living like it. He was the one in my bed, holding me all through the night. It had been a whirlwind, and I would have been lying if I had said I wasn't experiencing a minor whiplash.

He could sense my disorientation. I didn't want to give him any reason to doubt my complete infatuation with him, but it felt like I was trapped in a different reality.

He kissed the top of my head, attempting to keep me from drowning too deep. It bothered him when he couldn't find me, and I often felt him trying to claw his way in. We had planned on letting Morana come out last night, but we ended up making love all night which kept her buried deep.

We should have slept. I tried. I gave it my best effort, but every time I rolled over and saw him, I was climbing him and leaving marks all over his collarbone because he was mine, because I could.

And he was just as obsessed with me as I was with him. I wasn't sure we would ever sleep again. We would be dead walking amongst the living, only surviving off each other.

“You’re overwhelming me with the number of emotions you’re shifting through at once.”

I smiled and shrugged.

“You’re all jumbled.”

“What all are you feeling?”

“Bewilderment. Love. Restlessness. Agitation. Lust... a lot of lust.”

I nodded as he listed them off. “Sounds about right.”

He peered down at me, waiting for an explanation.

“It’s strange walking through here with you. Not strange as in bad, just different. The love should be self-explanatory. I’m restless because of what I have to do today. I’m agitated because you’re so beautiful, which led me to want you again. And again.”

He grinned at me very cockily, and I rolled my eyes. “There’s that irritation.”

I mocked him, repeating the words back to him sassily. That made him laugh loudly as we crossed the threshold to the dining room. Everyone was already at the table, and I beamed. I had never seen it so full.

Zeke released me as Jeanine stood and opened her arms to me. I jogged into them, and she wrapped me tightly, kissing my temple. Walking around the table, I kissed the top of Luca’s head in greeting before I made my way to Alice and John, who kissed me on the cheek.

My family. If only Isla could be here with us.

I was caught by Cade grabbing my wrist while I went to sit down. He pulled me close enough to him to kiss me on the cheek, making my eyes immediately snap to Zeke, who rolled his eyes and sat down in the chair next to mine.

He’s trying to get a rise out of me. Don’t react.

Listening to his direction, I put on a bright smile, took my seat at the head of the table, and sandwiched right between them.

But if he touches you again, I swear I'll kill him.

“No,” I said aloud, making everyone at the table look at me. Zeke’s grin was one of amusement as I cleared my throat. “No better meal than breakfast is what I always say.”

Did I just say that?

Glaring at Zeke, I reached for an apple while he filled my plate with more food than I could ever eat. I lifted an eyebrow as he piled mounds of eggs and fruit on my plate and then stuck a piece of bacon in my mouth. “You can’t survive off just me.”

I chomped down on my piece of bacon, dropping the rest to the plate as I chewed. And then deliciously intrusive thoughts shot into my mind at the idea of tasting him. He had done that on purpose, snickering as my body flushed while he pulled on the sleeves of his hooded jacket. He was teasing me because he would be gone all day, and I wouldn’t get him back until tonight. He was going to make me hurt for him all day long.

Well, fine. I could do that, too.

Leaning back against my chair, I lightly brushed across my collarbone with my fingertips as I took a bite of my apple and slowly licked the juice off my lips with the tip of my tongue. His eyes darkened on me, and I returned the smug grin he’d had on his face all morning. He cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. I gloated because he was hard and would be miserable along with me.

Suddenly, his knuckles whitened around the orange he was holding, and I wondered for a second if he ever actually got to consume the oranges he picked up.

Glancing beside me, I noticed Cade watching me tease him. I sat up slowly and returned my apple to my plate, wrapping my fingers around Zeke’s wrist. His eyes flared at me like a predator stalking his prey. It was a look I had come to know well when his protective instincts kicked in.

Pushing past my discomfort of being so openly affectionate with him in front of Cade, I rested my hand

against his cheek. "I love you," I whispered.

He drew in deep breaths through his nose, willing himself to calm.

I held his gaze. "Come back to me."

At my words, his features softened, and he turned his head enough into my hand to kiss my palm. I smiled at him and ran my fingers through his hair before I leaned back again and took another bite of my bacon, glancing around the table. Everyone was immersed in their conversations, and the sounds made a peaceful calm settle on me for the first time in a long while.

Luca asked, "Are you ready for today, Raven?"

I shook my head. I wasn't ready. How could one prepare for something like this? "Are you? Your brother is easy, but Jeanine is a hard-ass."

Zeke and Jeanine laughed. I ripped off another piece of bacon and winked at Luca.

"Luca will be fine," Alice said while smiling. "He's used to Zeke bossing him around."

"Zeke? Bossy? I have no idea what you mean," I replied, rolling my eyes.

He flicked my nose while grinning. I wrinkled it at him, and he leaned forward to kiss it before shoving another piece of bacon in my mouth. I muttered a curse word and took a bite.

"Today will be fine," I said. "Cade and John will be with me, and I have friends in the village who I know will support me and help reason with everyone else."

"That little girl is a doll," Jeanine said.

I grinned through my chewing as I thought about Eva. I needed to make sure I brought her gift with me. The day Jeanine told me about Mira's plan, she took me into town to buy gifts for Eva and Grace. We stopped by their quaint bookstore, and I bought a handful of fairy tales for Grace, and I planned to give Eva two of the dresses I had purchased from Alice's partner.

“She seems to love you,” Jeanine continued. “As does her father. It’s nice that you have that.”

“Eva and Theodore have become two of my favorite people. He knew of my magic before the rest of the village and never told anyone. He’s very loyal to me and has already told me he would fight for us if there ever came a time for that.”

Luca asked, “How many people are under your rule?”

My cheeks reddened slightly as I realized I didn’t know the answer to that question.

“A little under a thousand,” Cade answered for me. “Over half are men. Many of them work at the docks, and if they decide to join the army, we will need to fill their spots.”

I rubbed my forehead, embarrassed that I didn’t know the answer. I had a lot to learn if I planned on being more involved in the day-to-day activities of my kingdom. Maybe Zeke and Jeanine had been right; perhaps I had let Cade control everything for too long if it had reached a point where I couldn’t answer basic questions.

Zeke squeezed my hand, but I couldn’t meet his eyes.

“John and I can figure out the dock situation if that becomes a problem,” I said.

Cade snorted. “You’re going to go down to the docks?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “If I need to, yes. Why?”

Cade rested his forearms on the table’s edge and stared at me. “Not once in fifteen years have I seen you go to the docks unless you’re swimming or sailing.”

I narrowed my eyes on him slightly. I wasn’t sure why he was being so argumentative with me here, in front of people he barely knew. “A lot has changed.”

“Clearly,” he muttered, holding my stare. “John and I will handle the dock workers.”

I hadn’t noticed before that my breathing had quickened.

“Cade,” Zeke interjected, making me look at him. “I will need you with me. The Seolian men trust you. You were

trained as a soldier, right? You can lead them.”

“I haven’t done any training in a very long time,” Cade argued, clenching his fingers into loose fists. “I think Raven needs me here more.”

“I don’t,” I said. “I have John, and Zeke is right. He will need one of us there to gain their trust.”

“I would rather not,” Cade said, looking at me again.

“I don’t believe it was an option,” I stated. “It’s an order.”

Not once. Not once in fifteen years had I ever ordered Cade to do anything, and judging by the look on his face, he wasn’t pleased about it at all.

Someone behind me gasped, interrupting the tension. I twisted in my chair to see Luisa and Grace, smiling widely at them as I rose from my chair. They pulled me into a group hug. “John told me everything,” Luisa spoke lowly against my head. “I am so sorry for all you endured, Raven.”

I pushed back tears. I would not crumble today.

Pulling back just enough to smile at her, I gave my shoulders a slight shrug. “It’s nothing we can’t handle. Please, let me introduce you to everyone.” I turned and stood beside them, pointing to Zeke first. “This is my—” I caught myself before I called him my husband. “Fiancé,” I finished.

He grinned like an irritating cat.

“Oh my,” Grace muttered.

I snorted. Yes. *Oh my*. Zeke should be outlawed.



AFTER MAKING the rest of the introductions, I turned to Grace. “I have gifts for you!” Pulling her with me out of the dining room, I glanced at Zeke over my shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

“Why does Reales breed such dreamy men?”

I asked myself that often. Those boys were too damn handsome for their own good. “Can I tell you a secret?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

“Zeke is my husband.”

Gasping, she covered her mouth and squealed.

I smiled. “But you can’t tell a soul, Grace. No one must know. Not everyone in that room is aware, but I trust you.”

“I promise.” She crossed her heart but then frowned. “What about Cade?”

I sighed softly. She loved seeing Cade and me together. “Cade is wonderful. And I love him dearly. But it was always Zeke, even then. He’s the one who left me a rose in the library that day.”

Her nose wrinkled. “The one you burned?”

I giggled while nodding. “We were in a very long, drawn-out argument.”

“How could you ever be upset with someone who looked like that?”

I laughed loudly, nudging her side. “Surprisingly, very easily. He’s still a man, Grace, but I’m wildly in love with him. I know how much you loved Cade and me together....”

“Oh, Raven. All I want is for you to be happy.”

I linked our arms together and smiled as I thought about Zeke and how over the moon he had made me. “I am, Grace. I really am.”



EVERYONE WAS FILTERING out of the dining room when I made it back.

Jeanine rushed to me first, grabbing my hands and tugging them. “You’ve got this. We will be right around the mountainside if you need us, but I know you can do it.”

Pecking me on the lips, she pulled me into a tight hug. I couldn't imagine my life without her now. Coming so far in our friendship in such a short amount of time would always be something I was proud of.

Luca kissed the top of my head, winking at me as he pried a hesitant Jeanine off me. "We'll see you there," he said, looking at Zeke.

He dipped his chin in a nod before they disappeared down the hall.

Cade leaned against the wall while Zeke stood in the dining hall doorway. I blew out a hot breath, sticky from the tension that had seemed to take up permanent residence between the three of us.

Looking at Cade, I gave him a small smile. "I'll meet you outside."

He rolled his eyes and left without a word.

"I knew this would be tricky, but I didn't realize he would be so...."

"Cade-like?" Zeke answered with a chuckle. "I expected no different."

"Don't think I didn't realize what you were doing, by the way."

His jaw dropped as he came to me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "And whatever could you mean by that?"

"If he's with you, he won't be with me."

"Huh," he jaunted, appearing surprised. "I guess you're right."

I rolled my eyes, smiling as he buried his head against my neck. "This possessive nature of yours is getting a little out of control."

"I am simply protecting what's mine." He left light kisses across my throat. "Every man should be in love with you, and then I will derive pleasure from being the only one to make you scream, *but*," he lifted his head to look at me, "that does

not mean he should have the honor of being in your presence every moment of the day.”

“I would ask you to protect Jeanine, but I feel she can handle herself.”

“Jeanine can’t stand to be around him. While a gift for me, it is a tragedy for her.”

“A tragedy,” I said with a breathy laugh. “He is not that bad.”

“You know what is a tragedy?” He slowly backed me into the wall. “Being away from you.”

I frowned, brushing my fingers across his jaw. “I will think of you all day.”

“Every second,” he replied, leaning in to kiss me softly.

I melted all over. I had been with him all day, every day, for weeks, and being without him would make me miss him terribly.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips.

My eyes closed as I let it wash over me. His love would carry me through. He was with me even when he wasn’t. “You have no idea,” I breathed, throwing my arms around his neck.

Kissing me once, twice more before we released one another, he took steps back down the hall, and I bit my lip as I watched him go, giving him a pathetic wave. He paused for only a second before rushing back to me, cupping my face in his hands and kissing me repeatedly. I rested my hands against his ribs, my heart thundering in my ears as I became dizzy with passion.

“I’m so in love with you,” I told him between kisses. “Please take that with you. Never doubt.”

All he did was nod while he continued to kiss me. Neither one of us wanted to let go. And it was unfair that our marriage was starting like this. We should have been locked away somewhere and only emerging when we needed air or sunlight — not being pulled apart to prepare for a war that neither wanted to fight.

I had to be in the village in half an hour, which was the only driving force to breaking our kiss. He sighed into me and rested his forehead against mine. “Go, baby.” If he lingered any longer, I would give into him, and I couldn’t.

“Tonight,” he promised.

I nodded with a sad smile. He kissed my nose and forehead before releasing me, his fists clenched at his sides as he turned and disappeared down the hall.

My fist clenched against my stomach because I felt sick. I crouched down and covered my face with my hands as I began to cry — angry that Mira had taken this from me. If we ever reached a point where we weren’t under her control, I feared we wouldn’t know how to let go and finally live. We would always expect the worst, waiting for someone else to threaten to split us apart again.

“Raven.”

I looked up to see John staring down at me. He bent and gently grabbed my elbows, pulling me up. I curled into him while he stroked my hair. “I know, Raven. We will make sure you two get time somehow. I know it’s killing him as much as it is you.”

“It’s unfair,” I cried. I felt pathetic. Weak. I should have more strength than this, but we just found one another and weren’t able to celebrate it.

“You’re right. And we will find a way to rectify it.”



I STOOD at the castle doors with John and Cade. My hands were clammy, and I kept digging my nails into my palms, wanting to break the skin. John had made an announcement this morning in the village before breakfast that I had returned with news I needed to share, and everyone would be waiting for us on the side of the bridge.

Wearing a floor-length light blue dress that brushed the ground as I walked, I felt strong in my representation of my

people because my dedication to keeping them safe would never falter. And though I had become used to not wearing one, I had one of my gold diadems with dark-blue sapphires set in the middle.

It was a rarity, John had said once, that they could find sapphire of that color and the previous queen requested that she have a diadem fashioned immediately.

And weeks ago, I felt I had no right to wear these jewels in my possession — and now I knew they belonged to me, just like they would belong to my daughter. Rightfully.

Cade hadn't said a word to me, and I didn't know why I expected him to give me a reassuring shoulder squeeze. He was upset with me and seemed shocked that I hadn't run into his arms upon returning.

Zeke was right; I could do this.

I took my first step, drawing in a deep, shaky breath and exhaling as I bounced on my toes.

As anticipated, a large crowd was gathered at the end of the bridge, smiling and waving at me. I smiled brightly at them, returning their waves with my own. They weren't used to me making announcements and quieted as I halted at the end of the bridge.

I felt no less than a thousand eyes on me, making my stomach tighten with nerves.

Clearing my throat, I ran the tip of my tongue over the bridge of my mouth, mentally going through the speech I had rehearsed in my head between the multiple distractions Zeke gave me last night.

"I am so happy to be home!" I started, my voice strained as I shouted. As they clapped, I put my hands behind my back and twisted my fingers anxiously. "So much has happened since I left. To start, I am engaged to the Prince of Reales. That means that our kingdom will be bound to his kingdom."

I definitely had their silent attention now.

“While in Reales, I also discovered that I am the daughter of King Leonidas and Queen Celestina.”

Murmurs shot through the crowd.

“My sister is Queen Mira of Reales, and I am their princess. Around our mountainside lies half of Queen Mira’s army. They will stay here for the next few months and use our land for training.”

Valid questions arose from the crowd, like what they could be training for.

“We will ask if any men from our village would be willing to enlist as Seolian soldiers. Our soldiers will be under the command of my fiancé and will train with him and the soldiers of Reales every day, along with Cade.” Stares moved from me to Cade behind me. “We are on the beginning cusp of a new dawn! Never have two kingdoms in our realm merged like this, forever uniting as one regarding the decisions of our four kingdoms. The creation and expansion of our armies is merely a precaution to protect us against any invasions who are threatened by our power.”

The looks on their faces were a mixture of frightened and curious.

“I will never force any of you to enlist, nor will anyone else. I still believe in your freedom of choice, and I beseech you to keep your trust in me. I will keep you and your families protected under my reign.”

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting. A revolt. An uproar of voices.

Certainly not the peaceful nature of Theodore pushing to the front of the crowd and dropping to one knee in front of me, and certainly not how men followed his lead.

I kept severely underestimating the hearts of my people.

There were easily over one-hundred men staring at me from their knees, all willing to fight for what we had built. “We are honored to serve our queen,” Theodore said.

Shock, gratitude, confusion. All things I felt.

Motioning for them to rise with an unsteady hand, I conveyed gratefulness in my eyes as I held Theodore's gaze.

"We will lead you to the training yard behind our mountains in ten minutes. Please grab anything you may need. You will return home every night and report to Zeke every morning. I am grateful for your contribution to keeping our home safe!"

The crowd barely scattered as they began talking amongst themselves. I was sure I would be faced with many more questions in the coming weeks and, most likely, none I would have answers for.

Eva skipped toward us, and John came up beside me to hand me the box containing her dresses. I took it from him with a smile and sat on the ground in front of Eva, balancing the box in my lap and waiting until she sat down. "I was walking around Reales and came upon this shoppe." I handed her the box that was huge in her tiny lap.

She untied the string and flipped the lid off, gasping as she pulled the first dress out. It was made of the brightest teal and yellow ribbons with the fluffiest skirt I had ever seen on a dress her size.

Squealing, she hugged it to her chest before gently placing it beside her and then tearing through the box again. Her squeal became much louder as she pulled out another bright dress, made of gold and orange, fitted for daily wear and one I was sure I'd see her in often.

"They reminded me of sunshine, which you are. My tiny ray of sunshine."

She threw the box off of her lap and lunged at me. Laughing, I caught her and kissed the top of her head. "You're too small to understand this, but you kept me going every day while I was gone. Knowing that I was coming home to you made me so happy. Do you love your dresses?"

Her arms squeezed so tightly around my neck that I thought I might pass out, but I didn't make her move. "I love

them, I love them,” she repeated, looking behind me. “Where’s mister caterpillar?”

John laughed along with me. “Mister caterpillar?” My smile was broad. “Mister caterpillar is working today. Did you like him?”

“Mm-hm!” she answered excitedly. “He’s very hairy.”

I barked out a laugh while her mother approached. Eva released me to grab her dresses before running to her mother and practically throwing them in her face out of excitement.

I looked up at Theodore. “What’s her name?”

He looked at his wife with so much love that I smiled. “Evangeline. That’s where Eva got her name.”

I nodded as I watched Eva with her mother. While I had no pleasant memories with my mother, I hoped that maybe one day, Zeke and I could provide our children with happiness like that.

Theodore extended his hand to me, and I took it, letting him pull me to my feet. A small, blond boy bounced up beside Evangeline. “Teddy,” Theodore said.

I smiled again. “You have a beautiful family. Is Evangeline okay with you enlisting?”

“Evangeline will always fight for our home.”

“Hopefully, it doesn’t come to that,” I responded with a sad smile.



WE WERE ALMOST around the mountainside when I glanced back at the large crowd of men behind me. And then I looked at Cade, who still hadn’t spoken to me. “You’re going to get hot in that,” I said, motioning to what he was wearing. “Are you sure you don’t want to go back and change?”

Without looking at me, he shook his head. “I’ll lose the shirt if I need to.”

I sighed but said nothing else to him. After years of friendship, I learned that pushing him always got me nowhere. He would come around when he wanted to.

Closing around the mountainside, Jeanine saw us first and jogged to Zeke, pointing to us. When Zeke turned, his mouth fell open as his eyes flickered over the crowd behind me. And then his gaze rested on me, and there was something unreadable in how he looked at me.

Shock. Maybe a little pride, too.

As he came to my side, I turned around to face the crowd. “This is Zeke, and he is your commander. He has my authority along with Cade, and I expect respect toward him. He will return it. You may initially hate him, but I promise he has nothing but true intentions toward protecting Seolia.”

Zeke stood tall beside me and draped his arm over my shoulders. “Every morning, we will start at dawn. I expect everyone here on time and in line.”

I realized I was gawking at him as the smallest of grins tugged on the corner of his mouth.

“We will run drills all day until dark, and then you will be free to return home. For now, go find a place in line, and we’ll start with the basic drills to warm you up.” He pulled me closer to him to let my men pass by us. “How?”

I shrugged in response.

“You will learn to stop underestimating her,” John said before he began his walk back to the castle.

“Baby, I’m—” he trailed off, shaking his head.

I felt prideful. Powerful. And I didn’t say anything as I stepped out from his grasp and toward the men waiting quietly in their lines. My throat hurt from yelling, but I cleared it and gave them a bright smile. “These men make up Seolia and will treat you respectfully if you return it. Please know that I want to help you in any way that I can, and if there’s anything you need while you’re here, I will do my best to provide it. I know you’re all away from your home, and I understand how that feels, so please hear me when I say that while I expect

obedience, I am not cruel and want you to feel welcome while you're in Seolia.”

I turned back to Zeke. “I’ll get some food and water down here somehow. I haven’t figured that out yet, but they’ll be fed.” I had a million things on my mind and sidestepped around him. I needed to get back to the village and figure out how to feed all these men. Mira could have at least provided us with some help since she stuck me with half of her army.

He caught my wrist and spun me back to him until there was nothing but an inch between us. His constant silence as he stared at me made my eyebrow lift. “*What.*”

“Jeanine, start a warmup,” he shouted behind me. “Cade, follow her lead.” And then he pulled me into step behind him.

I glanced backward as Jeanine shouted at the men, smiling as they groaned. Cade stared after us before he took a spot beside Jeanine. Luca waved at me and then rolled his eyes as Jeanine shouted at him. I waved back at him right before I was turned off the path that led back to the castle.

Zeke pulled me into the valley between the mountains and gently pressed me against the uneven wall of the mountain. Looking around as he paced, I wondered why I had never come this way on all my nights exploring the Black Forest.

It was beautiful.

“All of those men followed you here.”

I nodded. “Is this your jealousy again?”

“It took me months to build an army, and you created one in a day.”

I shrugged a shoulder.

“You have no idea, do you?”

I wrinkled my nose. “No idea about what?”

He stopped pacing and stood before me, placing his palms flat against the rock on either side of my head. “You think I ooze power, but it pours out of you like a fountain.”

I shivered.

“Those men are willing to go to war — risk their *lives* — for you.”

I wasn't sure I was breathing.

“And you're mine.” He said it with such disbelief in his tone.

“Always.” My voice was breathy since he stole my breath each time we were together.

All he did was stare at me caged between his arms, and the heat of his gaze made me skittish. He always looked at me intensely, but this was different — like he recognized something in me that he hadn't before. And with a low voice, “I should go.”

“Then go.”

His chuckle caressed me like velvet. He straightened but didn't take a step away. Instead, he slowly dropped to his knees in front of me and grabbed the bottom of my dress, pushing it up over my legs, his eyes never leaving mine. When it was gathered at my hips, he nodded toward my hand. I grabbed the material and held it between my fingers.

Hooking a finger in my panties, he slowly dragged them down my legs until they settled snugly around my knees and parted my thighs. I swore if he didn't stop looking at me that way... and then the tip of his tongue grazed across my clit.

I bit my bottom lip as I watched this gorgeous man on his knees for me, about to consume his meal. When I shuddered as he blew out a hot breath, he laughed. “I love that I still give you those reactions.”

Expecting the soft caress of his tongue, I gasped as he slid two fingers into me. He worked them slowly, in, out, in, out, in, out, watching with lips parted. My back arched off the stone while I pushed my hips against his fingers, fucking them just as slowly. “You're beautiful,” he whispered before kissing the inside of my thighs, each of my hip bones, and resting his lips against my clit.

Anyone could walk around that mountainside, but I didn't care as I made a noise that resembled a whine and a sigh

through his teasing. “Please,” I begged.

“Oh, my love.” He pulled his fingers out and sucked my taste off. “Never beg me.” Taking a deep inhale of my scent, the tip of his tongue ran across my clit again. “I live to give you exactly what you crave.”

My knees would have buckled if it weren’t for his fingers gripping so tightly into my thighs. “You,” I groaned, growing frustrated. “I crave you.”

“Fuck my tongue,” he growled as he moved one of my thighs over his shoulder and finally thrust his tongue inside me.

I fisted his hair in my hand and held him still as I rolled my hips continuously against his tongue. Groaning as his fingers dug deeper into my thighs, he caused the skin to break and bleed. His head tilted to the side to drink more, and I moved quickly against him, keeping my gaze on his face while he so headily enjoyed me.

When his eyes met mine, I cried out his name and came, but it wasn’t enough for him. Wrapping his lips around my clit, he sucked until he had coaxed out a second climax from me.

I would bring him an army every day if this were my prize.

When he released me, he licked his lips clean. My legs shook as he removed my thigh from his shoulder and stood with a satisfied grin. “Now I can go.”

I shook my head and pulled him back. “You’re going to fuck me first.”

It took no convincing as he pushed his pants down hastily and found my thighs again, lifting me until my legs hooked around his waist. Fumbling underneath me, he filled me only seconds later.

“Give me everything,” I whispered against his lips.

Shadows clouded his eyes as his darkness was given permission to be let free.

“Hurt me, Zeke.”

There was nothing gentle about it. He pounded into me so hard that I worried I might split in half, but I took it and leaned down to bite the flesh between his neck and shoulder. His breathing was jagged while he attempted to groan from the pain of my bite. I did it again, and he slammed me back against the stone, causing my focus to blur. "Bleed for me, Raven," he demanded before his teeth sank into my shoulder.

His name left my lips as he tore my flesh, slapping the rock behind me as I bled for him. Snaking his hand around my throat, he squeezed, preventing me from making any more noises. "I do not...." Thrust. "Need hundreds of men...." Another thrust. "Trying to find the source of that delicious scream."

"Zeke," I whispered breathlessly, vision blackening.

"Come, Raven."

Shaking from the lack of oxygen, I shattered around him. Everything was out of focus as colors morphed into shapes in my eyes. And as he shot into me and covered my mouth with his, his hand released my throat, allowing me to pull in whatever air I could.

I was limp in his arms, and he was trembling as he held me.

Gripping his hair, I yanked his head back to lick up his neck as sweat beaded, desperate to taste him. His cock twitched inside me, his mouth moving back to the bite on my shoulder. Peppering kisses as he traveled from there and up my throat, he didn't stop until he could stare into my eyes. "What are you doing to me?"

I rolled my head against the rock while my pulse thundered, making it impossible to gather the oxygen I needed.

"The desire I have for you, Raven, it clouds everything. I can't think straight."

"You're not alone." It was all I could get out. Even though I was spent, I would still let him have me again if he wanted.

After slowly pulling out of me, he lowered me to the ground. My dress fell to my feet as he pulled his pants up,

staring at me again. I shoved his shoulder. “Stop.”

He smiled before he leaned in, kissing me softly. He could switch from dark desire to love so quickly that I wondered if that was how he kept me so dizzy. “You need to go, my love.”

He grumbled, and I scrunched up my nose at how cute he was, but he relented and took a dramatic step away from me. “I’ll try not to kill him,” he teased. “Be waiting for me tonight.”

Watching him walk away, I worried our infatuation might make us manic.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



ZEKE

Raven followed through on her promise and sent food and water. I'd given more breaks throughout the day until the Seolian men adjusted to the strenuous training but did take way too much pleasure when Cade vomited. He was pushing himself too hard to appear like he could keep up with the drills, but it seemed like he had become too comfortable in his adviser role.

Raven didn't need to know that I had gone a little harder than I needed to.

Though, Jeanine would snap at me any time she caught me snickering. If I weren't careful, she would tell on me. Raven and Jeanine could run all four kingdoms independently if they wanted, and people would fall at their feet. Raven was the powerful but kind leader, and Jeanine was just downright frightening. They complemented one another, and I believed that if we could get River alone, he would understand that Raven was not at fault. She would have readily given up her throne for him if she had known about him.

Which reminded me that we needed to talk to Grace about researching where he could have come from or who could have raised him. If anyone could dig through records, it would be her.

As the sun lowered, I nodded at Jeanine. She called for the Seolian soldiers to return home but to be back before the sun

rose. As they began to filter out, my men retreated to their makeshift beds made up of blankets that Raven had also sent today. She always tried to do the most she could for people, even for soldiers who had orders to destroy everything she built if she didn't play along.

Lighting from the village illuminated the pathway as we walked back to the castle. Cade stayed a few paces behind us, though I was sure he was listening to everything we were saying. Even though we were on the same side, neither of us would ever consider each other allies.

And luckily, Jeanine and Luca seemed to understand that as they mentioned nothing of war or River or any plans Raven and I had come up with together on how we could fix this.

Luca asked, "Any place to drink?"

I nodded and dipped my chin toward the edge of the village. "A place called Duck's."

"Can we stop in?"

"Let me find Raven first. Jeanine knows Arthur; she can take you in."

After Jeanine challenged Luca to a foot race, I laughed as they both took off down the remainder of the pathway, Luca nearly stumbling at the unexpected dip in the dirt and cursing loudly at Jeanine.

Before reaching the end of the pathway, Cade called my name, and I sighed, turning around to face him. Sensing determination and irritation in him, I mentally braced myself. Raven had asked me not to kill him, but depending on what he said....

"I know what you think you're doing by enlisting my help with the army," he began, standing a body's length away from me. "But you can't keep me away from her. I've been in her life for nearly twenty years."

"I'm not having this conversation with you, Cade. This isn't a competition. She made her choice."

“I threaten you. That’s the only reason you’re trying to keep me from her.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Do you honestly think that? No, Cade. I am keeping you from her because you forced yourself on her in Reales. I don’t trust you around her.” When I smelled surprise on him, I grinned. “You think she was loyal enough to you by that point not to tell me? You were fucked the moment she found out you held secrets about who she is.”

He shrugged like he didn’t give a damn. “She’ll forgive me. She always does.” He took another brave step closer to me. “You’re just like all the others. You’ll hold her attention until she becomes bored, and then she’ll be right back to me.”

Now would have been the time to tell him we were flames, that she had already given herself to me for an eternity, that she used to think about me while he fucked her, but I respected her and her decisions too much to do it without her permission.

Instead, I took two steps closer and held my shoulders back, trying not to smile as I felt a sliver of fear in him. “Whatever you think you have with her, it’s over. This tough guy act is bullshit. Real men don’t force themselves upon women, and I will make damn sure that she will be reminded of that fact whenever she even considers forgiving you. If it weren’t for her, Cade....” I leaned in slightly, “You would be dead.”

I slapped his shoulder. “See you in the morning. Bright and early.”

He didn’t say another word as I turned and continued down the rest of the pathway. He was lucky to be still breathing, and the only reason he wasn’t in the ground already was because of Raven. He didn’t deserve any more chances, but she couldn’t let go of their history together. And it was fine. As long as he stayed away from her and under my control, I could tolerate the idea of keeping him alive.

And when I turned to walk into the castle, I heard her voice calling my name, and a smile immediately widened on my face as I looked toward the village. Her smile was just as

wide as she ran to me and lunged, kissing me right as I caught her. “Baby,” I whispered against her lips, kissing her again. “Fuck, I missed you all day long.”

“I saw Jeanine and Luca....” Another kiss. “Go into Duck’s.” Another kiss, longer this time. “And I worried you were still with the armies when I didn’t see you.” She puckered out her bottom lip.

I nipped at it and started walking back toward the village with her in my arms. “They raced there. I was just a bit behind. Do you want to go in for drinks?” Grinning, I squeezed her ass with my hands. “Or...”

She giggled, wiggling in my grasp. “Always or, but I want to show you something first.” She looked down at the ground. “But you’ll have to let me down.”

I shook my head, tightening my arms around her. “That’s the worst thing you’ve said all day.”

She laughed and kissed me again, not helping her need for me to let her down at all. “You don’t know the village well yet. I have to lead you there.”

“Are you taking me to an abandoned pub?”

Her cheeks reddened, and when I pushed into the edge of her mind, I grinned as I watched the memory with her. Cradling the back of her head, I brought her back to me and pushed my tongue through her lips. She sighed into my mouth and brushed the back of my neck with her fingertips.

I would never be able to describe my immense comfort every time I held her.

But then she pulled away and put her fingers against my mouth. “Let me show you, and then we can spend all night doing that.”

I licked my lips as she removed her fingers. “Doing what?”

“You know,” she whispered bashfully.

I wanted to gobble her up. She had shown me multiple times that nothing was innocent about her desires, but I wanted to hear her say it. “Tell me, baby. What do you want to do?”

She bit her lip, smiling. “I want to fuck you.”

My cock twitched, and I lowered her just enough so she could feel it between her legs. “Say it again.”

Looking between our bodies, her heat flared and warmed my body. “I want to fuck you, Zeke.”

When she felt how I throbbed for her, she lifted her eyes to mine. And with a little more confidence in her tone, she whispered, “I want to ride you. I want your tongue everywhere.”

I dipped into a dark alleyway between buildings and moved her hair to one side, blowing a breath on her neck. “Here?”

She nodded, tilting her head to the side. I dragged my tongue across the skin of her throat. “Where else?”

Pulling down on the neckline of her dress, she tapped her collarbone. The tip of my tongue ran across the length of it, and when she whispered my name, I nearly put her down to fuck her where we stood. I tugged on the sleeve of her dress until her shoulder was exposed, licking across it before I started to suck on her skin.

“Why can’t we stop?”

Her question made me laugh as I pulled up, admiring the way her skin had turned purple from it. I wished it would stay. I would mark every inch of her if it would. She looked down at it with me, sighing as it had already begun to fade from her ability to heal.

I turned and pressed her back against the wall. “Because we’re in love, Raven. Madly. And we’re a pairing. Our need for one another will be more intense because of that.”

“But I think I’m obsessed with you,” she whispered, stroking my cheek with the back of my hand. “I don’t feel like I can breathe without you near me. People would be talking to me today, and I would just... stop paying attention because I was thinking of you.”

“If it makes you feel better....” I set her down and pushed my sleeve up, showing her my bicep. “Jeanine punched me so many times today that I have a bruise. I would do the same thing as you.”

She frowned and put her hand against it, healing it. “I hate that we have to be apart.” Resting her forehead against my chest, she sniffled. “It makes me sick.”

I brushed her hair through my fingers and kissed the top of her head. “It makes me sick, too. We’ll find a way, Raven. And then we’ll be together so much that you’ll be sick of me.”

“I can’t wait.” She lifted her head to look at me. “I can’t wait to be sick of you.”



AFTER BEGGING her once more to let me return with her to the castle, she shook her head and grabbed my hand, leading me to whatever she wanted to show me. The village was still alive with people, and we would be interrupted frequently by someone just wanting to greet her. She seemed to be an addiction for everyone, and while I didn’t like to share her, I did enjoy watching her interact with people.

She would introduce me to every person who stopped us, and in some way, whether through words or looks, I would be warned to take care of their queen. She would always smile, and I would repeat my promises to every single person, a bit exasperated that it needed to be said.

Could no one tell by the way I watched her every move how obsessed I was with her?

And then Lara ratted me out as we passed by the bakery, telling Raven that she recognized me for sometimes swinging by in the mornings to grab breakfast when Jeanine couldn’t for the three months I had watched her. I scraped my eyebrow with my fingertips, ignoring Raven’s eyes on me that I was sure were rolling as Lara would blame me for selling out of so many chocolate pastries.

“I just wanted a taste of you,” I explained, trying to woo her as we walked away.

“You could’ve had an actual taste instead of hiding like a chameleon.”

I barked out a laugh, which made her eyes widen before she broke into one. “A chameleon? Is that what you think of me? A scaly reptile?”

“Old,” she answered. “I think of you as old.”

I slapped her ass with the palm of my hand, making her yelp. “Then be respectful toward your elders.”

“I wish I could burn you sometimes,” she mumbled, causing me to laugh again.

We were reaching the backside of the village, where a handful of buildings were coupled with vegetable and fruit gardens. Out of all the weeks I had spent here, I had never ventured this far and didn’t know any of this was back here. But unlike Reales, none of these buildings were abandoned. Everything was well-maintained, and she didn’t seem to mind me plucking a few strawberries to pop into my mouth.

She turned and looked at me, leading me to a building at the end. I cocked an eyebrow, looking from her to the building. “The shoppe owner is retiring, leaving the space vacant.”

“Do you need my help cleaning it out or something?”

She smiled and shook her head, resting her hand on the doorknob. “No, I mean, not unless you want to. He was a merchant that sold things like clay sculptures from other kingdoms, but when he came to John and said he needed another tenant, I bought it.”

I looked at the building again, confused by what she could want with a shoppe. “Why do you need it?”

“I mean, technically, I own every building here, but as John said, I have funds set aside for projects. And this is one of them.” She opened the door and motioned for me to enter. “John has been with me today, cleaning and moving things

around.” She followed me inside, holding the door open against a stone for light.

I looked around the empty room. It was a large showroom with a desk and what seemed to be an office in the back, which I guessed was used for bookkeeping. “Raven, I feel like I’m missing something.”

She pointed to the back wall, and I followed her finger. The rack of dresses from the ship was stationed against it. “You want to sell dresses?”

“No.” She sat atop the desk and crossed her feet at the ankles. She seemed nervous as she looked at me, gnawing on the inside of her cheek. “I want this to be your mother’s. I’ve ordered her bolts of fabric and a workstation bigger than this one. A seamstress has always made my dresses, and she can help Alice.”

I stared at her. Speechless.

She ran her fingers through her hair and spoke in a hurried tone, “I just... I know that your mother had a dress shoppe in Reales, and she’s very talented, and Luca said she would love this, and I know you don’t like talking about your past, but I didn’t want to do this without talking to you first....”

I crossed the room, took her face in my hands, and kissed her into silence. And then kissed her again, convinced I had married some kind of angel because no one on this earth could be as pure as her, as giving as her heart was. “Does this mean...” she asked between my kisses, “that you’re okay with it?”

“Baby,” I whispered against her lips, resting my forehead against hers. “Of course, I’m okay with it. At this moment, I have fallen even more in love with you than I already was.” Shaking my head as I rose to look around, tears gathered in my eyes. She was trying to make this a home not just for me but for every person in my family. “She’s going to love this.”

“Good,” she responded with a smile. “I’ll bring her down here tomorrow. And I’ll help her when I can. I don’t know

how to sew, but I'll organize an opening day celebration. The girls here will love these dresses."

I felt so much love as I looked at her again, fearing I might implode. "Thank you."

Her nose wrinkled, and she shrugged. "Don't thank me, please. I do these things because I love you."

"Allow me to show you my gratefulness to you in other ways then."

And as she smiled and allowed me to kiss her, she didn't realize that while I would always worship her body with gratitude, I was determined to give her nothing less than the entire world someday.



THE SUN HAD WAKENED QUICKER than usual, or maybe we had been too drunk to notice. We had made it to Duck's last night, and Arthur had ordered so many bottles of rum that it seemed wrong not to drink at least two full bottles. Maybe three. After six or seven glasses, I had stopped counting.

Luca and I had raced back to the castle with the girls on our backs, and even in my hungover state, I was still shocked that none of us had broken any limbs.

Drunken Raven was a wild little thing and would give me no time to recover before she was on me again, riding me just like she wanted. And with eyes glazed and skin slicked with sweat and cum, she had passed out in my arms and whispered things in her sleep about a horse named Shadow.

I had fallen asleep listening to her, brushing her hair with my fingers while she slept on my chest.

And now, I was lying awake, and she hadn't moved an inch. She was still peacefully dozing, her body so warm that it made me sweat, but I didn't want to wake her. I needed to leave soon to walk with Luca and Jeanine to the armies, but I was tempted to fall back asleep and stay right here with her.

She was a dream while awake — perfect and surreal and mine, like maybe I had created her for myself.

Brushing the length of her spine with my fingertips, she stirred enough to whine. Chuckling, as I was sure her head pounded as hard as mine, I moved her hair off her shoulder. “I must get dressed, my love, but you can stay and rest.”

She shook her head, wordlessly wrapping her arms around me and pretending to snore. I laughed and squeezed her until she groaned from the pressure. “You don’t snore, or else I would completely believe that compelling attempt.”

“I don’t want you to go,” she mumbled against my chest, moving her legs until she straddled my waist. “I have ways of convincing you to stay.”

“You do,” I admitted, running my hands up her thighs. “But because of your genius idea of letting her move into the castle, Jeanine will bust in to drag me away and may not appreciate it as much as I do.”

She sighed as she rose, stretching her arms over her head. I reached up and cupped her breasts in my hands, gently kneading the skin between my fingers. “But I mean, if you really want to try....”

Smiling and with eyes full of sleep, she shook her head. “I do not want anyone else seeing the wonder that is you.” She shifted off of me, much to my dismay. “Even though she already has,” she tacked on with a giggle.

I stuck out my tongue in disgust. “Please stop talking about that. We both can’t stand the thought of it.”

“Mm,” she hummed, crawling over me to stand. “Luca and I already decided to use it against the two of you as much as possible.”

“I don’t think I appreciate this new alliance you have made with my little brother.” I stood with her and walked to her wardrobe, which she had so generously lent about an inch of to me. “We’re going to need another one of these, you know.”

She pushed out her bottom lip as she pulled out a light-blue dress. “You don’t like sharing with me?”

I pushed her dresses to the side, with quite a bit of force since she had so many, and grabbed a shirt for myself, pulling it on. “I would share a body with you if I could, but my clothes don’t feel the same way.”

She sighed rather dramatically after putting her dress on. “Fine, I suppose. I’ll order you your own.”

Like a stray dog, I followed her room to room as she prepared for the day. I lifted a brow when she grabbed a small bottle of something from her vanity. “What is that?”

She twisted the lid off. “A tonic. I take it once a month to prevent pregnancy. I have crates of it delivered every few months from Perosan for women in the village to take when they need it.”

I nodded, but as she raised it to her lips, my hand reacted as I knocked it from her fingers before my mind could catch up. It fell to the floor, and her eyes widened slightly as she looked from the bottle to me. “Uh...”

I ran a hand through my hair, giving her an apologetic grin and picking it up from the floor. It was empty, but I thrust my hand out toward her awkwardly. “Sorry.”

She took the bottle, set it behind her on the vanity, and licked across her lips. “Care to explain?”

“Not really.” I turned to locate my boots, having a hazy memory of kicking them off somewhere last night. Knowing she was following me and waiting for an answer, I sighed. “When we were in Reales, and you were standing over the cradle in the orphanage, I realized then how badly I wanted a family with you.”

I found one boot and slid it on, picking up random articles of clothing and blankets to try and find the other. I was only moments away from Jeanine knocking on the door. “And obviously, I am not going to force you into anything, and that reaction wasn’t intended.”

When I couldn’t find it, I turned to face her again. She had my other boot in her hand and held it out to me, but before I

could grab it, she jerked it back with a small smile. “I want a family with you, too.”

I sensed a ‘but’ coming.

“But,” she said, handing me my boot. “I think we need to wait until everything with River and Mira is over. I am going to have demands that I will need you around for. Demands that only you can satisfy.”

I grinned but nodded and grabbed her by the waist, pulling her to me. “I know, and you’re right. I don’t want to be away from you, no matter how enticing it is to start breeding with you now.”

“Breeding,” she repeated with a laugh. “We can *breed* all you want when this is over. I will insist.”

“Believe me, baby. We will be fucking so much that you won’t be able to walk.” I leaned down and kissed her. “Do I need to get you another bottle? I can do it before I go train.”

She shook her head. “I’ll do it after breakfast. I’m meeting John in his office to sign some shipping ledgers after you leave.” She wrinkled her nose. “I ordered quite a bit yesterday.”

Clicking my tongue, I slid my hand over her ass and pinched. “Do you need to be punished?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Only if you make it hurt really bad.”

As I was about to kiss her, we were interrupted by a door knock. We both groaned and then laughed as I kissed her anyway. “Come see me today, please. I need a mid-morning, mid-afternoon, mid-hour Raven break.”

“I promise.” She kissed me again. “Go before she breaks our door.”

I nodded, but before I left, I kissed her once more. “You make me so wildly unhinged.”

“My love,” she whispered against my lips. “You have no idea.”



JOHN CALLED my name when I walked out the door with Jeanine and Luca. We all turned, but he motioned for them to go on and then for me to follow him. Cade passed by me as I changed direction to return to the castle, stopping to look at John. “Why do you need him?”

John looked at Cade. “Nothing that concerns you, Cade.”

Cade looked between the two of us and decided to test boundaries. Again. “I’m an adviser.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I have a right to know.”

“You’re right,” John said. “When it has to do with matters of this kingdom and its inhabitants, you do. But Zeke is the Prince of Reales and unfortunately doesn’t answer to you.”

It was odd to hear my father defend me, but I kept quiet and tried to hide my smirk.

“Does it have to do with Raven?”

“Again,” John said, growing annoyed. “Nothing about the royalty of another kingdom allows for your inspection or opinion. In fact, you’re disobeying your queen’s orders by prying and not training.”

“You know,” Cade said, wagging his finger between us, “I don’t think I like this secrecy between the two of you, and I don’t think Raven would like it either. It may be time for you to retire, John, now that your family matters interfere with your job.”

Tightening my jaw, I stepped between Cade and my father. “Unlike your relationship with Raven, she and I do not have secrets. She is well aware of every move I make.” I took a step closer to Cade, lowering my voice. “And do not believe yourself so important that you threaten a member of my family again.”

“Zeke,” John said. “Think of Raven.”

Sighing through my nose, I took a step away from Cade. I was getting fucking tired of having to rein in my anger around this guy, but for Raven, I would continue to hold out.

Cade grinned. “Every man has a weakness.” And it was all he said as he left, walking outside.

I watched after him, fists balled at my sides. “Was *that* a threat?”

John sighed behind me. “Honestly? I don’t know anymore. I stay with her during the day. If anything happens, I’ll be there. Their interactions will be far and few between.”

“Where is she now?”

“Dining with Luisa. She’s meeting me in my office afterward.”

Nodding, I turned and followed him to his office. We may cross paths on my way out. I just needed to see her and know she was safe. Between River, Mira, Cade, Melik’s warning... I was contemplating having us sewn together all over again.

He shut the door behind me as I entered his office. I hadn’t ever been in here before. It wasn’t as large as Mira’s, but it was spacious, and one of our family portraits from our manor was hanging up on one of the walls. It was of the four of us before John had left, maybe a year before Raven was born. “How did you get that?”

John followed my gaze and smiled as he turned back around to rifle through some papers on his desk. “Raven brought back the majority of portraits from the manor. Did she not show you?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “She tried. I wasn’t ready to see them yet.”

“Hm,” he hummed, pulling out a piece of parchment from the middle of the pile. “She brought back many things from your childhood room. I think it would mean a lot to her if you looked.”

I nodded with a slight frown. “I know. I will.”

He handed me the parchment, giving me a moment to read over it. “Everything you requested is on there. Any children you sire with Raven will be heirs to both kingdoms, but your firstborn son will immediately follow the line of succession in Reales. Raven requested that a daughter follow her, even if born the youngest.”

I grinned, shaking my head. “Best of luck to any man who tries to court a daughter I may have.”

“And each child will have the right to abdicate once declared king or queen of either kingdom.”

“If something happens to me, what will Raven get?”

“If one of you passes, doesn’t the other?”

“That’s the rumor, but just in case. I want her protected.”

“She has her kingdom. What else do you want her to have?”

“Everything of mine. All earthy possessions need to go to her. And what happens if we die while our children are alive? Where will they go?”

“Ah,” he said, pursing his lips. “I hadn’t thought of that. Where would you like them to go?”

“To family.” I cleared my throat, handing him back the parchment. “You and mom first, Luca second. Jeanine needs to be a godmother.”

He swallowed as he took it from me, his eyes filling with tears, but he nodded in response. “I can have this updated for you by this afternoon. I will let you know when it is finished.”

I motioned for him to hand me back the parchment and laid it down on the table, taking a quill to sign my name across it. “I trust you. Just add those, please. Have Raven sign it, too.”

“I will have it done before she comes in to sign the shipping ledgers.”

“Thank you.” I tossed the quill back on his desk and headed to the door, laughing. “Tell her to stop spending so

much money while you're at it."

"That was my fault," he joked. "I shouldn't have told her she had budgets for projects."

"Knowledge in the palm of someone with a heart like Raven is dangerous."

He sighed, hitting the stack of ledgers waiting for her signature with his fist. "Tell me about it."



I WALKED toward the dining hall, pausing and ducking in a doorway as she glided out of the dining room, giggling about something with Luisa. I smiled as I listened to her, my smile widening as something she said made Luisa laugh even louder.

Peeking out from my hiding space, I watched as they parted, and she began walking in my direction. She had changed and was wearing a fancier dress than I had grown used to seeing her in. It was made of gold fabrics and flowed effortlessly with her through every movement, even when she twirled once down the hall and began humming a song. I felt like I was falling in love with her all over again.

Everything about her was so effervescent.

She had a delicate gold diadem that stood out against the black of her hair, which was falling in curls over her shoulders. It looked as if she had attempted to brush it, but the waves were bouncy, and she was muttering something as she tried to run her fingers through the bottoms of her strands.

"You know they say only crazy people talk to themselves," I said as she walked by.

She jumped and turned toward the sound of my voice, breaking into a wide smile as she spotted me. "I believe I've told you before that I never claimed to be sane."

"Mm," I hummed, coming out from the darkness of the doorway. "And now?"

She crossed her eyes. "I believe I am madder than before."

I broke into a laugh. “I’ve never been able to do that.”

“What? This?” She crossed her eyes again and blew out her cheeks.

Everything about her made me feel warm all over.

Squishing her cheeks out, I kissed her smushed lips. “You know what I’m mad about?”

She gasped and shook free of my hold, grabbing the skirt of her dress and swaying it back and forth. “Could it possibly be... me?”

I nodded, following her as she walked backward down the hall, spinning on her tiptoes and hopping just out of my reach every time I went to grab her.

She clicked her tongue. “Excuse me, sir, but I am a married woman. I cannot be flirting with strange yet unfairly handsome men who lurk in my hallways.”

I grinned. “And just where is this husband of yours?”

She stopped twirling and put a finger against her chin, tapping it like she was deep in thought. “I would imagine off brooding somewhere.”

“But only because he misses you, I bet.”

She shrugged dramatically and sighed even more so. “Do you really believe so?”

“I do, *but*.” I caught her as she giggled, bringing her to me. “If I were your husband, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight.”

She dragged a finger down my chest. “What else would you do if you were my husband?”

I leaned down and kissed her neck.

“He’ll kill you, you know.”

Walking her backward into another unused room, I pinned her against the wall with my hips. “I’d like to see him try,” I responded, cupping her chin in my hand and pressing my lips to hers.

She responded hungrily, pushing her tongue into my mouth. I tangled mine with hers, wanting to devour the sounds escaping from her.

Raising her dress, I pulled it over her body.

“I really shouldn’t,” she whispered, lifting my shirt.

“He’ll never find out,” I promised, yanking my shirt the rest of the way off. “I can make you scream.”

She hooked her fingers into my pants, shoving them down. “So can he.”

I bent and grabbed her thighs, bringing them up until she was wrapped around me. Fisting my cock in my hand, I aligned the tip with her entrance. “I can make you see stars.”

She ran the tip of her tongue across my bottom lip. “So can he.”

Chills went... everywhere. “I can make you come harder than you ever have,” I promised.

Before she could argue, I pushed into her. Her eyes rolled back as I filled her wholly, her head falling back against the wall.

Tangled limbs, mangled moans and whimpers, sweat pooling all over our bodies, and so much love between us that it filled the room we were in.

She sighed when I leaned forward to kiss her tattoo and tangled her fingers in my hair. “Who feels better?”

She lowered her head to meet my stare, smiling. “My husband does.”

I whispered her name, nipping across her collarbone.

“Always him.”

The smell of her sweat with mine made my bucks into her frantic, my tongue circling her nipples. She begged me to let her come, crying my name. I wrapped my hand around her throat and squeezed until I could feel her pulse against my fingers. “See stars, my love.”

Her walls clenched around my cock, her warmth cascading down. Her lips were slack as I held my grip on her throat while pushing through her climax — the perfect shade of purpled pink, her moans strained against my hand.

I kissed her as I released into her, only letting go of her throat after I filled her full of my cum.

She drew in short, labored breaths. My forehead fell against her shoulder as I tried to steady my thunderous heartbeat. I stayed inside her, even after turning and sliding down the wall until we were on the ground.

She straddled me, her chest still heaving against mine.

As I tilted her chin, she stared at me like she could see everything my dark soul was made of, and still with so much love behind her eyes. She was slowly repairing all the holes my hatred had burrowed into inside me.

Everything. She was absolutely everything.

She collided her mouth with mine, already hungry again.

I fed her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



RAVEN

Six days had passed, and they had been so wonderful that I asked him last night to try and scatter it since we surely couldn't go this long without arguing. He had laughed so hard from that that he'd fallen off the bed. When he landed on the floor, it was so loud that Jeanine and Luca banged on our door to make sure one of us wasn't hurt. And then we decided on a late-night picnic on our balcony, eating cupcakes that Jeanine and I had run downstairs to bake.

Zeke and Luca told us stories from their childhood. Zeke went through a phase as a young child where he wanted to be a monkey and climbed anything he could, including doors. When Alice became sick of it, she told him that he was allergic to bananas which meant he could not possibly live his life as a monkey. When truly, he wasn't allergic to bananas; they had all been lying to him. The shock on his face had us spitting out our wine and cackling.

Jeanine told us about her parents, whom Zeke and Luca knew. Her father had been involved with steel production as a blacksmith, providing his family well. Their family was well-known in their town, which was how Jeanine secured a court position quickly after her father died in an accident. Her mother passed away shortly after from a broken heart. She had no brothers or sisters, so she relied heavily on Mira to fill that gap.

That had me looking at Zeke, only to find him staring at me. When he was stabbed in Reales, it felt like my soul was shredding into pieces — like I was fading as he was. It made me wonder if I was somehow tied that deeply to him — that if he died, I would go, too — if we could even survive in this world without one another. Could our bond be *that* deep? That death itself couldn't tear us apart?

River seemed to think so.

After that, Zeke held my hand for the rest of the night and didn't let go. We all fell asleep in a heap of blankets and pillows, awoken by the sun's warming rays. And extremely hungover.

Again.

I'd been the first one up, and they were all cursing at me for waking them, but they needed to go. They bounded up so fast once they realized what time it was that Zeke and Luca knocked heads and stumbled backward, making me and Jeanine erupt into a fit of giggles all over again. They chased us out of the bedroom and didn't stop until we were outside. Zeke's bright smile was the last thing I saw before he disappeared down the path with them.

Our situation wasn't good, but even with the stress, he'd been smiling more.

But Cade still refused to talk to me. I had tried multiple times when I would catch them walking back to the castle. The four of us had made it a habit to go to Duck's every night, and I had tried inviting him twice, but he refused each time. Even when I would visit them during the day while they trained, he would barely look at me, and even though things were different between us now, it still hurt my feelings that he was so against me choosing happiness and refusing to be part of it.

It turned out that I had been wrong about our friendship the entire time. It couldn't withstand anything.

When I wasn't watching Zeke bark orders, I was at the docks or with Alice getting her shoppe set up. The bolts of fabric had come in, and when she saw me staring at an ivory

one, she promised that one day, she would make me a proper wedding dress, whether we ever had an actual wedding or not.

And, I had finally received my first shipment of food for the army. It was mostly bread and cheeses, but I had been unprepared to feed two hundred more mouths and keep the village well-stocked for my people. I delivered more blankets to them yesterday, and they seemed grateful, a considerable improvement from when they first arrived here.

And serving my people in this capacity compared to when everything had been so simple... well, I felt like their queen for the first time in my reign.

And now, I was tasked with finding more land to build cottages. After turning away a family of five yesterday due to a lack of cottages, I told John that we had no choice — we had to build more. I couldn't continue telling people no and risk them going to Reales instead.

Every evening before drinks at Duck's, I would have dinner with Luisa, John, and Alice. Isla joined us last night, and I filled her in on everything, including marrying Zeke. She hadn't met him since he was never home while she was awake, but I promised to find a time to bring him by soon.

And along with inviting Cade, I tried convincing Grace to join us for drinks, but she was still too intimidated to be around Zeke and Luca, not that I could blame her. There were cute boys in our village, but those brothers were *men*.

And to my disappointment, she hadn't found any information on River. I increased her salary and named her my official lineage researcher. John had laughed since that was an entirely made-up position, but a needed one.

I would try not to think about River, but every time I was near the water, it pulled at my heartstrings to know that he believed I was his enemy.

I kept having to repeat the word 'time' to myself, but I wasn't a very patient person. Neither was Zeke, and I was currently running behind to meet them for drinks. I had fallen

asleep in the bathtub while taking a bath and only woke up because I had nearly drowned.

But I was going to try not to tell him that.

He was standing at the door of Duck's as I approached, his arms crossed over his chest. The second he saw me, he rushed to me and wrapped his arms around my waist, crashing his lips against mine. "Where were you?" He pulled at my wet braid, frowning. "Bathed without me, did you?"

I tried to devise an excuse quickly, but he immediately sensed it on me and cocked an eyebrow. "Fine. I fell asleep in the bathtub and nearly drowned, but I'm okay. Obviously."

He released me and grabbed my hand, pulling me back toward the castle.

"Where are we going?"

"To sleep."

I laughed and shook my hand free of his grip. He tried to grab me again, but I jogged backward. "Raven, you're tired. We don't need to do this tonight."

"I look forward to this all day, and we're leaving tomorrow. Come on. We won't stay long."

I puckered out my bottom lip, and his eyes rolled, but he relented and motioned me to go inside. I planted my feet and put my hands on my hips. "Kiss me first, you buffoon."

He gasped and wrapped my braid around his wrist, drawing my head back. "Is that because I wanted to be a monkey?"

"That's because you're purely primal when it comes to me."

He growled and wrapped his other arm around my waist, bringing me flush against him. He skimmed my jawline with his lips, and I sighed when the tip of his tongue skated down my neck. I was suddenly very awake and famished. "Let's go *sleep*," he whispered.

“Mm.” It was all I could get out as he pulled down my sleeve and kissed my shoulder. “How can you be so good with your mouth?”

“A lot of practice,” he replied.

I stiffened, and he sighed, pausing his movements. “That came out wrong,” he muttered.

I put my hands between us and palmed his chest, shoving him a step away.

“Baby, I meant with you.”

“Even I can taste that lie,” I mumbled, turning from him.

I stepped toward the door, but he grabbed my wrist and yanked me back, kissing me as if his life depended on it. I was irritated but didn't have it in me to stop him.

When he pulled away, he trapped me against the outer wall of the pub. “There was no lie, Raven. I have taken great pride in knowing where to put my mouth on you to make you crazy.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but I had no words. I couldn't argue with that because it made sense. So, I grinned sheepishly.

“Believe me; I did not put in even half the effort with others I do with you. I only cared about my pleasure, and even that wasn't an ounce of what you give me.”

“Say more,” I breathed.

His grin widened into a smile. “Yours is the only face I've ever wanted to see. Seeing you sweating, writhing with pleasure....” He grabbed my bottom lip between his fingers. “Seeing your plump little mouth form the perfect shape right before you come... it's enough to send me over.” He kissed my lip so gently before releasing it. “Always you, Raven. Only, always you.”

It seemed impossible to be this in love with someone.

“If we don't go in now, I'll fuck you right here,” he whispered.

“One more kiss,” I replied, as dangerous as it was.

He chuckled, tracing the outline of my cheekbone with his fingertip. “It will never be just one kiss with you, Raven. If I kiss you now, I won’t be able to stop. If I kiss you now....”

I didn’t give him a chance to finish before I grabbed his jacket and pulled him down, pressing my lips to his. He groaned into my mouth, and every one of my senses was heightened. Right as it was about to get interesting, right as I was about to drag him back to the castle, the door to the pub opened, and Luca sighed loudly. “You were right,” he shouted. “They’re at it again.”

Even Zeke started to laugh as he broke from me, pulling me against him so I could bury my face against his chest.

“You two have an entire castle, yet somehow that isn’t enough for you,” Luca continued.

I felt Zeke shrug before he kissed the top of my head. “She can’t get enough of me.”

I scowled and shoved him off, running my hand down my braid to smooth it. “I’ve had plenty,” I lied, smacking his stomach with the back of my hand. “We’re coming.”

“I bet you are,” Luca said with a grin before walking back inside.

“I don’t particularly care for either of you,” I grumbled while following him.

“Liar,” Zeke said, keeping his arm around my waist like it would take sheer force to pull us apart.

Or... Jeanine. As she rushed to me and grabbed my hand, he sighed and let me go, knowing there was no point in trying to keep me from her. “You were late,” she said, pulling me to an empty stool.

“I fell asleep in the bathtub,” I said through a giggle.

She snorted and slid me her drink. I swirled it around before I slowly drank from it, giving Zeke the brightest smile as he came to sit beside me and kissed my cheek.

“I have fallen asleep in the bathtub many times,” Jeanine said, drawing my attention back to her. “Are you a little excited to go to Thoya tomorrow? I know you haven’t traveled there in a long time.”

“Since I was a kid,” I confirmed. “I didn’t see anything and didn’t want to be there. I stayed in the castle the entire time. I am curious to see what it looks like — if it’s as dull and gray as Reales is.”

“It’s not,” Zeke cut in.

I was reminded of what Jeanine had told me the night of our wedding — that he would sometimes disappear for days. I hadn’t asked where he went, and I didn’t particularly want to know what he had filled his time with.

“It’s bright,” he continued. “Their castle is white with a black roof. It’s lovely. It’s situated in rolling countryside, surrounded by tall trees. Taller than yours, than Reales. I love visiting Thoya.”

“I’m sure you do,” Jeanine interjected.

I bit the inside flesh of my cheek to keep from laughing as he glared at her. Obviously, that was where he had spent his time when he would disappear.

Winking at Jeanine, I shrugged. “It’s okay. I’ve had my fair share of Thoya when they would visit here for the festivals.”

Zeke growled and stood, going to sit by Luca at one of the smaller tables in the center of the room. “Everyone in Thoya is nice,” Luca said. “I went once with Zeke. It’s enormous. The trees are very green, and there’s a trader’s market. You may find some things to bring home. Like for your brother.” He looked at me with big, innocent eyes.

“If I manage to make it out of there without killing Mira, I will try and stop to pick things up for the two of you. Any requests?”

“I need new shoes and clothes,” Jeanine said.

“New boots and they make delicious fudge.” And then Luca slyly looked at his brother. “Zeke is a big fan of it.”

I narrowed my eyes slightly at my husband, who rolled his. “I ate all of Luca’s. Don’t listen to him when he’s being a dick.” He punched Luca in the arm. “She’s already threatened to annul our marriage once, prick.”

“Only once?” Arthur interjected, making everyone but Zeke laugh.

“What about you, Arthur? Anything from Thoya?”

He poured more rum into my glass. “Just your safe return, Raven.”

I smiled at him and tipped my glass before guzzling the remainder. The sound of the door opening had all of us turning our heads toward it, silencing as Cade entered. He cleared his throat and tilted his chin toward something outside. I leaned forward to look out the window behind the bar to see John standing outside. “He needs our help,” Cade said.

After bidding Arthur goodnight, we followed Cade outside. John waved but looked exhausted. We had been going nonstop these last few days, and his breaks were far and few between. “I know it’s late, but some of the boys on our kitchen staff left to join our army. The chefs have been bogged down with preparing enough food to keep the armies fed on top of us and asked if we could help by catching fish for them to serve while Zeke and Raven are in Thoya.”

Zeke asked, “How many fish are we talking about?”

John ran a hand over his mouth, seemingly stifling a yawn. “Thirty or so, I’d say.”

“Fuck,” Luca groaned. “That’s a lot.”

“We can do it,” I said. “Between the five of us, it won’t take too much time. John, go to sleep. You’ll have plenty to do while I’m gone and need your rest.”

When he tried to argue, it was Zeke who agreed with me. “She’s right, John. We’ve got this.”

Exhaustion overcame his guilt, and he expressed his gratitude before leaving us. Zeke then looked at me with a slight grin. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

“Nope,” Cade answered for me, shaking his head as he sighed.

I looked between them. “What?”

“For a skilled fisherman, catching that many fish could go quickly. Zeke and I used to do it for fun as kids, but that was long ago,” Luca said.

“For the five of us? We could be out there all night,” Zeke finished.

“Oh,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “Sorry.”

Jeanine laughed and shrugged. “We better start now. You two have a ship to catch in the morning.”



ZEKE LED the pack of us through the Black Forest. We decided that since we would need to catch them by hand, our best bet was to do it in the semi-shallow water of the small dock by our spring. We had stopped by the castle first to grab a couple of wicker baskets to hold any fish we managed to catch, though I wasn't feeling like thirty would be possible after Zeke tried explaining to me how to do it.

Cade was walking a few paces ahead, and I jogged a little to catch up to him. He quickly grabbed my elbow as I stumbled over a root poking out from the ground to keep me from falling. “Watch where you're going, Raven.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, glancing over at him. “Have you ever done this before?”

“As a kid,” he answered. “My dad taught me.”

“In Reales, I found a letter from my father.”

He didn't look at me, but I could tell he was listening.

“It mentioned your father. It said that he left me with a friend he trusted.”

He nodded, moving a low branch out of the way. “They were close. I barely remember Leonidas, but we frequently

dined with him at the castle.”

“Why didn’t your parents just... keep me? You were young and didn’t have siblings.”

“My parents were well-known. It wouldn’t have made sense for them to suddenly have a child to care for, especially one that looked similar to the lost princess.”

It was the most he had said to me in days. And while I still wish they would’ve told me, I understood his explanation. It would’ve brought up more questions about who I was. “How is training going?”

The progress we’d made dissipated. “The training you banished me to?”

“Cade,” I sighed. “I didn’t banish you. You were needed there.”

“Your *friend* doesn’t need me there, Raven. He wants me away from you.”

I frowned, wondering if this would be the time to tell him that Zeke was not, in fact, my *friend*. “Our men need you there. They must see that their leaders will be by their side during this.”

“Watch it,” he said but didn’t try to grab me again as I tripped over another root.

Luca caught me as I stumbled to the ground, brushing only a palm against it before he pulled me up. He stopped and waited while I brushed my hand off, ignoring the tears burning my eyes — not from nearly falling, but from the fact that Cade was not himself.

Sensing me, Zeke glanced at me over his shoulder and frowned, coming back to where we stood. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled, dusting my palm on my pants. “I tripped.”

He inhaled deeply through his nose, eyes flaring. “You’re lying.”

I shook my head, though it was pointless. “Zeke, he didn’t do anything to me.”

Slowly, he turned his head over his shoulder as Cade continued to the spring, not looking back. I tugged on his sleeve, waiting until he looked at me again. “I truly did trip. See?” I kicked at the root I had fallen over. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

He bent down, grunting as he ripped the overgrown root from the ground, tossing it into the distance. “I will not tolerate this for much longer, Raven.”

“How did you do that?”

He shrugged, taking my hand and pulling me into step beside him. “Impressed, little demon?”

“That you just ripped a root from the ground because I tripped over it? Maybe a little.”

We came upon the spring, and Zeke brought my hand to his lips, kissing my palm. “Care for a swim, my love?”

Chewing on the corner of my lip to hide my smile, I nodded. He bent over and grabbed me, throwing me over his shoulder but instead of taking me to the spring, he ran with me to the dock and jumped into the water.

Gasping from the chilly bite of the water as I came up, I shoved a palmful of water toward him as he appeared from underneath. “That is *not* what I meant!”

I turned my head from the splash of Luca and Jeanine beside us, ducking under as Zeke tried to dump handfuls of water on top of my head.

He pulled me up from underneath with an arm around my waist and sloppily dragged me to the shallow end until we could stand. “All right, Queen. Let’s teach you how to catch a fish.”

Cade entered the water from the other side of the dock and set the two wicker baskets on the pier. Jeanine and Luca swam to stand on the other side of Zeke. “Hold your hands like this... like you’re holding a loaf of bread between them.”

I mirrored what he was doing with his hands and nodded, watching as he silently took slow steps forward and stared into the water. Luca did the same and moved a body's length away from him. And when Zeke beckoned me over with his finger, he quickly rolled his eyes as my steps were louder and definitely not slow. "Raven," he sighed. "You're going to scare them away."

"Oh," I whispered, creeping closer to him on my tiptoes.

He stifled a grin. "Now you're going to scare me away."

I swatted his arm before mimicking his hands again.

"The trick, — he explained, taking another step — "is to be patient and wait for them to come to you."

Luca and Zeke thrust their hands at the same time into the water and came up with flopping fish. I gaped, looking into the water while they carried them to the basket. And when a fish swam in front of my legs, I put my entire body into lunging for it, yelping as I fell face forward into the water.

I came up to howling from the annoying brothers, stomping my foot in the muddy water as I crossed my arms over my chest. "I did what you said!"

Zeke was trying to stop laughing, but his doubling over while he tried to draw in breaths only added to my frustration as I turned away from him and tried to find another fish.

Locating one, I tracked it with my eyes and lowered closer to the water before I lunged.

I came up out of the water again, growling in frustration.

"Raven," Zeke called to me, beckoning me closer to him.

I huffed, crossing my arms again.

"Baby." He came to me instead and pulled me to him. "You can't be excellent at everything, my love."

"Are you saying I am not good at catching fish?"

He dragged his bottom teeth across his upper lip to keep from smiling. "I am saying that you are talented in so many other areas." He tugged at my crossed arms. "Why don't you

and Jeanine go swimming?” He nodded backward toward Jeanine, flinging herself into the water as I had. “We’ve got this. Even Cade has caught a few.”

I looked over at his basket on the dock. It looked like a handful had already been caught between the three.

“But I want to help,” I said. “I got you into this.”

“You help tremendously by just being near me, little mouse.” He kissed me, tugging on the end of my loosened braid. “It won’t take us long. Wade out a little farther and swim with Jeanine.”

“Fine,” I sighed, smiling as Luca started shoving Jeanine toward me.

“She’s scaring all the fish away,” Luca complained. “Take her with you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



RAVEN

Jeanine and I were on our backs, floating peacefully on the water and staring at the moon. The men weren't far but didn't speak as they quickly tried to catch the thirty fish we needed. I was shifted into Blaze to keep warm since it was still chilly outside from winter ending only days ago.

"It doesn't seem like it's going well with Cade," Jeanine said, threading her fingers through mine.

Through our locked fingers, I shared heat with her, laughing as she shivered from the sudden burst of heat mixing with the bite of the water.

I turned my head just enough to look at Cade and frowned. "He's the one who taught me how to swim. I wish he'd forgive me."

"Raven." She pulled me closer to her. "There is nothing to forgive. You've done nothing wrong."

"I thought I was clear with him in Reales. He asked me to come back to him, but I thought..." I trailed off, looking away from him. "I don't know."

"I think he needs time. He'll meet someone else eventually."

"I hope so," I said honestly. "I want him to be as happy as I am. Maybe once I have more time, I could try and find someone for him."

“Raven!” Zeke called. “You’re too far!”

I turned my head toward him and cursed, realizing we had floated farther away than we meant to. We twisted to our stomachs and began paddling back, but Jeanine was getting there quicker than I. The water seemed to push me backward, tiring my arms out quickly as I swam forward.

I stilled in the water, which seemed to settle around me, but it pushed me back even farther when I tried paddling again. “I can’t,” I said, using my legs to try and kick closer.

Luca noticed something wrong as he called my name, starting to take steps closer. “Raven, why are you sinking?”

In my attempt to swim to them, I hadn’t noticed that only my mouth, nose, and eyes were above water.

And that was when I realized what was happening.

“It’s River!” I screamed but barely got the words out before I was pulled under. Not by a human or anything physical; it was by pure force.

I thrashed against the current, pulling me lower and lower from the surface, but it seemed to cradle my legs to prevent me from kicking my way up.

This couldn’t be it. This couldn’t be how I died. Death by evil twin. That would not be my story.

Think, Raven.

I stopped thrashing and stared at my hands. Fire wouldn’t work, and wind couldn’t help me.

I shifted into Frost and thrust my hands out, spraying ice until it cocooned me. It froze the water pulling me down, giving me a long enough chance to kick my way to the surface and draw in one single breath before I was pulled under again.

I could hear the screams and shouts for me above water as they tried to find me, but I was dragged under quicker this time, and instead of being pulled, it felt like I was pushed.

Why was he doing this? Mira needed me. Unless he was doing this on his own. Did he genuinely hate me that much?

Enough to come to Seolia alone? And instead of trying to talk to me, he just wanted to kill me. And as my lungs started to burn, I knew that was exactly what he was doing.

Killing me.

But *why*? He would lose his magic, too.

I shot more ice out of my hands, spraying everywhere I could, but any time I could free myself, more water would surround me and drag me under.

Death.

I was immortal as death.

I didn't have time to second-guess myself as I shifted into Morana, the need for air in my lungs disappearing. I loosened my ribbons from my fingers, and they encircled me like a shield, protecting me against the current pushing me down.

And the water itself seemed to let go of me, stilling around me once more like it always had.

I cocked my head under water and shifted into Blaze. The second I did, the water returned with a vengeance, pushing me down again.

But when I shifted into Morana, it stopped again.

My elements. He could feel me when I was an element, but not as a spirit.

He wasn't on the island. This was part of the control he had over water. It could reach me from Reales because he could feel me. He had conquered his element well enough to control it from hundreds of miles away.

My envy awakened Morana's need for life, and when a fish swam in front of me, I let my ribbons go and waited while they took its life, bringing it back to me.

When arms wrapped around my waist, I knocked my fists against them. Just a few more fish. Just a bit more life. That was all I needed.

I was dragged onto a hard surface and practically tossed down as a blond man hovered over me, looking fearful as I

stared at him. “You would taste nice,” I whispered, raising my hand.

It was quickly pinned to my side, and I was pulled up to my feet, staring into the eyes of the beautiful man who always seemed to find me. His other hand cradled my face, putting his lips against mine.

I flinched, but he wouldn't let go.

It was a nice feeling, but what I felt inside him felt even sweeter. “Beautiful stranger,” I said with a gasp as I pulled my head free and stared at his chest. “You can let them free; free the darkness inside you.” I tapped his chest with my palm, excitedly squealing as something pulsed against my palm. “They want to be free. Your shadows want to be freed.”

He stared at me with his eyebrows drawn in and then looked down at my hand on his chest.

“We could take over the world.” I tilted my head slowly. “Me and your shadows, we could rule over everything.”

He smiled at me. “Give her back to me, please.”

I cursed at him, trying to pull my hand away from his. “Always her, always the girl with fire. Never me, never me.”

I could feel him inside my mind, showing me an image of him and the girl with fire dancing in a room of gold — a space of gold and red roses and a kiss.

A kiss with so much passion that my entire body warmed, a kiss that made me envious of the girl with fire. I wanted to stay with him, let the shadows inside of him free to play with my ribbons. “Why won't you let them free?”

His forehead rested against mine. “Because they belong to her. The girl with fire.”

And when he kissed me again, he kissed me like he had kissed her in the memory. And when warmth rose through this mortal body, I tried to shove against him but lost and drowned by fire.



ZEKE WOULDN'T LET me speak until we were away from the water and back to the castle. They had almost caught thirty fish before River nearly drowned me, but Zeke refused to stay out there even when I offered to return to the castle with Jeanine until they finished.

He led us to the large sitting room we had never used. I had only been in here a couple of times through the entirety of my reign. Even though we didn't have use for it, it was maintained and full of outdated furniture that I saw no reason to trade out for anything newer.

But the room's focal point was the enormous fireplace that occupied most of the central wall area. And above the fireplace was a painted portrait of Leonidas, but he was young. Maybe from when he first took the throne.

We looked nothing alike, but maybe that was because I was nearly identical to Celestina. His hair was brown, his eyes the same. But unlike the portraits of my mother, Leonidas's expression was kind, which I had inherited from him.

I threw a ball of fire into the fireplace, lighting the wood ablaze as Jeanine and Luca sat down in front of it. We were all soaking wet, but Zeke didn't seem to care as he began pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace.

Cade lingered close to the door and hadn't stopped staring at me. Any time I was shifted into Morana, my memories of my time as her were blurry, but I did remember blond hair and had a feeling he'd seen me as the evil spirit lurking inside of me.

"I need you to tell me what happened," Zeke said.

I watched him pace back and forth as I tried to recall. "I was trying to swim back to you but couldn't. It felt like the water was dragging me backward, and when I realized it was River, it pulled me under."

“The water?” Zeke asked, running a hand through his hair. “The water itself pulled you down?”

I nodded, looking at my legs as I tried to think of a way to explain. “It was like it wrapped around my legs, and I couldn’t kick free. My ice freed me long enough to breathe, but he caught me again quickly.”

Jeanine looked as stressed as Zeke. “But how? He’s not on the island. We would’ve known.”

“His ability to control his element is...” I trailed off, shaking my head. “He could feel me. When I was an element, he was able to feel me. When I shifted into Morana, he couldn’t.”

“Because it’s not you,” Zeke said, stopping to stare at me. “We’ve known that. He can’t feel you when you’re her because she’s a spirit. She shouldn’t be in a body.”

“But... it protects Raven,” Luca said. “If she’s Morana, he won’t be able to harm her.”

“We are not letting Morana free. The more Raven shifts into her, the harder she becomes to push away because she wants to be let out. I feel less of Raven every time.” Zeke looked from Luca to me again. “You have to become as controlled as him. You have more elements. Water may be the strongest, but you need a defense system against him.”

“Why would River want to kill her?” It was Cade who asked as he took a step into the room. “If Mira needs her and knows that killing her would cause him to lose his element, it doesn’t make sense.”

“He wasn’t trying to kill her,” Zeke said. “It was a warning. He doesn’t want her to feel safe on her island. It’s control.”

“But Mira should be on her way to Thoya,” I said, sliding out of my wet boots. “He’s acting alone.”

“Unless he’s with her,” Zeke countered.

“I guess we’ll find out when we get there,” Cade said.

Zeke and I looked at each other. We hadn't planned on bringing Cade. The fewer people I brought with me, the less risk I took against losing one of them. And Zeke had traveled to Thoya often; he knew the royal family and their protocols.

I licked across my lips. "Can you give us a second?"

Zeke hesitated but nodded and beckoned for Jeanine and Luca to follow him into the hallway.

I will be right outside the door, he said into my mind.

I had become used to constantly feeling him in a specific corner of my mind, like he had created his own space to talk to me.

I turned toward Cade and gave him a small smile as they filtered out. "Sorry if I scared you earlier."

He moved closer toward me while nodding slowly. "You... she... it said I would taste nice."

I couldn't help but laugh a little as I stared into the fire. "Morana takes life for her own. I feel immortal when I shift into her. I was able to breathe underwater."

"But you can't control her?"

I shook my head, giving him a slight shrug. "I'm not supposed to have her. I don't think she's fond of me."

He came to stand beside me and slid his hands into his pockets, rocking a little on his heels. "I miss you, Raven."

My smile was soft as I looked at him. "I miss you, too." But when he loosened a hand from his pocket and grabbed mine to bring up to his lips, I gently pulled it away. "But not like that, Cade. I miss you as my friend."

Sighing, he stuck his hand in his hair and tugged at the strands. "I don't understand this, Raven. We were fine before I left. You said you wanted time, so I left to give you that time."

"You left because I wouldn't fuck you," I argued. "You left because I wasn't giving you what you wanted."

"But you'll give it to him?" He looked sick as he turned from me and stared out into the hallway.

I knew Zeke was listening to every word said and most likely being held back by both Luca and Jeanine.

“Cade,” I sighed. No answer would make this better. “He makes me happy. You should be happy for me, maybe not right now, but maybe....”

“No,” he snapped, his features hardened as he looked at me again. “If you hope this ends in your favor with me living peacefully with him, you will be disappointed.”

“And what exactly does that mean?”

“That it’ll either be him or me.” The distance between us closed so quickly that I stumbled back a step. “You have a choice to make, Raven. Do you want me in your life? He has to go. And you’ll need to make it fast because I am not traveling on a ship with him to Thoya.”

“Cade, I wasn’t planning on bringing you to Thoya. It will be just him and me.”

I didn’t miss that his hands balled into fists or Zeke standing in the doorway a second later.

“Raven,” Zeke said in warning.

“Cade, it doesn’t have to be like this.” I tried to touch his arm, but he jerked it away. “Just because we can’t be together doesn’t mean it has to be bad between us. I still value you in my life, on my court.”

“He is not right for you, Raven. I will make you see that.”

“Cade, he will forever be in my life.”

“Raven,” Zeke said again, stepping into the room.

Sighing, I rubbed my forehead. I still loved Cade, and even though it wasn’t the way he wanted me to, I didn’t want him out of my life. He had been by my side for so long that I wanted us to return to how we were before Zeke came into my life. “Cade, please. I will talk to you when I return. We can make it okay between us again; I know we can.”

I didn’t try reaching for him again, and he said nothing else as I grabbed my boots off the ground and took Zeke’s

hand.

Jeanine gave me a small smile as she slid an arm around my shoulders. “You did your best, Raven.”

I nodded, but as I looked back inside the room at Cade staring into the fire, I knew my best wasn’t good enough.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



RAVEN

*J*frowned as we departed the dock the following day.

He wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his chin on my head. “We will be back, Raven.” But even he lacked the confidence he usually had in his voice.

It sounded as if he were trying to convince himself, too.

For the first night since we returned from Reales, we had slept the entire night. We didn’t speak of River, Cade, or seeing Mira; he only wanted to hold me. And he did all night long — he held me against his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around me, my face nuzzled into his neck. We didn’t move all night, and we didn’t make love; we simply existed together because we were both scared.

If it hadn’t been for Morana, I wasn’t sure I would’ve survived last night.

We were sailing with Godfrey and a minimal crew this time. Even being the skilled sailor he was, Zeke wanted to take every opportunity to spend time alone with me, and he couldn’t do that if he had to be responsible for sailing.

I watched the water when he disappeared below deck to unload our trunk for the short trip.

It used to be a safe place away from the castle. It made me feel as if our island was protected on all sides, like somehow no one could reach us that way. And I’d always been drawn to

it, and now I was fearful of entering it again. Because no matter how far away I was from him, I worried he would always be able to feel me. And he had stolen away the safety I'd always felt — now, being on my island made me feel as if I were stuck in the glass box from my nightmares.

And how could he feel me, but I couldn't feel him?

Would I feel him if he walked through fire, touched a tree, and palmed snow?

Or was the connection to my elements just not strong enough?

And as I stared into the black murkiness of the water beneath us, the fear of being pulled under sprang to my mind, and no one loved fear more than Morana.

Numbness crawled through my legs as my thoughts darkened into nothing but silence. And as I began gasping for air, searching for that one breath I so desperately craved, Zeke spun me and cupped my face in his hands. My ears rang as I tried to claw out of the desolation I felt, as he shoved into my mind to scatter the black mist.

He kissed me hard and hectically. "I'm here, Raven."

I nodded, my head falling against his chest as he held me. It was becoming more tempting to let Morana free each day because no one could hurt me there.

And I wouldn't have to feel... everything.

He touched the tips of our noses together. "You were in there deep, baby. I couldn't feel you."

"Take me to bed," I whispered.

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me downstairs into the small cabin and sat me on the edge of the bed. "I love you, Raven," he whispered, kneeling and resting his head in my lap. "What can I do? What do you need from me?"

I ran my fingers through his hair, listening to his jagged breaths, heavy with worry for me. "I need to know more about you," I said softly. "It's the only way we can break down this wall between us."

He was silent as his fingers wrapped gently around my waist. What was he so afraid to tell me?

“Beautiful stranger, she says. You’re her beautiful stranger.”

He nodded against my lap.

“But you’re mine, too. Zeke, I am desperate to know you. There is nothing about you that could push me away. Please, please, let me in.”

“You said I broke your heart.” He turned his head until his face was buried against my legs, his voice muffled as he continued, “In Reales. You said I broke your heart with the truth.” His words were heavy and laced with the pain of that memory. “I can’t do that to you again.”

“Zeke, my love.” If it were possible to cover a person with one’s heart completely, it would be the exact thing I wanted to do now. “The only way you would ever break my heart is if you loved another.” And before I could continue my speech of grandness and pretty promises, he sat up quickly with disgust on his face.

“Do not think of thoughts like that. Do not even put them into existence.”

“Then tell me.” I touched his cheek with my fingertips. “Where did you go all those years?”

He lowered his eyes and sank onto his knees. “Anywhere but there,” he answered with blunt softness.

I could see the pain in his eyes as something churned in his dark mind, something he didn’t want to share with me. “I immersed myself into whatever could take away my pain.” He turned his head into my hand and kissed my palm before sitting beside me on the bed. “I have a past, Raven. I don’t know how much you want to hear.”

I didn’t know, either. None of it. All of it. I would have rather lived not knowing any of it, but he was my husband, and I wanted every single inch of him inside and out. “Everything,” I whispered, not wholly convinced but willing.

He rested his cheek against the top of my head. I had spent so many nights letting him love me, giving him parts of me that I wanted to remain burrowed. I knew every curve of his body, but I needed his mind. I needed his beginnings.

“I’m like you in a way.” He adjusted his body, bending his knee on the bed and leaning back against the wall while taking my hand.

His eyes searched my face as if contemplating if he wanted to tell me things that could hurt me. “I’m a prince, but I didn’t believe I earned that title. It was only bestowed upon me because of John. I grew up thinking it was mine until they finally told me he was not my birth father. I wish they never had.”

The pain etched into his words would be what hurt me the most.

“When I found out, I suddenly wasn’t sure what my identity was anymore. I grew up with privileges, and things were offered to me that weren’t offered to my friends, and I liked that. It made me feel important. And as a child, feeling big can breed the need always to feel that way.”

I remained silent, even as he stared at me. I would not dare interrupt the man of few words.

“When I discovered that I wasn’t a prince, I was angry. Not angry because I gave a shit about a title, but because I had been lied to. The man who raised me, taught me to swim and fish, wasn’t who I thought he was. My mom always said there was a gloominess to me, but that grew into something much darker after discovering that he wasn’t my birth father. I felt I needed to prove worthy of the title bestowed upon me, but the harder I tried to toe the line, the less connected I felt.”

His eyes fell to the floor behind me. “I never knew the darkness sticking to me was because you were taken.”

“There was no way to know,” I said gently.

“I began to resent Luca because he was deserving of my title. It was his. Whenever I saw him and John together, I told

myself that I was being pushed out, that John only felt obligated to give me that title because of my mother.”

He laced our fingers together and brought my hand to his lips, kissing along my knuckles. I mentally braced myself for whatever was about to come. “When Rudolf became sick years ago, Mira was suddenly much more involved. I didn’t see her often since I avoided the castle when I learned I wasn’t who I thought I had been my entire life. I didn’t want that life anymore. I knew Mira learned of my abilities long ago, but my restlessness turned to anger when she began asking me to do things for her.”

He cleared his throat nervously. “I had always chased girls. I wasn’t a stranger to fucking for release.”

My skin felt taut, but I wanted him to keep going.

“The farther I could get from Reales, the better. I’d jump ships as they left, and no one could stop me because I’m *the prince*.” He said it so condescendingly that I grinned. “I would visit Thoya and find someone to distract myself with. Women just always... wanted my attention.”

He was trying to spare my feelings, but nothing about that was shocking. I wanted nothing but his attention the entire time he was in Seolia.

“It became a game. It numbed my pain — the identity crisis I was going through. So then I started hopping on ships to Perosan. All the royals would house me, and I felt like I had this big secret, like they were letting someone in that shouldn’t be there. That made me feel powerful. And because of my title and my looks, I don’t really fucking know, women wanted me. I didn’t care who it was — single, married, engaged — if I wanted them, they would know it. Not one of them ever denied me.”

He swallowed, absentmindedly skimming his lips across my knuckles. “It became boring. I was chasing something I knew I could never find in those women. It never cured my emptiness. I always felt like I was missing something. Missing you.”

I gave him a small smile.

“When I returned to Reales over a year ago, Mira had enough of my shit and imprisoned Luca and my mom. I was stuck. I had to do whatever she asked me to do. She told me that we needed to build an army, and I didn’t give a fuck as to why. I just needed my family to be safe, and I would do whatever it took. She took me to the forest. I had been there plenty of times before, but I had been gone so often over the prior months that I didn’t realize how far gone Reales had become. When we came across a group of terrible guys—” he trailed off, the look in his eyes changing into something distant.

“She told me to kill them. I grew up hunting and was decent with a bow, so I did it. I shot each one right through their skull. And it felt... good. It was my new high. Whatever changed in me that day, she saw it. She sent me into the forest every day for a week, and she’d let me kill all of them. All that anger I had built up, I finally had a way to let it out. Seeing the light leave their eyes added to the power I had grown to rely on. I felt invincible. But that wasn’t enough for Mira. Keeping our kingdom clean of criminals wasn’t her endgame. She made you believe it was when she brought you to watch me.”

I nodded.

“She had me capture them, and we’d hold them under the castle, right next to where my family was held. They would have to listen as I threatened those men, as I would shatter their memories. Kill them. The ones who agreed to join our army had free rein in town without the threat of being killed or jailed, only as long as they reported to training every day. And I was responsible for training men I had just threatened. Once word began to spread that Reales was not only giving criminals free rein but encouraging them to come, they flocked to us.”

“That’s when places started closing down. Our shop owners kept getting mugged. Merchants stopped bringing things to us, but I couldn’t stop her. I couldn’t do anything but catch those guys; it was every day, baby. All day. I would go into the forest, drag them out, and repeat that until night fell.”

A small, devious smile pulled up the corner of his mouth. “At night, I’d take my bow and kill them. I wouldn’t give them a chance to speak. I would push into their minds as soon as I saw them. I was their judge and executioner. She never knew. Or, if she did, she didn’t care because she knew I needed something to take my mind off killing her.”

He nibbled on my knuckles before resting our hands on his lap. “When Mira told me I’d be going to Seolia to seduce their queen, I didn’t even know your name — that was the truth. I had no knowledge that I was supposed to marry you, that it had always been the plan. John never shared that information with me, even after I arrived, and I believe he didn’t tell me because I’m a *little* stubborn.”

“Just a tad,” I agreed, smiling.

“But he found me in Seolia and informed me that he was worried Mira had something in mind that she wasn’t telling him. And it didn’t make sense that Jeanine was included. She had her role on court, but besides being Mira’s lover, she wasn’t a player. So, I took a page from my previous life and seduced her. It was almost too easy, and that should have been my first clue that she wanted to get away from Mira.”

He sighed from irritation. “It was pointless. Jeanine knew nothing. I would share the bits and pieces I managed to get from her, and the three of us eventually figured out that Mira was trying to get to you to incite war. John tried warning you without telling you.”

I remembered that meeting very well. “Why didn’t you come to Seolia on your trips?”

He laughed softly. “Because I couldn’t imagine there would be anyone worth fucking on your tiny island. And I think I knew I wasn’t ready for you in some way that I’ll never understand. Seolia always seemed off-limits, and I never knew why. I think it was the universe’s way of keeping us apart until I was prepared. But then I saw you. And Raven, I could never explain what I felt at that moment. Everything I had gone through was what it took to get me to that point — to stand in

front of you. The girl with purple hair and eyes of gold. Baby, you were the most enchanting creature I had ever seen.”

I smiled, but then he laughed again. “I saw you in the forest. You were my little demon, and you were killing two men. I never saw your face, but even then, I wanted you.”

He hadn’t told me that before.

“The night of the festival, I knew I was hooked when our eyes met. I would do whatever it took for you to fall in love with me. I knew what you were to me. It wasn’t until the night of the banquet, when you were asleep in the loft that I searched your memories and discovered who you are to Mira. I had a decision to make. I could either stay with you, let you fall for me, and then see your heart break when I brought you to Reales. Or, I could stay away, pull your memories, and create dreams for you.”

He continued, “I wanted to tell you, and that was the only way I could do it without risking my family. I’m the one who told Jeanine to take Cade to the pub, but even after you saw him, you still wanted me. And then you took me to the dungeon, and I learned you derived the same twisted pleasure from killing as I did. Walking away from you that night was the hardest thing I had ever done.”

He inhaled a deep breath. “I knew you would find me in the village, so I made sure to stay next to Jeanine. When I saw your face, it broke my heart.”

I frowned and climbed into his lap. He cradled my neck in his hand while his thumb brushed across my jaw. “I debated telling you everything that night. It killed me, Raven.” He leaned in and rested his forehead against mine. “It killed me to see what I’d done to you.”

“I love you,” I said on the exhale of a breath. “Keep going.”

“When Cade said he was going to propose to you, I was going to let you be happy. If you chose him, I wouldn’t try to change it. But then I felt you that night on the balcony, and I knew you still loved me.”

“I never stopped.”

“And at the ball, you kissed me and asked me not to leave you again. I screwed up. I made the wrong decision pushing you to Cade. I underestimated our connection. Since you hadn’t seen what I had and didn’t know what we were to one another, I thought it would be easy for you to let me go. It drives me insane to think about how I allowed him to touch you. You’ve been mine since I laid eyes on you.”

I nodded, pulling him back to me as he tried to pull away. He could easily separate himself from moments he didn’t want to remember, but we had gotten this far.

“Jeanine kept trying to talk me into telling you, but I wasn’t going to control your narrative. It had gone too far. You needed to learn who Mira was, and it would be your choice to accept her or not. But when you said you would sail with me, I knew that being alone for a week wasn’t possible without touching you.”

It took us less than one day to touch each other.

“I gave up, Raven. I chose to accept the consequences even if it meant we’d go to war. I would do anything if it meant we could be together. But, I still sensed hesitation from you, and I was holding on to hope that you’d still not love me enough to agree to Mira’s plan, but you almost did. I felt it in our chambers that day. All I felt from you was love. When you said my eyes are the color of your ash, I knew I was becoming to you what you’ve always been to me.”

If I kissed him, he would stop talking, but he was so tempting, especially when he would get that look of love while talking about us.

And when he smiled at me, I realized I had given myself away. “Despite what you may think or believe, I had never been in love until I met you. I didn’t know what love could be until I saw you at the festival.”

“You love me?”

He shrugged a shoulder, holding my gaze. “Maybe a little.”

I was worried my next question would scare him away. “Why don’t you like seeing John and your mother together?”

His posture changed. He stiffened as he held me, looking away. I worried that I’d lost him and pushed him too far.

“John let me down.”

Four words, but they were so heavy. And it didn’t seem like he wanted to give away any more than that, but I could tell he was trying. For me, he was trying to break down the walls he’d spent so many years building. And I didn’t want to tell him to stop.

“They revealed he wasn’t my birth father not long before he left. Not only did he sever our connection as father and son, but he left us. And I felt like I was at fault for it. That was two fathers who felt I wasn’t enough for them to stay.”

“Zeke,” I whispered, running the back of my hand down his cheek. “You were only a child. It wasn’t because of you.”

“And it would irritate me even more how... forgiving my mother was. I didn’t understand why she kept us in Reales or didn’t want to separate from him. And as the oldest son, I felt responsible for filling the holes he left us with. I tried to be a father to Luca. I worked much younger than I should’ve. He stole my childhood away from me. He left Luca with no father. He left my mother to raise us alone.”

Because he was with me. John left Zeke and Luca to watch over me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, trying to blink back tears.

And when his eyes snapped to my face, he could taste my guilt and immediately began shaking his head. “No, Raven. You are not going to blame yourself. I am grateful that he kept you safe.”

A tear slid down my cheek as I stood from his lap. “But he left you because of me.”

“Raven.” He stood with me and pulled me back to him. “I have already reconciled that you may not have made it to the throne if he hadn’t left. He ensured you were in the will and

always had eyes on you. There's even a secret tunnel in the castle that you don't know about because he wanted to have a way to get you out if he needed to."

"I have hurt you so many times without trying."

"No, Raven." Cradling my face in his hands, he kissed me.
"You healed me."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



RAVEN

*H*e was lying beside me, dragging his fingers across my back with his lips resting against my forehead. I could've fallen asleep like this. There would never be a safer place for me than in his arms.

But when he whispered, "Now it's your turn," against my forehead, I jerked back.

"My turn to do what? You know everything about me."

"Your life before me."

I cringed and stood again, walking to the far wall. I wasn't sure what extra space between us would do, but perhaps I could become invisible.

Flattening myself to the wall, I crossed my arms over my chest. "You don't want me to talk about that." *I* didn't want to talk about it. Not with him.

"How many were there?"

I snorted, unable to hold his gaze.

He sat up in the bed and leaned against the wall. "Come on, Raven. I told you all about my past. You can give me something."

This was the most possessive man in the universe, and he wanted me to discuss this with him.

“I sense fear.”

“Stop doing that.” I could never hide anything from him when he constantly read my emotions. And when I felt him tickling my mind, I shook my head. “Out.”

He pouted.

“It will not change anything if we talk about it.”

“I just want to know how many men I have to hunt down and kill.”

“You’re going to hunt down all those men?”

“*All those men?*”

I covered my face with my hands. “They’re all a blur. I never told them my name, and I was always shifted. No one knew who I was. It was purely for release because I could never be satisfied. I started thirsting for blood; that was the only thing I could do to quench it. We rarely had crime, and I don’t like killing animals, so I just fucked.”

I dropped my hands, slowly raising my eyes to meet his. The color had drained from his face.

“We don’t need to rehash my past.”

“Why did you walk away from me at the festival?”

I smiled as I recalled that night and how much I didn’t want to walk away. I wanted to run headfirst into the hell and heartbreak I knew I would experience with him. “I didn’t want to, but I knew you were different, and I didn’t want to get attached to you. I thought you were only there for the festival, but I thought about you all night.”

He listened intently with a slight grin.

“And the next morning, I almost....” I trailed off, blushing. I averted my eyes again, but his shit-eating grin was so big on his mouth that I could see it, even while looking away.

“But I didn’t because I had to go to a meeting where I learned of imminent war, and then Cade told me that we needed to go to the throne room because someone from Reales wanted to meet me. When you kneeled before me, I couldn’t

breathe. Both times I had been around you, the world went quiet like it was only us. I told myself that we could be just friends, that I wouldn't let it go any further." How wrong I had been. "But something was pulling me to you. I couldn't understand it, but I didn't want to shove it down as I had with everything else in my life."

"You stayed with Cade the night you met me."

It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyway. "I stared out the window of his sitting room, wondering if you had found anyone else. I wanted to dream of you."

He shook his head. "I returned to my ship and got off to thoughts of you."

I still couldn't meet his gaze as my cheeks heated all over again. This man had explored... all of me, but the sound of his voice could still melt me into a puddle.

"Do you still feel like you haven't earned your title?"

His brow furrowed. "I don't know." He rolled his head against the wall to stare at the ceiling. "I've done some questionable things, which wasn't to protect my kingdom. It did the complete opposite. Mira may have been the one to start the desecration of Reales, but I helped. I let it fall into chaos. That doesn't seem very princely."

"You're helping it now," I objected.

"Because of you." His tongue licked over his lips. "I would still be doing it if she hadn't sent me to Seolia. I would never have stopped. Mira would be having me train them until I was dead in the ground. And I would have, Raven, to keep Luca and my mother safe. Soul be damned."

"I see good in you." I pushed off the wall and returned to sit beside him on the bed. "You can't erase what's happened, and it doesn't make me love you any less. I love you more because of what you've faced and how you're still going daily." I grabbed his hands, imploring him to look at me. "It's not too late for redemption."

He tugged at my hands, and I crawled into his lap, running my fingers through his hair. His forehead fell against my

collarbone. “I love you and your shadows. Every single one of them.”

“The shadows,” he sighed. “The shadows that Morana wants me to let free.”

I wrinkled my nose. “What?”

“I don’t know,” he responded. “She seems to think they’re real. She wants me to free them, but there’s nothing to be freed.”

His eyes. They seemed to darken whenever he was upset — maybe because of his shadows. And if anyone — any *thing* — would be able to know what they are, it would be Morana. But as I was about to suggest that I shift into her to see what she could mean, I felt his lips gently brushing across my collarbone.

He wanted to be finished talking.

Bunching my dress in his hands, I raised my arms to allow him to slide it off. I hadn’t bothered with undergarments since I knew he would keep me locked away in this room.

He shifted me from his lap to the bed, following me down while his lips never left my skin. He left kisses down my chest, circling my nipple with the tip of his tongue and blowing on it after it hardened from his touch. I exhaled a soft breath as he repeated it with my other nipple, my back arching from the bed.

Knowing I was already desperate for him, he chuckled against my skin. This was where he felt powerful. And I would let him dominate me as often as he wanted.

His mouth continued to tease down my stomach, circling his tongue around my belly button. I fisted the blanket underneath me in anticipation. It had been three days since we last had one another, which was an eternity for us.

Smelling how wet I already was for him, he whispered my name as he slid off the bed and onto his knees, deeply inhaling along my clit. My stomach tightened — everything tightened.

“Tell me, baby.” His voice was low, and it tickled my skin.
“Did *all those men* taste you?”

This was his desperation to claim me.

“Did they make you scream?”

I shook my head, gasping as the tip of his tongue barely brushed against my clit.

“Answer me, Raven,” he demanded.

“No,” I rasped, bucking my hips. I needed more of his tongue. “No one but you.”

He rewarded me by licking up my clit, but then he was gone again, and I groaned. “Show me where you want my tongue.”

Quickly, almost manically, I slid my hand down my stomach. His eyes burned into me while he watched my middle finger touch my clit. “Is this what you were doing when you thought of me?”

I nodded against the bed.

His deep laugh was the epitome of sin. “Keep going.”

I didn’t want my finger. I wanted his tongue.

“Think about how I was pressed against you.”

Closing my eyes, I returned to that night as he brought the memory forward. “Show me what you wanted me to do to you.”

Slowly, I began rubbing my clit with my finger.

His hands squeezed my thighs. “Watch how desperately I kissed you.”

I pushed two fingers in, sighing from the memory of us together.

“I watched you walk away that night.” He kissed the inside of my thigh. “I followed you back to the castle.”

My eyes fluttered open. Another secret was shared.

“You went into that barn, and I wanted to know why.”

His need to explore it. That was why.

“I wanted to know every part of your life, Raven. Everywhere you went, I wanted to go, too.” His fingers wrapped around my wrist and pulled my fingers out, sliding them into his mouth.

My head rose just enough to meet his eyes as he sucked my taste from them, gliding them in and out like I had done to myself, never breaking my gaze.

This goddamn devil.

And then he gave me what I craved. He dropped my hand and replaced my fingers with his tongue, diving deep into me. My head fell back to the bed, my arms reaching behind me to wrap around the bars of the headboard.

He fucking ravaged me.

If he wasn't erratically thrusting his tongue in and out, he was sucking. Caressing. Drinking.

It was never the same sensation twice, and I was manic, panting heavily, unable to build because all he wanted to do was taste me.

His hands slid around my waist and his fingers pressed into my skin, bringing me closer to him like he couldn't have enough. I begged him. I pleaded. I tried to say his name, but my tongue was heavy, and my brain couldn't form words. And still, he wouldn't relent.

Two of his fingers replaced his tongue, and he drew them in and out while his tongue flicked over my clit, groaning from how soaked I was.

He wanted no memories of anyone touching me but him, replacing everyone else.

“Only yours,” I managed to say in hopes of him letting me come. “Zeke, please, please let me come on your tongue.”

He gave in and pulled his fingers out, pushing his tongue back in. I climbed quickly, my entire body shivering. Grabbing the pillow behind me, I covered my face as I came undone, screaming his name.

He growled but drank from me until I had nothing left — until I felt hollow from his absence.

Crawling over me, he ripped the pillow from my hands. “I didn’t say you could do that. Now we’re going to make you scream again, and you’re not going to muffle it. Let them hear what I do to you, Raven.”

Flipping me onto my stomach, he shoved his pants off before he gripped my hips, pulling me up to my knees. I had no time to recover from my climax before he filled me to the hilt.

Unforgiving. It was the only way to describe his drive.

Bringing his palm up, he brought it back against my ass, the sound echoing through the small room. I gasped from the sting and shoved back against him.

“Fight me, Raven.”

Pent-up feelings from meeting him that first time had me pounding backward against him while he bucked into me. He spanked me again, and I cursed, turning my head to watch him fuck me.

All my darkest fantasies were wrapped up in him.

His black hair fell over his eyes, his face covered in sweat, and his eyes darkened as he watched himself. And when he caught me staring, his self-righteous grin returned. “You look so fucking good, Raven.”

His words sent me over, and I dropped my head, screaming for him again. Grabbing a handful of my hair, he yanked my head back and bent over, licking along the shell of my ear. I was quivering underneath him as he pushed me through my climax.

He cried out my name as he released, tilting my head to kiss my neck. He was panting, and I was trembling. “Baby,” he whispered over and over against my skin.

My hair stuck to my face and neck, my entire body hot and cold all at once. Every ember inside me was ignited, my ice trying to cool it — trying to keep me from imploding from this

mad desire for him. His thrusts slowed until he pulled out of me, shoving at my hip. I fell to my side, and he laid behind me, rolling me over to face him. Grabbing my hand, he put it against his heart and covered my heart with his, and we stared at one another while they beat as one.

My mirrored soul. My twin flame.

I shifted into his little demon, and crawled on top of him.

And we burned for each other.



I DIDN'T REEMERGE from below deck until we began approaching Thoya. He'd kept me fed, but we had become used to sustaining one another. Somehow, it was all we needed, and I learned to stop questioning it. The last two days had been the first time we'd been alone since we wed, and we made up for as much lost time as possible.

But now, it was time to play our part and meet Mira.

I wondered if River would be there if we weren't supposed to share he existed.

And I wondered if Zeke could stop himself from killing him if he was.

I represented Seolia in how I dressed, and he was in the colors of Reales. I had a charming floor-length dress made of golden fabric that shimmered when I moved and mingled well with my curves with a sheer, light-blue tunic over my shoulders. My hair was braided and resting against my back with a simple gold diadem fastened to my hair. I felt like a queen, but my husband....

I rolled my eyes as I watched him dress. He was in black pants — I doubted he owned another color — but his shirt was a deep green under a black leather vest. The shirt was loose and revealed part of his clavicle, and he had rolled the sleeves up to his elbows. I was seeing him in a crown for the first time, and it was silver and simple but looked perfect on his black hair that was slicked back.

He smirked obnoxiously as I stared at him, aware of how good he looked. His confidence could fill an entire kingdom, and it was sexy. Irritating but sexy.

“You’re such a liar,” I grumbled. “Pretending to be unaware of why women wanted you.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he blatantly lied.

“I would appreciate it if you could be a little less mesmerizing.” I opened the door to our room.

I heard him hopping behind me, trying to shove his feet into his boots while laughing at my irritation. He caught me by the wrist and pulled me back, pinning me to the wall with his body. “You look beautiful,” he murmured, kissing along my jaw. “We’re quite the pair, you and I.”

“You’re extremely cocky,” I replied, chills racing across my skin as he worked his lips down my throat.

“For you,” he replied, sucking gently on the skin underneath my ear.

“Mm,” I sighed, tilting my head. “Are you trying to mark me again, my love?”

He licked across the scarred bite on my neck. “I don’t want to get blood on your dress.” But then gently nibbled as the temptation proved too great for him.

“I won’t have any blood left if you keep trying to drink from me.”

“I’ll sustain you,” he offered, tugging the skin between his teeth.

“Do it then.” Feeling connected to me would help him through this. I had other dresses.

His teeth immediately sank into my flesh. He had done it so often that I barely flinched from the pain. I closed my eyes as he sucked, careful not to let any blood escape his lips.

But then I heard screams, not from where we were, but inside my mind — like a memory.

Screams that sounded like they were coming from me.

I gasped as my eyes shot open, and he pulled up, putting his palm against the bite to keep blood from dripping down. “Raven, what?” He searched my eyes, his own full of bewilderment.

“I heard screaming. It was a memory.”

He pushed into my mind, but as he searched, he found nothing like what I had just heard. “What memory? You have no new memories.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, closing my eyes again to chase the screams. “It was me; I was screaming, but I couldn’t see anything. I could only hear it.”

He growled, pushing into my mind again, but there was nothing for him to see. “Was someone hurting you?”

I hadn’t realized how tightly I was holding his vest in fear. “They weren’t screams of pain.” I met his eyes. “I think someone was hurting you. I think they were screams of heartbreak.”

“From when I was stabbed?”

I shook my head slowly, tears filling my eyes. “This was different.” Panic crept up my skin. “We need to leave. Someone is going to hurt you. I can’t; I can’t...”

“Raven.” He put his fingers against my lips. “You said it was a memory. No one is going to harm me. The royals of Thoya are kind, and we will be together the entire time.” He removed his hand from my neck after the bite had healed and uncurled my fingers from his vest, bringing them to his lips. “No one will touch me, Raven, I promise.”

“Why would I have a memory that you can’t see?”

“I think there are many things we don’t understand yet. John said magic is slowly reawakening, and I think instances like this are exactly why we need to learn more about our bond.”

“I will not hesitate to kill anyone who touches you,” I swore.

“No one is going to touch me,” he repeated. “No one but you.”

I threaded our fingers and turned his hand to face him, garnering a sigh from him. “You can’t wear this, Zeke.” I kissed the ring on his finger.

“I’m not taking it off,” he argued, pushing my hand against the wall while he leaned in and resumed his gentle nibbles.

Sometimes I wondered if he wanted to consume me entirely.

He grabbed my other hand and raised them until they were pinned above my head. “I am your husband, and that’s not something I am willing to hide, no matter how much it may piss her off.”

Would I ever tire of hearing that? My husband. I doubted it. His pride for us was endearing, and he was willing to risk everything. “What if they notice? Men don’t wear rings when they’re engaged.”

His lips landed on mine, his hips ground against mine. He’d had nothing but me for two days but wanted me again. I was practically part of the wall at this point, but I turned my head just enough to break our kiss. He bared his teeth at my rejection. “Then let them notice. I’m royalty and have the power to do whatever the fuck I want. We’ll say we do things differently.”

Sensing my argument incoming, he shook his head. “I’m not taking it off, Raven.” He quickly resumed our kiss, most likely in an attempt to keep me from speaking. When I turned my head again, he growled and tightened his hold on my hands. “Stop doing that.”

I smiled at his frustration. “How quickly you claim your title when it has to do with this.”

“The only thing I claim is you. But I own the crown and title and will use it to my advantage when it concerns you or us. Especially when you like seeing me wear it so much.”

I nodded as I relented. Whatever he wanted from me, he could have.

He responded by kissing me again.

And then I had to watch him get dressed all over again.

Definitely a masochist.



UPON FINALLY REACHING THE DECK, I blinked my eyes rapidly as they adjusted to the sunlight. “You have to stop locking me away,” I said, shielding my eyes.

He laughed as we walked to the ship’s bow, bringing me in front of him and pressing us against the railing. Motioning ahead, I could feel him smiling against the top of my head. “Thoya.”

My lips parted. It was beautiful. Breathtaking.

The castle was unlike anything I had ever seen. It was white with a black roof and many windows scattered across it, meaning it had to be full of so much sunlight on the inside. Small cliffs covered by the greenest moss held it, cradling the tall towers. Green trees surrounded it, so green that it seemed like spring only bloomed here. “Maybe we should take over Thoya,” I whispered in complete awe.

He kissed the top of my head. “My favorite place is by your side, but this is a close second.”

Even the sky looked bigger here — bright blue with puffy clouds. Was it possible to be in love with a place? Because I was. Utter joy was all I felt.

“It’s the most enchanting kingdom in our realm.”

I nodded. My eyes couldn’t take in enough. I wanted more.

“We’ll try and find time to explore some of it. Maybe we can come back when this is all over. Those hills never end. Manors behind the castle have been around for a very long time. There’s a lot of history here.”

I asked playfully, “So you did more than fuck around here?” He nipped at my earlobe, and I giggled, yanking my

head free. “Behave, Prince.”

He spun me and crashed his mouth against mine. “Never around you,” he whispered against my lips.

I smiled and threw my arms around his neck, holding him like he was the only thing that could tether me to this world. I let him kiss me again, and he didn’t stop, even after we had docked.

But when he finally did, it was with a frown. “She’s here.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, my forehead falling against his chest. His arms wrapped around me protectively, as if she could somehow hurt me from where we stood. All my joy drained with those two words, replaced with fear and fury.

“She’s waiting for us.” Sighing, he kissed the top of my head. “I won’t leave your side.” He tilted my chin to look at him, giving me a sad smile. “No one is splitting us apart, Raven. We’re going to leave together in three days.”

I didn’t care if she was watching. “Kiss me.”

“Raven, I need to speak with her about River. What he did wasn’t—”

“Please kiss me.”

He leaned in and pressed his lips gently to mine. And then, desperately. I tilted my head to the side while his fingers gripped my chin. His other hand splayed across my lower back, pulling me tighter against him. His tongue moved leisurely with mine like we had all the time in the world.

When I attempted to break, he chased me, and I let him catch me.

We kept one another from collapsing from this lie we were about to live.

He drew in a sudden sharp breath and smiled against my lips. “She’s irritated.” His eyes flickered to the side before coming back to me.

“I don’t care what she’s feeling. I only want to feel you.”

He whispered my name and resumed our kiss, which lasted like this for another moment. Two, three. Time seemed to lose all meaning when he was pressed against me like this.

When I broke from him, I had to stop him from coming back with my fingers against his mouth. “I love you. Stay with me.”

“Nothing will ever keep me away from you,” he promised.

I nodded and lifted on my toes to kiss him once more. But as I thought of the screams I heard, everything felt tight again. Mira had no reason to kill him, not when she still needed me.

And if it was a memory, what was it a memory of?

Mira stood on the end of the dock with a tight, satisfied grin as we approached her hand-in-hand.

I could kill her right here. I didn’t see River nearby.

“No, you cannot,” he whispered to me.

“Are you sure you can’t read my mind?”

“I feel her.”

Her. Morana. I sighed.

“Ezekiel. Raven,” she greeted us. “Glad to see both of you here. Reales’s colors suit you well, Ezekiel.”

I looked over at him. His jaw was tight, his anger apparent at how he was still pledged to her, to their kingdom.

“It’s good to see you are accepting where you came from,” she tacked on, rather bravely considering how he was shooting daggers at her with his stare.

He took a step forward and put his arm across my stomach, pushing me behind him to cover me partially. I felt I needed to prepare for whatever he was about to say. “My allegiance on paper may still be to Reales, Mira, but make no mistake that I will kill for Raven, and Raven only. Where I came from has no meaning without her. You and your new pet need to remember that.”

Speaking of River, I found myself looking for him, and when Mira caught me, her grin turned malicious. “You stupid girl, you think he cares enough about you to come with me.”

Zeke growled and covered me completely, pushing me behind him. “Do not speak to her that way.”

My cheeks were hot from the disappointment and embarrassment I felt. Even after what he tried to do, I still found myself wanting to know more about him and connect with him.

“They may be twins, but River feels no sorrow for the sister who lived a life of luxury while he was cast away from his home and birthright.”

“That is no fault of Raven’s!” Zeke shouted. “And the lies you’ve spewed have made him believe it is. You should be ashamed of yourself for never allowing them to meet. Your wickedness will catch up to you, Mira, and if it is not by Raven’s hand that your life finally ends, it will be by mine.”

“Be careful, Ezekiel.” I couldn’t find it in myself to look at her, but her tone had become cold and biting. “For I hold the power of knowledge and know enough of your bond to know that if I kill you, she will die, too, but only after River has drowned her pathetic island kingdom.”

Zeke was shaking with anger. “And I know that if I end River before he can, you will be left with nothing.”

“And so will Raven,” she quickly reminded him. “We both possess what the other needs, so it is in your best interest to play your part, or Raven may as well kiss her magic goodbye.”

“Then tell him to stop trying to fucking drown her from your *dying* kingdom.”

When Mira was silent, I peeked around Zeke. She seemed... surprised. And when Zeke chuckled, it wasn’t from humor. He was purely agitated. “You can’t even control your weapon, Mira. Do you ever fully think through your plans before you set them into motion? River nearly killed Raven by drowning her while swimming.”

“I will... make sure that does not happen again.” And that was it before she turned and walked away.

It wasn't until she climbed into the carriage waiting for her that Zeke finally turned to face me. “Raven,” he whispered as I finally let my tears fall, covering my face with my hands. “Baby, look at me.”

But I couldn't. I felt ridiculous for wanting a relationship with a brother I never knew existed, who wanted nothing to do with me and tried to drown me in my own waters.

“Raven, he doesn't understand.” His arms wrapped around me. “If he did, he would love you just as everyone else does. Please know that.”

There was nothing for me to say, nothing either of us could do to fix this gnawing feeling inside my gut telling me that there was something very wrong with twins being on opposite sides.

“Either way, this ends badly.” I looked up at him, my chest hurting from the rising panic. “There's no way we can win this without losing Seolia or my magic. Or each other.” I tried to laugh through my tears, though it was a pathetic attempt. “And all three make up my entire personality.”

“No, Raven.” He cradled my neck. “We are not giving up that easily. Through the foggy haze, there is a solution, and we're going to find it. I am going to fix this for you.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “My self-deprecating little witch, I love you. Come. It would be cruel of us to leave them alone with Mira for too long.”

He held my hand, leading me to the carriage. I climbed in, and he pulled me into his lap after closing the door behind us. “How much do you remember from your visit here?”

“I don't recall much. Cade and John did most of the talking. I was only eleven, but I remember the queen.”

Damiana, whose bloodline spread back farther than the history books tracked. Queen Damiana married King Baldwin and had two children: Edmund and Gisela. Their son, Edmund, was a little older than Zeke and took his role as heir

to the throne seriously. Their princess, Gisela, was a little older than me.

“Do you know Edmund and Gisela well?”

He didn't respond verbally but nodded.

“Do you like them?”

“Their entire family treated me with nothing but kindness and respect when I would stay here. I am very grateful for that, especially when I needed it the most.”

I smiled at the warmth of his voice. “You're such a softy, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“Baby, I am anything but that.”

He kissed my neck as we passed through town. Luca was correct; ivory tents were lined up everywhere, full of goods. I spotted one full of dresses that I could look through for Jeanine. As I leaned over and pressed my palm against the window to admire the town, he took that as an invitation to pull down on my tunic and suck on the top of my spine. “You and carriages,” I said with a satisfied sigh.

The tall cottages and shops caused me to strain my neck to see the tops of the peaks of their roofs. Every building was the same white stone as the castle, making everything seem airy and light, even from inside the carriage. There were people everywhere, and their laughter was so loud that I could hear them and found me smiling with them.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he pulled me away from the window and laid me down on the seat. And covering my body with his, he snaked a hand around my throat and kissed me.

The carriage ride lasted another few minutes, and he never stopped kissing me until my lips were burning and raw. And when he pulled up as we came to a stop, I was breathless. “I needed that to get me through this next part.”

He pulled me up as the carriage door opened, climbing out before I could inquire why. I took his extended hand with a raised brow. “What aren't you telling me?”

No response as he guided me to where King Baldwin and Queen Damiana were waiting for us on the castle's steps. My jaw dropped as I stared at Damiana. Her skin was dark and smooth, her eyes round and the color of chocolate. Her hair was long and piled on top of her head in intricate braids, her dress gold to honor my visit, making her look like the sun.

And she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

I found myself walking to her before I told my feet to move. She held her hands for me to grab, which I did rather greedily. "You have grown," she said softly and kindly. "You are exquisite."

"*You* are exquisite," I breathed, gawking at her in awe.

She laughed the most joyous sound and pulled me into a hug. Zeke greeted Baldwin beside me, their repertoire familiar. Damiana released me so we could switch places. Baldwin was the complete opposite of his queen. His complexion was creamy, and he had bright blue eyes, reminding me of Cade with his blond hair. "Thank you for welcoming us to Thoya," I said. "Your kingdom is breathtaking. I do not remember much from my visit here, but I am anxious to explore."

Baldwin dipped his chin to me in gratitude. "Ezekiel knows Thoya well. He's been here many times."

Mira came up behind me, and Baldwin's gaze traveled back and forth between the two of us. "You both have Celestina's eyes."

I smiled because, despite her end, she was still my mother, and I loved that I resembled her. It gave me a piece of her that didn't include ebony ribbons of death and despair.

"But Mira looks like Rudolf, and Raven resembles only Celestina. I see none of Leonidas."

"My kindness," I said. "My peacefulness is from Leonidas."

Zeke cleared his throat from drowning a chuckle. Mira sighed next to me, plastering a fake smile on her mouth. I simply held Baldwin's gaze as he continued to size me up.

With news traveling that I belonged to two powerful rulers, it would not surprise me if others started questioning my morals and decisions. Along with the magic I held, the idea of me could seem somewhat threatening.

And if I were a more prideful person, it would go to my head.

“She is everything a queen should be,” Mira said, disdain dripping in her voice. “She is Celestina reincarnated.”

I was fucking sick of hearing that.

Damiana looked at me. “I hear you possess magic.”

I gave her a slight nod. Zeke wrapped his arm protectively around my waist, but there was nothing other than kindness in Damiana’s eyes. “I think that’s wonderful. I’d love to see it before you leave.”

“I would be honored to show you.”

As two more people emerged from the castle doors, my lips parted again.

How was one family so beautiful?

Edmund’s skin was lighter than his mother’s, but he had inherited her beauty. The same smooth skin, a full mouth, and sharp features on his face made him devastating to look at. And he was staring at me the same way I was ogling him. Zeke pinched my waist, and I tried not to grin at his envy.

But as Gisela came out from behind Edmund and halted a step when she saw Zeke, my body stiffened.

That was a kiss of guilt in the carriage.

She was gorgeous like her mother, except her hair was down, and her natural curls were bouncy and short, ending at her shoulders. It made her appear youthful, especially when the broad smile stretched across her mouth.

Narrowing my eyes, I glanced up at Zeke, who wouldn’t meet my gaze. I shoved his arm from around me and approached Edmund, extending my hands which he took.

Zeke sighed behind me.

“I am so excited to meet you finally,” I said.

He was rather unapologetic about how he took me in. I couldn't say I wasn't doing the same. His eyes were dark brown with hints of orange flecks in his irises. They were what I imagined the sun would look like if it burned up. “I have heard tales of your beauty, but they've done you no justice. Words cannot describe such grace, such allure.”

His voice was deep, and I blushed at his compliment. Zeke was by my side instantly, palming the small of my back. Edmund's eyes never left my face as he greeted him. “Ezekiel,” he mumbled, finally tearing his gaze away from me. “Your fiancée is enchanting.”

I would feel guilty, but he didn't tell me that one of his conquests was Gisela, who was moving her eyes back and forth between Zeke and me. “You must be Gisela,” I said.

She nodded and curtsied.

“I'm Raven, and it's a pleasure to meet you. Of course, you already know my fiancé.”

Zeke went rigid beside me as Edmund laughed, slapping his arm. “I like her. This will be fun,” Edmund said, pulling me to fall into step beside him as we walked into the castle.

I took a moment to look around. I had been correct in my assumption. Sunlight poured through dozens of windows. It was open, airy, and opposite the castles in Seolia and Reales.

Edmund halted, allowing me to spin and take it all in. This was exactly what I wished my castle looked like. It was so dark, even when the sun shined directly on it. This one was nothing but light.

Edmund smiled at me. “It's something, isn't it?”

Admiring how the ceiling never seemed to end, I nodded. The accents of everything — the columns, the doors, the frames of the windows — were gold. “There are no words for it. I am envious that you have so much sunlight to bathe in.”

He tugged on my elbow gently, and I stopped spinning to follow where he was leading anxiously. I glanced back at Zeke

as he followed behind us, glaring at me. I returned it.

He had no right to be jealous after what he pulled.

Edmund pushed open two grand doors that looked like they were fashioned from bars of gold, laughing as I gasped.

The room was large enough to hold two of my dining halls and had a window that stretched across the entire back wall, bringing in so much light that it made me feel as if I was standing directly in a ray of sunlight. Lined along the walls were bookshelves full of so many books that I couldn't possibly read them all in this lifetime. Scattered throughout the room were plush chairs made of the softest white. Two long tables rested in the center of the room with tall vases full of golden sunflowers. Painted portraits of the royal family and framed maps of each kingdom in our realm adorned the walls.

"I am in love," I said on a breath, admiring the view of the rolling hills outside the window and smiling as horses galloped over the greenest grass.

"I spend a lot of time in here. Reading, studying, any excuse I can find." Coming to stand beside me, he lightly placed the palm of his hand on the small of my back, using his other to point toward a manor in the distance. "That is my childhood home. We had the option of living here with my grandparents, but my mother wanted to be with her horses. I grew up spending hours riding and running around those hillsides, and now I see them daily."

"It is exquisite," I said, mesmerized by how free the horses seemed to be.

"*You* are exquisite, but it is lovely."

"I am beginning to believe you are trying to steal Raven from me, Edmund," Zeke said as he stood on my other side, watching the horses playing in front of us.

Edmund chuckled and removed his hand from my back, shrugging a shoulder. "She is always welcome here if she can be pilfered."

"She cannot," Zeke answered with a sigh.

I smiled, not glancing at either of them. I was used to Zeke trying to compete for me with any person who gave me attention.

“Ezekiel and I used to race horses when he’d visit. We would bet way too much money on who would win. He would become so frustrated when I won that he insisted we do it again.”

Zeke muttered a string of curse words.

Edmund laughed. “Always competitive, even now.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that Zeke has a friend?”

Edmund grinned like a cat. “I am the only one who can stand him.”

“Except for your sister,” I mumbled.

Laughing again, Edmund draped himself over one of the plush chairs. I followed his lead and sat in a chair next to his, refusing to meet my husband’s eyes. “Can I spend the next three days in here?” I sighed dreamily and rolled my head against the back of the soft plush of my chair.

“Let me commission a portrait of you, love,” Edmund begged.

I smiled, leisurely kicking my foot back and forth.

“A painter would offer himself freely to get a glimpse of you.”

“Enough, Edmund,” Zeke said, though there wasn’t a snap in his tone like there would have been with anyone else. He and Edmund must be closer than I realized.

“Ezekiel, it is considered good manners to share your treasures with those close to you.”

“This is not one I will ever share, I’m afraid,” he demurred, his tone soft.

I met his eyes for only a second before I turned to admire the bookshelves behind us.

“Then allow me to stare at her and stop hovering.” Edmund’s foot brushed mine, and I turned my head to look at him. “Does he make you happy, love? Tell me he doesn’t. I promise to make up for it.”

In response, I shrugged. I could see a grin on Zeke’s mouth from the corner of my eye as I was sure he could sense my admiration and desire even through my irritation. “He’s adequate, I suppose. Though I am not fond of him at the moment.”

Edmund left his chair and fell to his knees before me, taking my hand in his. Zeke said his name as a warning, but I grinned as he brought my hand to his lips. “Tell me what I can do. Would you like the sky? Tell me, Queen Raven.”

I puckered my lips in thought and tilted my head to the side. “Do you have any horses available to ride right now?”

Edmund nodded with a grin. “Let’s go frustrate Ezekiel.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



RAVEN

Less than an hour later, I was changed into riding clothes. I didn't bring any of my own, so I borrowed from Gisela, who had allowed me to change in her chambers. I wore a white long-sleeve button-down tucked into some ivory pants that fit my legs like a second skin. My boots were brown and settled around my knees. She told me I was free to keep everything since she had a double wardrobe crafted just to fit all her riding attire.

I had managed to find the stables on my own. There were multiple, and each one was huge. I wandered into the middle of one while I braided my hair, admiring the horses behind their gates. Stablehands walked around, feeding and brushing each one, making me long for a peaceful job like theirs.

River may believe I received the better end, but there were drawbacks to the life I was given. Responsibilities that he couldn't possibly understand. Pressures of keeping an entire village unharmed from people like Mira, to keep all of them fed and housed.

And if he would allow me to speak with him, to understand his life and share mine, maybe a relationship between us wouldn't be unimaginable. Perhaps he could forgive me.

Not that Zeke could ever forgive him.

I hadn't realized I'd been staring at a horse until the stableman asked me if I'd like to brush her. I nodded excitedly as he came to unlock the gate latch, pulling open the door so I could step inside. "Her name is Diamond," he said.

"Hello, Diamond," I greeted her, running my fingers through her silky mane. She neighed in response.

After handing me the brush, he gently grabbed my hand and put it against Diamond's flank, assisting me for a few strokes before releasing me.

I found myself calming as I brushed Diamond, even my brain relaxing and not screaming for attention. If Shadow would come out from hiding, I could do this for him.

Surrounding me were only sounds of horses neighing softly and the breathing of Diamond, who whipped her head around every time I reached the point of her hip. I giggled each time, believing her to be ticklish. And when she kicked one of her legs up, even the stableman laughed with me.

After a few moments, I turned my head to see Zeke and Edmund watching me, leaning back against the wall outside the gate. They both smiled at me simultaneously, causing my cheeks to redden.

Turning around, I handed the brush back to the stableman. "Thank you."

"You know a woman is beautiful when you can watch her brush a horse and never tire of it," Edmund said, approaching the gate.

"Maybe it's the horse," I replied.

"No, love. It's you."

I shook my head with a bashful grin as he opened the gate. Instead of letting me out, he came in and shut it closed behind him, retrieving the saddle hanging up on the far wall of Diamond's stall. "This is who you'll be riding today. She's our fastest," Edmund explained.

Good. I wanted to beat my husband.

Resting my elbows on the gate required me to stand on the tips of my toes, watching as Edmund saddled Diamond. My entire body warmed as I felt Zeke's presence creeping up behind me, and I stopped breathing as his mouth found my ear. "You look beautiful," he whispered as he nuzzled against my neck with his cheek, tracing light kisses up my throat.

He wanted my forgiveness, but I was not quite ready to stop torturing him yet.

I remained stoic, and his laugh was deep against my skin. "Stubborn baby."

"You have no idea," I replied, tilting my head away from him.

As if anticipating it, he trapped it with his hand and brought it back, finding my ear again. "You are mine, Raven."

"Am I?"

He licked across the scarred bite on my neck. "Do not make me repeat myself."

I turned my head toward his and leaned in close, our mouths inches apart. His eyes rested on my lips, but I pulled back an inch as he was about to kiss me. "I belong to no one."

It was untrue, but it would drive him crazy.

And on cue, he growled as I pulled away and returned to Diamond's side as Edmund finished.

The stableman came to my side to assist me in mounting, but Edmund insisted that he be the one. I stepped into his lowered hands, and he hoisted me up until I was straddling Diamond. Wiggling in the saddle, I grounded my hips and refused to give Zeke the satisfaction of meeting his stare.

Edmund opened the gate, and Diamond kicked into a trot, leading us outside the stable and halting while we waited for the others to join us.

"We'll race until we reach the tree line," Edmund called out as he trotted beside me and pointed ahead toward the outline of trees in the far distance.

I held on tightly to the cantle and leaned into Diamond, nodding. As a horn sounded off behind us, we took off. We were lightning against the ground, her hooves flying beneath me. My braid loosened, and my wavy hair whipped around me as we quickly pulled into the lead.

And I felt like I was flying — light, powerful, like nothing could ever catch me.

And maybe for half a second, I debated seeing how far away she could take me from the pressures of my life.

Diamond leaped, and I squealed as we crossed the invisible finish line, landing gracefully.

The tree wall looked like it had been crafted by the goddess of spring herself, with thick trunks so tall that I had to tilt my head back to see the tops covered in bright green leaves.

“I have a horse in Seolia,” I said as Edmund finished behind me. “His name is Shadow. I would love to bring him here for you to train if you’d be willing. He’s a bit wild but fast.” And very elusive, and kind of missing.

He nodded. “I’d be honored.”

His smile was bright, and guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders. There was so much honesty in his sunburnt-brown eyes, so much kindness. I couldn’t lie to him; I couldn’t be part of this evil. Before I even knew what I was doing, I blurted it all out, “Edmund, Mira is planning to invade.”

His smile was gone instantly as he stared at me — his previous jolly stare replaced by widened eyes. Zeke came up next to us, his jaw clenched, having heard everything.

“She’s using our engagement as a distraction. She wants it to seem like it’s only for love, but it’s not.” I was about to tell him about River and his magic, but I held back. I found myself not wanting to jeopardize him. “Half of the army is in Seolia, ready to invade my kingdom if I don’t play along.”

Zeke hung his head. “Oh, my love.”

“Zeke and I are already married. We truly love one another and care nothing about tying Reales and Seolia together. Mira plans to ask your father and Perosan to recognize her as sole power of our realm, and if they disagree, she will invade.”

Edmund looked at Zeke.

“I was planning to lie to you because I’m fearful for my kingdom, but I can’t. We can prevent this from happening together.”

His silence was making me a bit apprehensive.

“Are you willing to help us?”

A few seconds felt like an eternity, but he nodded. “What do we need to do?”

“Build your army,” Zeke answered. “Keep pretending like our visit is strictly to show that we have no ill intention toward your kingdom or Perosan. Mira has to believe you, or she’ll kill everyone in Seolia. Reales’s army is large, and they’re well-trained. We have a plan, but we need time, and you must prepare yours.”

Edmund looked back at me.

Zeke continued, “We’re going to end this, Edmund, but we are not prepared. I need more time.”

“I will not inform my father. I will prepare the army on my own. The fewer that are aware, the safer Seolia will remain. We will help you. We have, after all, allied before to take down Reales. Why not allow history to repeat itself?”

I felt relief as he reached for my hand, giving it a slight tug. “I am grateful that you informed me. I’d hate not to be your friend.” He gave me a genuine smile. “We will pretend everything is jolly, love. She will not know any different.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Edmund. Truly.”

He held his heart with his other hand and threw his head back dramatically. “Listen to how she says my name, Ezekiel. It’s heavenly.”

Zeke muttered another curse word.

“Let’s discuss why you would ever marry Ezekiel.”

I laughed as Zeke’s eyes rolled.

“If you were looking for a husband, I was much closer.”

Zeke tried to shove him off his horse as we began our walk back to the castle.

“Some family reunion you must have had.”

I shook my head. “You have no idea.”

“How do you plan on stopping her?”

A wicked grin spread across my mouth. “Black magic.”



“THAT WAS UNEXPECTED,” Zeke said as we walked into our room.

Again, I was in awe. The bed had four golden posts covered with a white, translucent canopy. Coated on the walls was light gold paint with flecks of black, and two large golden wardrobes sat against the far wall. Sitting between them was a round, white marble tub big enough for two. Paintings of clouds and blue skies hung behind the bed, and I wondered if this was how the heavens looked.

I stood in a beam of light cast down through our window, warming me as it danced across my skin.

“Raven,” he murmured.

I did not turn.

“I didn’t want to tell you.”

I extended my fingers and wiggled them, smiling at how the sun seemed to move with them.

“Please say something. Yell at me. Hit me.”

“You would enjoy that too much,” I mumbled.

He laughed softly. “It was only once, and I was very drunk.”

I didn't want details.

"And I was missing you."

I scowled. "You didn't even know me."

"But I needed you. I was trying to fill a hole that you left."

"Are you seriously trying to blame me for this?"

"No, Raven. I am saying that every woman in my past was because my heart had a crack in it from your absence. You must understand that I would never have touched another woman if I knew you."

He was being romantic while I was trying to shove down my need for him.

"You want Edmund."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"He wants you, too."

One didn't need to be an empath to figure that out. All Edmund did today was watch me. "Me thinking someone is attractive doesn't mean I want them." I whirled around to face him and crossed my arms over my chest. "I want *you*. He's nice to look at. *You* should've told me."

"I know. Please forgive me."

I shrugged. He took a tentative step toward me. I cocked an eyebrow, and he grinned, taking another step until there were only inches between us. I tilted my head back to look up at him, and he was frowning. "Is he nicer to look at than me?"

"Are you truly doing this?"

He nodded.

I was highly annoyed. "You are so beautiful to look at that you shouldn't be allowed to exist. So, no, you infuriating ass, he's not."

His jaw dropped at my insult, but he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me to him.

"No. Your punishment is that you can't have me right now. Or ever, if I continue to stay angry." His eyes widened as he

shook his head, but I nodded. “I am not rewarding you. You’ll watch him flirt with me at dinner, and maybe you can have me tonight. *Maybe.*”

“But I want you now.”

I shrugged. “Gisela looks at you like she’d be up for it, so go down the hall.”

“So... you are mad.”

“Of course I’m mad. She’s stunning. As is Jeanine, as is the one from Reales, as is probably every woman you’ve fucked. And she’s had you. She knows your body as I do. And now, I have to sit across from her at a table while she thinks about you, and why do I constantly have to sit across from women you’ve fucked?” I shoved his arms off. “It’s unfair.”

“I know.” He sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I know it is.”

“I am not judging who you were. We’ve both lived, but I deserved a warning, and just once, I would like to meet someone who you haven’t stuck it in.”

His hands cupped my face, and I tried to pull away, but he held me still. He stared into my eyes, and I hated how easily he ensnared me. “Baby, if I could take it all back...” He leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose. “I would. I’m sorry for putting you through all this, but she doesn’t know me like you. No one does. I have never derived pleasure from anyone the way I do with you. Not even close.”

“Do you think about her...”

He immediately shook his head. “I don’t remember anything. The memory is blurred.”

I sighed. He leaned down, but I stuck my fingers against his lips. “No.”

He growled. “Raven.”

“You get nothing from me until tonight. If then. Now, tell me if you think we can trust Edmund.”

He still wouldn’t release me, even as I wrapped my fingers around his wrists to try and pry him off, grinning as I glared.

“We can. He won’t say anything. Nothing but good intentions on him. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

I nodded, and he leaned down again, but I pressed my fingers harder against his lips. “Raven,” he groaned, biting at my fingertips. “Tonight is a long time away.”

“You should have thought about that.”

“Do you know how in love with you I am?”

I shook my head. “Do not try and make me sick with your love.”

He grinned. “I am, though. When I met Eva the night we returned home, all I could think about was how I wanted that in our future. I want that life with you, and only you. I want to see a miniature version of you running around, bossing me, getting everything she wants from me. Because I want that, Raven. I want to give you everything you could ever dream of.”

When my body relaxed, he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. “Hurting you is never something I try to do, but I made a mistake, and I’m truly sorry, my love. I’m still learning.”

“I know,” I sighed, leaning my head into his touch. “I know you are.”

“Forgive me?”

“I will always forgive you, though I was wondering....” I gave him a small smile. “Would you want to adopt?”

He blinked, his eyes searching mine.

“We can have our own, but I wanted to provide our life to a child who needs it.”

He swallowed. “Yes, Raven. Please let me kiss you.”

And when he leaned in again, I didn’t try and stop him this time as his lips met mine. “How are you mine?” His voice was a whisper against my lips.

My resolve to keep him away dissolved. “Because I’m meant to be.”

As always, my love for him outweighed my anger.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



ZEKE

*M*y love continued to amaze me every single day.

She fell asleep next to me in this bed that looked cut from gold and then sprinkled with gold flakes. Everything about this castle seemed to shimmer, and she loved it. I'd never noticed it before, as my life seemed dull compared to the light she brought. I wondered if I could talk her into renovating our castle in Seolia or if she would ever only want to visit here after this was over.

I wasn't sure I wanted her to with Edmund's desire for her. I smiled despite it. He had always been a great friend to me and wouldn't cross that boundary. And it was impossible not to want her, especially with how her skin looked flushed like it was now. The most delicate shade of pink spread across her skin any time she was aroused or satisfied, and I wanted to paint the sky that color so everyone could admire her beauty.

We needed to leave in just a few moments, but I couldn't stand to wake her. Sleep was a rarity for her, especially when we were together. As I brushed my fingers through her hair, she sighed softly in her sleep. I smiled when I dragged my finger down her spine and admired the way it sloped down her back, leading to her lusciously curvy pair of hips.

Smitten. And it was my constant state. It wasn't just love — I was obsessed with this woman. Haunted. Bewitched.

I couldn't believe she was about to ask if I had thought of Gisela and our night together. I was truthful about my memory being blurred. I had inhaled a lot of whiskey that night and was leaving for Reales the next day, and she was there. It was awful — the person I used to be — but Raven changed me. That version of myself seemed like a stranger now.

I would blur all my memories with other women until Raven's body was the only one I could see.

I kissed the top of her head as she rolled in her sleep and curled her body into mine. I wanted her again, but she would kill me if I kept her much longer. We couldn't miss this dinner. But she felt so good against me. She was my serenity, calming all my thoughts except those that desired her.

My sweet addiction.

I brushed her temple with my lips, and she stirred, her hips pressing into mine. I could take her so easily like this. "Raven," I whispered so gently.

A breathy whimper came out of her mouth. She wasn't going to make this easy on me. When her leg hooked around my waist, I looked down between our bodies, and all my thoughts went dark. "Baby, we have to go to dinner." My voice came out louder than I meant, but we would not make it to the dining hall if she didn't get off me.

Her head lifted from my chest, and she looked at me sleepily, blinking her glazed eyes.

Perhaps I should allow her to doze more often.

"Dinner," I repeated, watching as she bit down on her bottom lip while her breasts pressed into my arm. I was throbbing for her, but she didn't realize it as she shifted against me, her thigh lifting higher on my stomach. I was going to lose it.

She rose to her elbows, exposing her chest to me. Her tits bounced as she lifted to her palms and...

Fuck.

She froze, turning her head to look down at her leg on my stomach. “Did you just...” She sat up and slid her leg off. “You did.”

I had never come just from *looking* at a woman. “I did,” I repeated, covering my eyes with my arm. “You kept moving on me, and your body is flushed to perfection, and that’s never happened to me....”

She giggled and pressed her lips to mine. I moved my hand to cup the back of her head, pressing her harder against me.

She drove me crazy.

She tried to break from me, but I didn’t let her. Instead, I pushed my tongue against her lips. She opened for me and twisted hers with mine.

The fact that I was already hard again was proof that there was no way we were human.

“We have to go,” she tried to say, but it was garbled.

I started to laugh, and she used that distraction to shimmy away from me. I reached for her, but she hopped off the bed before I could catch her. “We’re going to be so late.” She walked to the trunk we had yet to unpack and bent over, shuffling through it to find a dress.

I groaned and buried my face into the pillow before feeling my clothes landing on top of me.

“Get *up*.”

“I am *up*,” I mumbled into the pillow.

I heard her exasperated sigh from across the room. When I looked up, she was already dressed, tiara and all.

I stood from the bed, grinning as she stared at my erection with lustful eyes. As I slowly pulled on my pants, her eyes moved up to my stomach, which I flexed for her. She pulled the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth, tilting her head to the side. I loved putting on these shows for her. She always looked at me like I was her next meal.

A grin spread across her mouth when I slipped on my shirt and pulled at the sleeves. I placed my crown on my head, and she looked like she was in a trance as I sauntered coolly toward her. “What are you thinking about, Raven?”

“Dinner,” she breathed.

Smirking, I pulled her against me. “Me, too.”

Her eyes finally met mine. She parted her lips, and I leaned into her, brushing mine softly across them before leaving kisses along her jawline. “This is madness,” she whispered. “We’re not normal.”

“No,” I confirmed, moving my lips down her throat.

“We have to go,” she muttered while tilting her head, exposing more of her throat to me.

“No, we don’t.” I moved to her collarbone and nipped at the skin.

She was panting, and I added my tongue, skimming across the bone. I thought she was about to relent, but then her hands slid between our bodies and gently pushed me away. “Raven,” I whined, pressing my forehead against hers. “We can be ten minutes late.”

“The way you fuck? It would be more like thirty.”

“Just let me fuck you. I’m not above begging for you on my knees.”

“Tempting, but.” She opened the door and took a giant step away.

“You think that’s going to stop me?” She took another, and I closed the distance in one step. “You’re tiny.”

She pouted, puckering out her bottom lip. I moved to bite it, but she caught me and pressed her fingers against my lips. “That didn’t work earlier.”

“Dinner first, dessert later.”

I groaned at her words; her grin was rotten as she turned on her heel, walking away from me. I hung my head as I followed behind her, watching her hips sway. She lifted her

hand behind her and wiggled her fingers, making me smile as I grabbed them with my own.



EVERYONE STOOD as we entered the dining room while Raven made a beeline for Damiana. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “We fell asleep.”

That was partially true.

“Oh, Raven, please. You traveled a long way. No need to apologize,” Damiana graciously said.

Dipping my chin to her, I palmed the small of Raven’s back and guided her to our chairs across from Edmund and Gisela. Once she was seated, I took the spot beside her and immediately grabbed her hand, bringing it to my lips. Her smile was warm enough to light my body on fire.

“I am so anxious to hear how the two of you met,” Damiana spoke warmly.

Here we go, jumping right into it.

I squeezed Raven’s hand before lowering them down to her lap. I wasn’t sure which one of us should answer, as we hadn’t rehearsed the act Mira wanted us to do.

Mira decided she would be the one to answer for us, and in her jovially condescending tone, no less. “It was on one of Ezekiel’s trips. You know how much he loves to travel.”

I had to control myself from glaring at her.

It was the gentleness of Raven’s tone that brought me back. “He visited Seolia during the Festival of Dreams, and it was love at first sight.”

I smiled as I stared at my plate. It was.

“He stayed for three months. We spent every day together.”

I definitely spent every day with her, even if she didn’t realize it at the time.

“When he proposed to me at my birthday celebration, it was like a dream. But then, he topped that and proposed more intimately in Reales. I knew at that moment that I couldn’t spend a day of my life without him.” I met her eyes as she looked at me and then at Mira. “And I refuse to.”

An open threat in front of everyone.

My daring little witch.

Mira didn’t react with anything other than clearing her throat and plastering on a fake smile.

“He is already wearing a ring,” Baldwin observed.

I glanced at my hand on the table, spinning the ring around my finger with my thumb. “I am. My father gifted this to me. Since my soul is already bound to hers, I decided there was no reason I couldn’t start wearing it.” I laughed then, looking at Raven. “And we have a very protective friend, Arthur, who had become tired of telling others that I already belonged to someone else.”

She smiled at me. I had told her during one of our late-night lovemaking intermissions of the times Arthur had scared multiple women away while we were apart. She had been so overcome with her need to possess me that she had created a trail of marks across my throat, which made for an exciting day of training when Cade wouldn’t stop glaring at me.

“Bound to her,” Damiana repeated. “You are twin flames.”

My eyes snapped to hers. We weren’t supposed to share that with anyone, and the thought of someone taking her away from me had me squeezing her hand tightly, but Damiana’s smile only widened. “I could tell when you greeted us together. There’s a connection between the two of you. It is strong. There’s a tether; a binding indeed.”

I nodded slowly, my gaze traveling to Raven. She was beaming at me.

“It’s golden, your strand.”

Raven and I moved our attention back to Damiana, who was still smiling. “That’s why I do not fear Raven’s magic, nor

should anyone else. Magic is the blood of the universe and has been around much longer than most realize.”

I didn't think Raven was breathing as the realization hit her before I caught on. “You're a witch,” she said in disbelief.

Damiana's light laugh was warm. “An astral witch, to be exact.”

I immediately looked at Edmund, who nodded at me once in confirmation. I was shocked. I had spent many weeks with them and had never seen evidence of magic. “Why haven't I heard about this?”

Mira looked just as shocked as she stared at Damiana.

“We were afraid,” Damiana answered. “When witches were poisoned and burned, any families who still possessed it was hidden in plain sight. Magic continued to pass through generations, but fear was deep-rooted and spread rapidly throughout towns. When rumors of Raven's magic made their way here, I felt hopeful for the first time in a long time, and I am old. My hope only blossomed when we learned of her people accepting her.”

Rumors of Raven's magic... but my mother said they were already aware of her magic. And I wanted to inquire more, but I couldn't. Not here in front of Mira, and it wasn't something I had shared with Raven yet.

And Raven looked just as befuddled as I felt, her emotions changing between admiration and confusion. She had always felt so alone, and now, there was someone like her.

I leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Baby,” I whispered in her ear. “I love you.”

Gathering her courage, she sat up a little straighter. “What can you do?”

Damiana looked as if she wanted to wrap her up in a hug. “I can see energy. Manifest it into material form, which is what I did when I met the two of you. Your strand is golden, which means the gods crafted it. It can never be broken.”

Relief washed over me, tears lining my eyes. Confirmation that I wasn't aware I needed had just been given to me. I brought Raven's hand to my lips again, perching my elbow to rest on the arm of the chair.

While my fear of losing her would always remain, I took solace that nothing about our pull to one another could be damaged.

"We were hesitant when we heard of your engagement," Baldwin said, looking at his wife.

I couldn't stop staring at mine.

"Reales is the largest of the four kingdoms, and with Raven's magic, we weren't sure we could acknowledge the two of you together. A lot of power will rest between your kingdoms, and we do not want to disrupt our Circle of Peace, but it is true love between the two of you, which is why we will accept the invitation to your wedding."

Raven stared at me, trying to convey something with her eyes, but Mira watched us, and we needed to think of Seolia. "Thank you." I sat up straighter, switching into my role of the prince. "We look forward to hosting you in Reales."

Mira gave me a satisfied grin as she leaned back in her chair. I felt like a goddamn puppet.

Damiana asked, "Raven, could you honor us with a visual?"

I looked at Raven, sensing her hesitation. She had only recently become used to her people knowing of her magic. I wasn't sure if she was ready to extend her trust, but she slowly stood from her chair and walked to the front of the room. Everyone twisted in their chairs to face her. Her cheeks flushed from the attention, her eyes darting to me.

I winked at her and whispered into her mind, *I am right here.*

Smiling, she closed her eyes and extended her palms in front of her. Her black hair shortened, and I shifted in my chair, already hard in anticipation of seeing my little demon.

Her fiery red hair cut at her jawline, and her eyes opened to reveal the flame-filled irises, fire spreading across her palms.

“Fuck,” Edmund muttered.

I grinned. She was a delicious sight. Why Cade ever wanted her to bury this part of herself would remain a mystery to me. She was fury. You couldn't exclude any part of her. This was her, and all of her was perfect.

Her hair extended to her shoulders as it changed into the icy-blond, snowflakes falling down her irises as the flames melted into icicles in her palms.

I felt smug that she was mine as everyone else stared at her with parted lips.

She winked at me before her eyes closed again, the icy-blond morphing into the bright violet. Her golden eyes fluttered open, and she turned her palms, lifting the icicles with a breeze and making them dance above the table. Heads tilted up as they watched, but all I watched was her.

A playful grin appeared on her mouth, and I cocked an eyebrow as she guided the icicles to dangle above my head. I shook my head, narrowing my eyes on her. “Raven, I swear.”

She bit her lip to stifle a giggle, despite the rest of the table beginning to laugh as she snapped her fingers and turned the icicles into icy water that fell onto me. It was barely enough to dampen my hair, but I still stood from my chair and sauntered over to her. She took a step away from me, but I caught her quickly and rubbed my moistened hair over her face and neck, laughing as she tried to shove me away.

“Incredible show,” Edmund said, laughing with us.

I kissed her temple before releasing her. She slid a knife from Damiana's place setting before handing it to me and holding her palm toward me. The room quieted again, plagued with intrigue. With the knife, I palmed her hand and sliced through her flesh, grinning as everyone gasped.

As her blood poured, my mouth watered, but I couldn't very well drink from her here.

She curled her fingers over the cut, biting her lip as she stared at me. Our need for one another was extremely apparent to everyone in the room as they watched us intently. I wasn't embarrassed by it, but if she didn't stop looking at me that way, this would turn into a very different show.

Clearing my throat and diverting my eyes from hers, I wiped the knife clean with the inside of my shirt before handing it to a passing servant. After half a moment passed, she held up her palm to show off her wholly healed cut.

I took her freshly healed hand in mine and kissed her palm, guiding her back to her seat.

"You're an elemental witch," Damiana said.

Raven nodded in response, twirling a strand of her violet hair around her finger.

"Interesting," Damiana replied, looking from Raven's hand to her face again. "The healing, that's a gift from a goddess. That is not magic. You were honored with a gift and your twin flame."

Raven's nose wrinkled. "But why?"

"You did something in another lifetime that the gods deemed honorable."

She had been incredible in every life she lived, and I was gifted with being by her side for each of them.

"There's an energy around you, Raven." Damiana looked at me and then at her again. "It's virtuous. Righteous."

Instead of the smile I expected to see from Raven, she looked broken. "I've spent my entire life feeling unworthy."

I wanted to wrap her up and take away her pain. She had never been unworthy. Her heart was too kind to be considered anything but. If anyone deserved magic, it was her.

Damiana smiled. "Oh, my dear child. You are anything but that. Magic is bestowed upon those who deserve it."

I glanced at Mira, whose mouth was drawn in a straight line. And then I looked at Raven, whose eyes were filled with

tears. But when I pushed into her mind, it was memories of River she was pulling.

I took her hand between mine while she pushed away tears with her other. This felt like something I couldn't fix for her, and it seemed to be what she wanted the most.

And if magic were truly gifted to those who deserved it, could that mean that somewhere inside of River, goodness lingered?

Raven's shoulders sagged as she leaned back in her chair, overwhelmed. Damiana smiled reassuringly while Baldwin leaned over and kissed her cheek. I looked back and forth between them, tilting my head at how Baldwin seemed to stare at her as I stared at Raven. "You're... mates."

"We are," Baldwin replied.

"But mates..."

"Are rare," Damiana finished for me, nodding. "Yes. We've kept our pairing quiet for that reason. Anything irregular seems to spook others easily."

"How long have you known?"

Baldwin looked at Damiana with a secretive grin. "A long time."

I should press, but it wasn't any of my business. And no sort of information in Mira's hands ever helped anyone.

I looked at Raven, staring at her plate with glassed eyes. Reaching over, I gently pulled her chin until she looked at me. "Come back to me, my love."

A tear fell down her cheek, and I leaned forward, kissing it away. She leaned into my touch, rubbing the tip of her nose against mine. The heartbreak coming off of her was making my chest hurt. "I love you, little demon." I tugged on the ends of her violet hair. "I need a nickname for this one. Little tornado?"

She smiled, rolling her eyes. I kissed the tip of her nose before releasing her.

As food was brought out, I loaded her plate full of vegetables and meat, grinning at her annoyance with me. With attitude, she stabbed a carrot with her fork and took a bite. I snorted, filling my plate. But then, our attention was quickly brought to the doorway as a platter of something fell to the ground.

I lifted an eyebrow at the man staring at her, seemingly paralyzed. Raven's face was confused until, finally, guilt and embarrassment poured out of her. My eyes narrowed as I slowly shifted my eyes from her face back to his, clenching the arms of the chair in my fingers as the memory he was pulling was one of her. And him.

I pulled out, blinking rapidly to try and clear it. One of the men from the festival was standing there, gawking at my wife. Rage built and coupled with the copious amounts of envy had me nearly standing in my chair, but she grabbed me and shook her head.

Edmund looked back and forth between us until he looked behind him at the servant still staring at her and broke into a deep laugh. "Atticus, my boy. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Raven dropped her head as her cheeks reddened while I continued to glare at the man. "Would you like to paint a portrait of her?" I snapped, trying to wrangle my wrist free of her tight grip.

"Zeke," she whispered. "Stop. Please."

I shoved into his mind and broke the memory of the two of them together, watching in satisfaction as his face turned from one of lust to one of confusion.

"Shift," I demanded, peeling her fingers from my wrist. "Into yourself. Now."

Sighing, she shifted while the servant bent down to pick up the platter he dropped. Edmund looked at me with an amused grin, causing me to glare at him instead. "Don't."

As he continued to stare at her, only now with bewilderment from hazy recognition, I growled and squeezed

the back of her neck, bringing her lips to mine. I didn't know why I had expected her to flinch or push away from my sudden need to claim her, but she returned my consumption of her mouth with just as much passion. So much so that Edmund started clapping and shouting for an encore.

That caused Raven to laugh, and the sound calmed my raging heart a few ticks. She was mine, I told myself over and over, inhaling deeply through my nose.

“Intense, no?”

I looked over at Baldwin as my chest heaved. I couldn't tame this feeling, this need to tear apart skulls who dared glance upon her. I couldn't even speak. All I wanted to do was carry her to our room and fuck her until she couldn't walk — until people kingdoms away could smell me on her.

“It will intensify as magic continues to reawaken,” Damiana warned. “As you start to understand more about your mating bond.”

“Mating bond?” Raven looked at Damiana. “Is that not the same thing as a twin flame?”

Right. I hadn't yet told her all the details of my conversation with Melik.

Baldwin shook his head. “Mates and flames are both pairings, but one is not the other. Ezekiel is behaving like you are his mate. Flames are companions throughout every life. Passionate and forever. In this life, you seem to be mated as well as flames. I cannot imagine what that must feel like.”

“I need to take a walk.” Despite Raven's protests, I stood from my chair and left the room, pacing the length of the hallway.

Mates and flames. I needed to understand the differences. I needed to be better prepared if something like that were to happen again. But how could you prepare for something you didn't understand?

I had expected Raven to follow me out, but it was Edmund who came out into the hallway, watching me move back and forth. Leaning against the wall, he crossed his arms over his

chest. “I’m guessing this is the first time you’ve experienced this.”

I nodded, rolling my shoulders to try and release tension. “I haven’t told you this.” I needed to stop pacing, but I couldn’t push down the feeling of wanting to kill that man. “But I’m an empath. I can read emotions. I can also walk into your mind and dreams and shatter memories. It’s how I knew they knew one another. I saw his memory of her.”

“I am learning all kinds of things about my best friend this week.”

I stopped pacing and turned to face him. “Your best friend?”

“You think I would open my home to just any drunk?” He waved me on. “It is disappointing that you did not feel you could come to me with all this.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “A lot has happened, Edmund. Things I couldn’t express to you.”

He nodded once but crossed his arms. “Part of having a friend is trusting them. And you can trust me.”

“I know I can, but I have to protect her. Every move I make, fuck, every word I say, has to be with her in mind.”

“I wrote to you multiple times, Ezekiel. I invited you back and asked what was happening in your life.”

I frowned. “I know, Edmund. I read all of them. I was in... a very dark place until I found her. She brought me back.”

I could tell there was more he wanted to say. Out of every friend I’d ever had, he was the only one who held me accountable for anything, and I had clearly hurt him by becoming silent and distant. “For future reference, please come to me with whatever you need.”

His kind gesture had made me speechless. I was undeserving of the forgiveness offered to me by the people I admired most.

“Now, let’s return. Your delicious little witch said she was only giving me five minutes before she came out here.”

I grinned at that and blew out a breath. “I need you to make sure Atticus doesn’t make another appearance. I have self-control, but it disappears when she’s involved.”

“As it should.” He gave me a small smile before looking toward the dining room. “She’s yours but will be protected by all of us. I can guarantee that.”

I was overcome with gratitude as I reached out and squeezed his shoulder. “Thank you.”

Raven popped out of the dining room and threw her arms up. “As much as I *adore* being with my sister, I would appreciate it if you’d return to the table.”

“Come here.”

Edmund took his leave, and she came to me, snaking her arms around my waist. Moving her hair from her neck, I didn’t give her a chance to speak as I leaned down and sank my teeth into her skin, cradling her neck with my hand. The second her blood hit my tongue, I felt calm again, knowing she was safe in my arms. I waited for her to tell me she had heard things again, but it never came. Instead, she relaxed into me, allowing me to lick across the wound until it was closed again.

“Should we ask if this part of the mating bond, too?”

I shook my head, licking across my lips. “I’d rather not share that I like to drink your blood. While magic is awakening, what I’m doing to you is something from horror stories. I doubt there’s an answer for it.”

“We won’t know unless we ask....”

I put my fingers against her mouth gently. “Not yet, my love. I’m not fully okay with it. I have a feeling many others won’t be, either.”

She frowned. “I’m okay with it.”

“That is all that matters.” I kissed her softly. “I will kill him if I see him again.”

She shook her head wildly. “You won’t. He didn’t know who I was or that I was here.”

“And he won’t from now on. I shattered his memory of you.”

She placed her hand on my cheek, concern behind her eyes. “I am so sorry that you had to see that.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “I guess we’re even.”

She rolled her eyes as she grabbed my hand, leading me back to the dining room. “We won’t be even until you sit across from someone I’ve....”

“Cade,” I said quickly, grinning as she winced.

“Okay, we’re even.”



WE RETURNED to the dining room and had gotten into a comfortable chatter with Edmund, reminiscing about our times exploring some of Thoya. I would sail in, and Edmund would meet me at the dock with two horses. He knew that I would start drinking as soon as I entered the castle, so he would keep me out until night fell, but he never pried as to why I loathed being in Reales so much.

I had never realized that our friendship meant to him what it had to me. In many ways, before Raven came along, Edmund was the one that saved me from completely giving in to the darkness that consumed me and had forgiven me when I woke up the following day, realizing what I had done with Gisela. He found it more comical than anything. We were both consenting adults, though I did not act my age.

“So, Raven,” Gisela said while staring at me.

I averted my gaze from her and lingered on my wife instead. I couldn’t even begin to brace myself for what could come next.

“What is it like having a sister now after so many years without one?”

Raven nearly choked on her turkey. I wrapped my fingers around her neck and squeezed lightly, looking at Mira as she

stopped conversing with Damiana and Baldwin. “It is nothing like I imagined it to be,” Raven replied with a smile.

I grinned, realizing I had not once seen a fake smile on Raven before this moment. It looked misplaced on her lips, like she had never attempted one before.

“It is so lucky that both your twin flame and sister lived in Reales,” Gisela continued.

All Raven did was nod, taking another bite.

Gisela looked at me again. “Did you know about Raven?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat while Edmund snickered. I threw him a glare, and he hung his head, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter. “I didn’t,” I answered. “I wouldn’t have lived without her if I had.”

Gisela rolled her eyes as she leaned back in her chair. She was irritated with me, and I didn’t blame her. I was a jerk before Raven came into my life. I was still a jerk but was trying to be better for her.

Raven stared at me with a shit-eating grin, making Edmund laugh. I muttered a curse word, poking at the pork on my plate with my fork. Though, I was happy to see Raven eating more. Our nefarious activities finally created a hunger that didn’t include me.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that part.

Baldwin asked, “Have you and Raven decided which kingdom will be your main residence?”

“Seolia will be our main residence,” I answered. Even if I couldn’t swear my allegiance to her kingdom, it would not keep me from staying there with her. “But, I will try and talk her into renovating our castle. She loves yours. I fear she may leave me to move into it, which Edmund is begging her to do.”

Baldwin and Damiana laughed while Edmund nodded.

Raven brushed her fingertips back and forth across my palm. “I will send my horse here, whom Edmund has graciously offered to train for me. He’s wild and could use

some instruction. Your horses are beautiful. I rode Diamond today.”

Damiana clapped her hands together and gave Raven a bright smile. “Diamond is my horse! I trained her myself.”

“She’s incredible. We won our race today.”

Damiana sighed, looking at me. “Do not tell me you are racing again. You have taken too much of our money already.”

I chuckled. “He won some of it back.”

“We will do it again tomorrow, and I’ll win all of it back,” Edmund said.

I raised an eyebrow and threw my napkin down on the table, my competitive spirit rearing its ugly head. “Double or nothing.”

Raven groaned. “Darling, it’s our money now, and we need to talk about these things first.”

I looked at her with an amused grin. “Signed any shipping ledgers lately?”

She huffed, muttering something under her breath.

Edmund smiled at me before he nodded. “We race while the ladies prepare us a picnic as our prize.”

Both Raven and Gisela groaned now. I laughed and kissed Raven’s hand. “You have a deal.”



WE SPENT two more hours at dinner, laughing and feeling lighter than we had in weeks. When Mira stood to leave, she nodded at me. I sighed, looking at Raven. We begrudgingly excused ourselves for the night, and I promised once more to kick Edmund’s ass tomorrow, laughing until we were out in the hall and following behind Mira. “You two performed wonderfully. Keep it up in Perosan.”

My fists clenched. None of that was an act. We both truly loved the people in that room.

“Mira, you don’t have to do this.” Raven stepped ahead of me and grabbed Mira’s hand, trying to turn her to face us.

Mira pulled her hand away but humored Raven and turned.

“They’re accepting of magic. They would have accepted mother.”

“Mother didn’t care about acceptance, Little Bird. She wanted power.”

“But why do you want power? We can stop this. You don’t need to avenge her in this way. We can work past this, Mira.” Raven was lying. She would still kill her for hurting me, for keeping her brother from her. “Me, you, and River. If you would just let me talk to him...”

“No,” Mira snapped, causing me to pull Raven back against my chest. “I will have power, Raven. I will avenge her, and then I will burn every man who is like your father.”

Raven started shaking her head.

“Every man who does not submit to me will burn at stake, and you’ll be the one to do it.”

“I won’t,” Raven argued. “I do not kill the innocent.”

“You will, or Ezekiel will be mine. He will suffer the same fate as his brother.”

“She won’t bow to you, Mira. It won’t matter if you have me.”

I felt Raven’s eyes on me, and I followed Mira’s gaze down to her. “Oh, Ezekiel. You underestimate how much she loves you.”

I pushed into her mind as she stared at me, conveying something to me with her eyes. *I would’ve burned the very soil of this world for you*; she had told me that night on the dock after the ball. And as I stared into her green eyes, the realization fell on me like a heavy cloak. Shame and fear etched into the lines of her face. I had underestimated her, and my blood felt like ice.

She would burn them all for me.

CHAPTER FORTY



RAVEN

Zeke had been silent since Mira left us in the hallway, and his quiet retreat continued even after we had returned to our room. He was sitting in a chair, his elbows propped up on the table, his head hanging between his hands. I sat on the edge of the bed and nibbled on my bottom lip as I recalled the night.

There was another witch. Another witch. I wasn't alone. Even after discovering I had a twin who possessed the same magic as me, I still wondered if maybe we were... different. Different together, but seeing how he wanted nothing to do with me, I still felt alone with my elements, but Damiana possessed her kind of magic, which meant that there had to be more.

And tonight had been fun, and it had been a long time since we'd had a chance to laugh like that, until Atticus. And seeing Zeke react the way he did... I was curious why I didn't have those kinds of reactions. I was protective over him, but he seemed like he wanted to crawl across the table and kill Atticus for merely looking at me.

But when Mira threatened to take him away, I was surprised that he didn't know I would do anything to keep him safe and alive. Even with everything between us, he still didn't understand that I loved him as much as he loved me — that I needed him as he needed me.

Raising my eyes from the floor to him, I frowned. Times like this, I wish I could sense him. He had an excellent way of drawing into himself when I needed him to do the complete opposite. “You have to say something, Zeke.”

His head only dropped farther down, his shoulders sagging.

“I am not going to lose you,” I bit out, frustrated that he couldn’t seem to understand that.

“This is so much bigger than me, Raven.”

I shook my head. “Nothing is bigger than us.”

“I didn’t say us. I said me,” he snapped. “Why are we even trying to fight her then? Fight River? What’s the point? If she’s going to take me, lock me up, why not do what she wants now?”

I tried to keep tears from falling as he shouted at me. “Because you told me not to give up! Her threats don’t mean anything if we stick to our plan!”

“But if we fail, you will do it even if I’m locked up. Did you learn nothing from Luca and Alice? Mira would never let me free, but you would do it anyway.”

“Of course I would!” I shouted back. “Why would you expect anything different from me?”

Damiana said so herself — we were a gift. Our thread was golden. We were a gift, a gift, a gift. I kept repeating the words in my head, which only made me angrier. Fire flared behind my eyes. This giant room of gold and white suddenly seemed too small.

He glanced at me and stood, starting to walk toward me.

I stood from the bed and walked away. “No.” He said my name, but I shook my head furiously as my ears started ringing. “You still can’t let me love you.” My tears betrayed me and fell down my cheeks. “After everything, you’re still pushing me away.”

I felt sick, my stomach tightening the more panicked I became. He tried to grab me, but I shoved him off, allowing

my fury to fuel me. “If you want me to give you up, I need to start learning how to live without you now.”

He stopped, his body stilling. I didn’t mean it, but I couldn’t stop crying and shifted into Blaze without willing her forward. My mouth was dry as the taste of blood coated my tongue, ribbons wrapping around the bones of my fingers. I shook my head, stumbling backward as Morana twisted with Blaze.

Grasping at my throat as fury mixed with fear, I tried to scream as it burned. It all burned.

This had never happened before — my shifts never combined. Fire was an element; death was forever, and none of this made sense. Morana was trying to fight Blaze, and both were losing.

I needed to get out of this room.

Rushing to the door as ribbons tried to escape my fingers, I tried pushing them down as I ran. I didn’t know where to go or what to do, but it felt like everything inside me was on fire.

I stumbled as I made it outside, ignoring his calls for me as my legs carried me quickly across the lawn where we had raced this afternoon. I needed to kill something. I wouldn’t be able to shove this down otherwise.

Something small caught my eye, and I followed it, thrusting my fingers out in front of me as my black ribbons curled out, dancing with fire. I fell to my knees as they wrapped around a rabbit in front of me, screaming as its body burned through the blurriness of my tears.

I was screaming, screaming. So much burning, even as the ribbons came back to me, giving me its life. They burned with my flames while reentering my skin, and nothing about it felt good; nothing about it satisfied my thirst.

I didn’t want this black magic.

I didn’t want to murder anymore.

But I did, and it was all I wanted to do.



I HAD COLLAPSED on the ground as the fire stilled, leaving me with just my emptiness. I had pushed myself so deep into the trees that it took him a while to find me. He panted as he paced around my body, staring at the rabbit that was nothing but ash in front of me. I had let the darkness overtake me like it had my mother. And I realized that I couldn't hold him responsible for this anymore. I couldn't be a burden any longer. If staying away from him kept him safe from Mira, then it was what I needed to do. And if killing River was the only way to rid me of this black magic, then maybe it was something I needed to consider.

Or maybe, I was the problem.

"Stop," he said, looking at me. "Stop thinking whatever you're thinking."

"Please leave," I managed to say. It was selfish of me to try and keep my magic when I could so quickly end all of this. I could kill River and keep Zeke safe. This could end with me.

This was our consequence. We were a gift, but gifts always came with strings.

"Stop, Raven."

My tears fell to the ground beneath me as I stared up at the black, starless sky.

"No, Raven."

I silently stood. I couldn't bear to look at him as I turned to leave him standing amongst the trees. He followed me and grabbed my wrist, spinning me to him. "Stop."

I tried to pull my arm free, but he yanked me closer. "Let me go. We're risking too much by being together. You'll be safer without me. I can end this, Zeke."

His thumb ran across my bottom lip, his gaze on my mouth. His desire for me was overpowering his logic. I yanked my head away from him, and his eyes darkened on mine

before narrowing. “Do not ever,” he growled, “pull away from me.”

“This is bigger than our passion,” I whispered weakly.

“Nothing is bigger than us,” he replied hoarsely, gripping my chin between his fingers. “Nothing. And I’m getting really fucking tired of chasing you when you try to run away from us.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t control this. I can’t... I’m going to end up hurting you or hurting someone.”

“No, Raven. *You* don’t seem to understand.” He kissed me then, snaking his hand into my hair and threading his fingers through it firmly. “You belong to me. Every part of you, and there is nothing about you that is going to scare me away.”

I tried to shake my head, but he kissed me again to avoid arguing. “You are mine, Raven. I don’t care if I have to follow you into hell. I will burn before I give you up, and even then, I will crawl on my knees to you.”

Tears burned my eyes. “Those ribbons of fire proved that I *am* hell.”

His lips pressed against mine, his tongue desperate to taste the life I’d stolen, searching my mouth hungrily. When he pulled back, there was deviled look in his eyes. “You have been my hell since I met you, Raven. I have wanted to burn for you since the second I saw you. And I will always, always kneel to you.”

Yanking my head back, he circled the tip of his tongue around my pulse to remind me that I still had a beating heart — that I wasn’t death walking. He whispered my name against my skin, coupled with the word *my*. *My Raven, my Raven*, he whispered aloud and in my mind.

His Raven.

I was his Raven.

He nibbled across my collarbone, creating light bite marks on my skin that I wished I could keep tattooed on myself.

His Raven. Not death, not fury. I was still his Raven, no matter what I did. Someone still loved me.

He slowly lowered down to his knees and kept his eyes locked on mine as he pushed the bottom of my dress up to my hips, quickly shredding through the fabric of my panties as I kept the dress held against my stomach.

My skin was burning, but only for him.

His tongue licked up my clit, and my knees buckled, having nothing to hold myself still with. I was at his mercy, hidden amongst the trees, which was exactly what he wanted.

Me at his mercy.

Because even with all the power I held in my fingers, I would always relent to him. He would always be the one thing, the one person who could bring me back, who could remind me that I was still someone worth saving, even when I couldn't save myself.

He took a deep inhale of my scent. Our scent.

Pine, pears, jasmine, unfortunate lack of rum.

“If you are hell, men would damn their souls for all eternity just to smell you.”

“Not if I smell like you,” I whispered.

He flicked his eyes up to mine. “Because you belong to me.”

His voice was raw as his fingers dug into my thighs, spreading them farther apart so his tongue could dive deep into my cunt. I bent at the waist, pressing my fingers into his skull as he relished the power he would always have over me.

His head tilted slightly, the sensation as he flicked my clit over and over sending me spiraling, my stomach tightening, my fury in a frenzy from how much I needed him, from this panicked pleasure he always put me in.

Never having this with him or losing him would drive me to ignite anything that stood in our way. And that was exactly

what he wanted to remind me of; that none of this mattered if we didn't have each other.

He groaned as my walls clenched around his tongue, my cry of pleasure scratchy as I came. It blazed as it spilled on his tongue, his nails digging deeper into my skin while he drank from me.

And when I had nothing left to give him, he stood and wrapped his arms around me, cradling me against his chest as he lowered to his knees and laid me gently on the soft grass. Discarding his clothes slowly while staring at me, he seemed to be searching my eyes for something. And whatever answer he sought, he soon found because he lowered to his palms on top of me and slid into me.

I gasped, my eyes rolling back. His thrusts were slow but rough, each one a reminder that he would never let me go — the pain a reminder of how it felt when I tried to make him.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I kissed him apologetically. And ever the forgiving one, he balanced his hand delicately on the side of my neck, resting his forehead against mine. "My Raven," he repeated softly, lovingly. "Come for me, little demon."

I whimpered because I didn't want this to end. If it ended, when it ended, we would be back in our reality, and I wanted to stay in this one with him — the one where nothing ever hurt.

I shook my head in answer, closing my eyes. Seeing his damnable sweat-soaked face was always enough to send me over.

His irritated laughter was breathy. "You're so goddamn stubborn," he sighed. "Open your eyes, witch."

"Mm-mm," I hummed.

He thrust quicker, making my body ache, but I wanted more. "Open your eyes," he demanded again. "Baby, I'm never going to leave you. Open your eyes."

I opened them, and he grinned. I glared at him, but when he leaned in and bit down on the skin of my shoulder, I

breathed his name again and shattered. My name off his lips was a mixture of irritation and admiration as he followed me over, our heat combining.

His heart thundered against my chest as he released his hold and fully sank onto me. I removed my red hair from my face that was sticking to me from the sweat. I hadn't shifted back yet because I couldn't. Blaze seemed to have made her home right at the forefront of my emotions, and I couldn't push her back down. She was punishing me for keeping her hidden for so long.

Or, perhaps, she was protecting me.

"Stop trying to leave," he mumbled against my skin, his face buried against my throat.

"Stop pushing me away," I volleyed, my heat flaring again from the thought of losing him. "I've surrendered to you; why won't you relinquish to me?"

"My soul is not worth saving."

I tangled his hair in my hands and pulled until we were staring at one another. My broken man, surrounded by shadows, thought so little of himself when he didn't realize that he was everything. "You are worth all of it. If you die, I will follow you. Our thread cannot be broken. We live on this earth together or spend another lifetime searching for one another after death." I kissed him softly. "I am not ready for this life to be over yet."

He propped up on his elbows, brushing his thumb across my forehead until he finally dipped his chin once. "I surrender to you, Raven." He pressed the tips of our noses together. "I am yours."

I wrinkled my nose. "Have you not been?"

He laughed softly at my question. "I've been yours since I saw you, but I've never been willing to let you sacrifice anything for me. If you're insistent that I do, then I cannot ask you not to do the very thing I would for you."

"All of this could have been resolved. I wouldn't have had to sacrifice a bunny."

He looked deeper into the trees like he could see the charred remains.

“I couldn’t stop them from combining. And I’m scared, Zeke. I can’t control Morana alone, especially if she morphs with Blaze. If she overcomes all of them....”

“She won’t.” He looked back at me. “She doesn’t belong to you, and I believe that’s why she’s fighting you so much. We have to find a way to get rid of her.”

“I thought you loved *all of me*.”

He rolled his eyes. “If you want to keep her, then I do. But she’s trying to take you away from me. I need her gone. I will be especially pissed off if she takes away Blaze.”

I snorted. “You’re going to make the others jealous.”

“Good.” He kissed down my throat. “You fuck harder when you’re envious.”

I scowled, trying to roll him off me, but he laughed and kissed me. “Baby, I promise I will help you, but you must stop running away. We are not leaving one another.”

I nodded and threw my arms around his neck. “I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“When we return home, our mission is turning her army against her and finding answers for you.”

“It feels so good when you call Seolia home.”

“Baby, you’re my home. I rest in you.”



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, we were deep in the throes of our endless need to make love when we heard a knock on the door from underneath our fort of quilts. Zeke cursed and untangled himself from me, leaving me frustrated with want.

He pulled a sheet off our bed and wrapped it around his waist as he walked to our door. Opening it a sliver, he leaned

against the frame so no one could see me naked and burrowed under the quilts.

I had eventually shifted into myself overnight, but it took a lot of sweet words from him to calm the fury that had settled into every part of me.

“It is time to give me what’s owed,” Edmund bellowed from outside.

I rolled my eyes at the competition between these two gorgeous men.

“I’m a little busy at the moment,” Zeke bit out.

Edmund laughed. “Ten minutes, Ezekiel. Meet me, or we will triple the earnings.”

“I’ll triple the earnings anyway,” Zeke challenged.

I snapped my fingers at him. “Stop betting our money, you buffoon.”

Edmund poked his head through the crack in the door. Zeke tried to shove him back, but he remained firmly in place. “Good morning, you exquisite creature. Gisela is waiting for you in the kitchen to make our picnic. Please hurry because she cannot bake.”

I laughed, giving him a small wave. “We’ll be right out.”

Zeke cursed as Edmund laughed again while leaving down the hall. Zeke shut the door behind him and looked at me before running back to the bed, lunging for me. I squealed, trying to avoid the crash of his body weight on me. “Baby, we have to get up now.”

He climbed on top of me and pinned me to the bed, shaking his head. “We don’t have to do anything.”

I tried to wiggle out from underneath him. “Are you going to say that every time?”

He grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head. “Yes, because you are about the freedom to choose, and I choose you.”

He leaned down to kiss me, but I turned my head and laughed as he groaned. “You are not going to use that against me. Don’t you want to race and see me bring you a picnic with some possibly disgusting food if Gisela is left alone?”

“If it gives me extra time with you, I’ll eat all the disgusting things.”

My heartstrings tugged at how cute he was.

He took advantage and thrust back inside of me.

“Ezekiel.”

“Ah, I feel like I’m in trouble. I like it.” He moved slowly, his grin smug. “We have to finish where we left off, or I won’t be able to focus today.”

“You’re an awful liar,” I mumbled, but he felt too good to care. “Fine.” I pretended to be exasperated but wrapped myself around him, kissing him wildly. We needed to come quickly, but he was moving extremely slowly. It was almost like he wanted Edmund to bust in here.

I broke from him and arched a brow at his coy grin. “Baby.”

He shook his head. “No. It means I have to leave you.”

“I am going to see you in just a little bit,” I argued.

“No, Raven.”

“You can be so annoying.”

I would have to make it impossible for him not to give in.

Digging my nails in his back, I dragged them down harshly while licking up the base of his throat.

Cursing, he bucked into me harder. “Stop,” he demanded.

I didn’t listen and instead pressed my mouth against his ear. “You feel so good when you fuck me.” I nipped at his earlobe. “Let me come all over you, baby.”

He groaned while his pace increased. “Fuck, Raven.”

There were goose bumps all over him. I trailed my tongue across the ridge of his ear, grinning as he shuddered.

“You infuriating witch.”

“I’m so madly in love with you,” I whispered into his ear.

He cried out my name as he released into me, hitting the bed with his fist out of frustration that I had beaten him. I kissed him once more as I shattered around him for what had to be the hundredth time today.

Brooding as he pulled out of me, he threw the quilts off. “You used our love against me.”

I gasped. “I meant every word.”

Following him out of bed and walking to the wardrobe, I looked over my dresses with a sigh. “I didn’t realize it was so outdoorsy here. I am ill-prepared.” I glanced over at him as he pulled on tight, black pants that clung to his muscles and a black shirt that did the same.

I narrowed my eyes, and his eyes flickered to me. “You have to stop this. It’s getting out of hand.”

Adjusting his shirt over his waist, he sauntered to me with a grin.

I turned my attention back to my clothing. “And you say I’m infuriating.”

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my temple. “You want to keep me for yourself, my love?”

“You’re mighty full of yourself.” Choosing a dress, I held it up. “But yes.”

His laugh felt like sunshine against my ear.

“Please try not to make anyone swoon.”

“I will be positively cold toward all of them until you arrive.”

“But that is part of your charm.”

Laughing again, he released me so I could pull my pale-blue dress over my head. It was simple — long-sleeved with a cinched waist, the skirt spreading down my legs. Simple, yet elegant. And way too dressy for a picnic, but it would have to

work. I decided to skip a tiara and slid on a pair of matching flats.

Grabbing my hand, he spun me out of the room. And as the skirt twirled around my legs, I smiled. “Do you think I could’ve been in a fairy tale?”

“Baby, you are better than a fairy tale. You’re the story parents tell their children to scare them.”

I guffawed at that, pinching his side.

“I won’t do that to our children, of course.”

Smiling, I threaded our fingers together. His dreams of a future helped me believe it may happen. “Are you anxious to *breed*, my love?”

He kissed the top of my head. “You have no idea how much I’d love my claim on you to be as obvious as that, but we’ll wait. This isn’t the world I want to bring our child into yet.”

“Our child,” I said with a warm smile.

He returned it. “Ours.”



HE LED me downstairs to the kitchen. I shouldn’t have been surprised at how familiar he was with the layout of this castle. He and Edmund were close, and their friendship made me ache, wishing I had known him before Mira took over. I loved seeing him loosen up.

We always had to be on edge.

Gisela was waiting for me and gave me a kind smile.

“Kiss me for luck.” He spun me and leaned down to catch my lips with his.

I rested my hand gently against his cheek as he kissed me softly.

When he pulled away, it was with a cocky smile. “Not that I need it. I am quite good.”

I grinned like a dope as I watched him walk away, only turning once he’d disappeared back down the hall. “Good morning, Gisela.” I brushed my lips with the back of my hand, still feeling the tingle from his kiss. He made me melt more often these days, and I would miss him before he even left a room.

“Good morning, Raven. I was trying to decide what we should make. I was thinking maybe some sandwiches and baking a pie, but I am not good at the latter. Are you?”

Nodding, I walked around the kitchen and gathered supplies for a pie. “I am. I used to bake them as a girl. I will handle the pie if you want to take care of the sandwiches.”

She gave me a small smile. I knew she felt uncomfortable around me, like she had a secret she needed to hide. “He told me, Gisela.” My voice was soft. “I am not upset. He had a life before me. I would like for us to be friends.”

Her shoulders sagged in relief. “I’ve been sick about it, Raven. I am not normally this quiet.”

“Good, because neither am I. I plan on visiting often and would love for us to get to know one another better. Like how two beautiful people like you and your brother have not been snatched up.”

I began combining my ingredients as she stood on the other side of the table and started cutting the bread into smaller slices. “Edmund takes his role as heir very seriously. He’s always studying or meeting with father’s advisers to prepare for the transition whenever that day comes. It doesn’t give him much time for anything else. He does like you, though.”

She winked at me. “But you and Ezekiel are a match. It’s undeniable. As for me, I am a lover of all and not quite ready to settle down yet.”

I nodded with an understanding of how that felt. “I wasn’t ready until him.” Being a wife had not been simple, but it was where I was meant to be — at his side and equal in every way,

just as it should be. I was ready to be bored and happy instead of constantly having something to fret about. “Have you always known about your mother?”

“I’ve known since I was a girl. It was hard to lie to her since she could feel our energy.”

I grinned. I couldn’t lie to Zeke, either. “What is the peak of her ability?”

“She can share her energy with others and absorb psychic energy. It makes her stronger, or she can project it. Or gather it in her hands and manifest it into physical form. She threw it once at a tree, and it ripped in half.” She laughed while shaking her head. “It was terrifying to see a tree that’s been around for hundreds of years just crack down the middle.”

“And it didn’t pass along to either of you? What about her parents?”

“Not to either of us that I’m aware of unless it’s dormant. Her parents died when she was young. She rarely mentions them, but I don’t believe they had magic. Did yours pass to you?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. “I don’t know. I’ve had my elements for as long as I can remember, though they became more prominent the older I got. I don’t believe my mother possessed any sort of elemental magic.”

“And Mira doesn’t have any?”

I tried to hide my smugness and my lie. “Only me.”

And it would be her demise.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



RAVEN

*I*t was mid-afternoon when we finally left the kitchen. We made way too many sandwiches. Gisela had cut the bread unevenly, and in between baking pies, I helped her try and salvage what we could, but it ended up with us having to cut through another loaf of bread. And while she put the toppings on them, it gave me enough time to bake two pies — cherry and sugar cream.

We padded along the grass barefoot, having ditched our shoes back at the castle. The grass was too soft to waste with shoes. We were loosely holding hands and swinging them between us, the picnic basket hanging from the crook of my arm.

We had become close already, spending the entire time chatting about our childhoods, and I answered all of her questions about Seolia. She listed off the booths I needed to visit before we left tomorrow and agreed with what Luca said about the fudge: Thoya definitely made the best.

We chose a spot in the middle of the giant yard and spread a large blanket on the grass, lying on our backs to stare at the clouds. This was the life I wished for.

“Please spend at least one month here every summer. We can travel the countryside,” Gisela begged, pointing toward a cloud outlined in the shape of a shoe.

I would love nothing more than to spend the entirety of summer here. Maybe bring Jeanine and Luca. “Zeke said there’s a lot of history here. He raved about it.”

“He’s right. He and Edmund used to be gone for days exploring the outskirts. That was before Edmund became *so serious*.”

I laughed at how she said it.

“He seems to regress to a child when Ezekiel visits. He would never be doing this otherwise.”

“Then we need to make an effort to see one another often. Zeke needs it.”

“I need you,” I heard him say from above.

I tilted my chin back as the men approached us. “Aren’t you two chummy?” Edmund asked as he peered down at us. “Bond quickly, did you?”

“Oh, yes. We’ve compared notes,” Gisela answered.

I giggled as the color drained from Zeke’s face.

“Not to worry, Ezekiel. We both agreed that we’ve had much better.”

Edmund howled in laughter as he took a seat between Gisela and me.

Raising to my palms, I motioned for Zeke to sit beside me. He narrowed his eyes on me as he did.

Rolling mine, I leaned over to the basket and flipped the lid open. Both men looked into it, almost as if afraid of what they would find. “Sandwiches and pies!” Gisela exclaimed proudly.

Edmund winced. “Please tell me you did not bake the pies, Gisela.”

She shoved his shoulder.

“I baked the pies,” I said. “Leave her alone.”

Edmund gasped and shook his head at Zeke. “They’re already defending one another, Ezekiel.”

“I told you it wasn’t a good idea,” Zeke mumbled, grabbing one of the sandwiches.

We all followed his lead. “Are we broke, my love?”

Edmund grinned at my question. Zeke didn’t answer.

Groaning, I took a bite of my sandwich. “After I wished you luck and everything.”

“We broke even?”

I lifted an unimpressed brow.

“I’m out of practice. Edmund gave me a slow horse.”

“All I hear are excuses from this man,” Edmund said, reaching for another sandwich.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” he sighed.

At that, the three of us groaned, and then we all started to laugh, even though I was unsurprised if that were true.

“Feed me pie, woman,” he demanded.

Gasping, I cut a slice for him and shoved it in his mouth. The cherry filling smeared across his mouth and chin. “That’s not quite what I meant,” he said while licking it from his lips. “But it’s delicious. Why don’t I ever get these at home?”

I took a bite of my slice. “Because you don’t look like Gisela. We’re madly in love now.”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“We men are never needed anymore,” Edmund said.

I shrugged a shoulder. “Were you ever truly needed before?”

Both Edmund and Zeke dropped their jaws while Gisela and I laughed.

“For your pleasure,” Zeke said, reaching over to pull me to him.

Gisela pulled me back toward her, laughing as I tumbled over into her lap. “Women can pleasure just as well as any man, believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you.” Leaning over me and sliding an arm under my back, Zeke raised me back up. “This one gives me great pleasure.”

“Why can Gisela flirt with Raven, but I can’t?”

“Because I can fight you,” Zeke answered, moving me to sit between his legs. He brushed my hair off my neck to plant a gentle kiss. “I can’t fight Gisela.”

“And as much as I would love to test that for Raven’s eternal love....” She stood from the blanket. “I promised to meet someone in town. Say goodbye before you leave tomorrow.”

Reaching up, I grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles. “I promise.” I watched her walk away before going for another piece of pie and cutting into the sugar cream flavored.

“You would do well here, Raven. It suits you,” Edmund said.

He was right. I felt jovial here. It wasn’t dark and gray like Seolia and Reales, and there was nothing but land for miles. I could spend hours exploring and riding horses without feeling trapped as I did on my tiny island. I would never have to go into the water. Perosan and Reales were both connected to Thoya by land. There would never be any need...

I stopped my thought process there. Seolia was my home, and I refused to be fearful of it forever.

“Stop trying to steal my wife, Edmund,” Zeke added.

“Never,” he replied, taking a bite of his pie.

“Thank you for participating in our scheme, Edmund. She thinks we performed well last night. She’s leaving this evening, giving us tomorrow to ourselves before we have to meet her in Perosan in four weeks. Are they as charming as you?”

“They’re old goons, love. You will not get the same response if you tell them what you told me.” He looked at Zeke. “They will immediately invade Reales. Their hatred for your kingdom is deep.”

“I know,” Zeke agreed. “That’s why I didn’t travel there often. They’d house me, but their demeanor toward me was cold. I started renting a cottage for the nights I was there.”

“They may not take the news of your faux engagement well. But don’t fret. You have me on your side. What is your plan?”

“Two hundred of Mira’s men are in my kingdom, training with Seolian soldiers. We have just over three hundred to Mira’s two-hundred and fifty still stationed in Reales. When we travel to Reales for our wedding, we’re going to surprise her with an invasion in hopes that her men will change their allegiance to me beforehand. We will capture her, and I will end this.”

“And if you fail?”

“That’s not an option, Edmund.” I held his gaze with nothing but determination in my eyes. “We will not fail.”



I WAS ALONE AGAIN, leaving the kitchen after returning the picnic basket. Zeke and Edmund decided to race again, despite my pleas to stop spending our money.

I was walking toward our room when I heard my name called. I spun on my heel, smiling as Damiana approached me. “Humor me with a walk outside? Baldwin is in a meeting, and it’s a beautiful day.”

Nodding, I held out my hand to her. She looked at it, her smile widening as she took it and nudged me gently with her shoulder. “You make me feel like a young girl again, Raven. It’s been so long since I’ve had a leisurely stroll with a friend through our yard.”

Once outside, we kicked off our shoes before stepping onto the grass. “Are you enjoying our kingdom, love?”

I nodded enthusiastically. “It is gorgeous. I love it here.” I looked around at the large manors that were spread throughout

the grassy hillside and the stables right down the hill with horses freely galloping. “It’s serene.”

“I remember when you came here so many years ago. You wouldn’t meet my eyes; you were so afraid.”

I hardly remembered anything from my trip here.

“Tell me, love. Where is your twin?”

My head whipped to hers, my eyes widening. “How...”

“We are all connected by threads, but only the strongest connections possess enough energy to be able to see it. Along with the tether you have with Ezekiel, there’s another. It is a blue string mixed with the colors of your elements. And when you didn’t show the water element last night....”

“You knew,” I finished for her. “He is in Reales. He believes me to be his enemy. I know nothing about him, nor did I know he existed.” I wished I had an escape from this permanent sadness.

“There was a prophecy once, a long time ago. So long ago that I wondered if maybe it was a tale.”

I wrinkled my nose. “A prophecy? Weren’t those banished the same time as beliefs were?”

“The prophecy stated that twins would be born of darkness — so deep that misery would follow them all their lives....”

That was wonderful to hear.

“...but they would hold so much power between them that it would bring magic back to every realm. Every creature who ever possessed magic would be reborn, reawakened.”

“I don’t believe that we are the answer to that prophecy. River tried to drown me. Expecting us to ever work together for something like that would be merely a dream.” I couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it. River would rather see me die than save magic. “And magic is still alive outside of our realm. There’s nothing to restore.”

“Just because magic is alive does not mean that it’s not dying,” she answered. “There are more than witches, Raven.

Many creatures once roamed these lands.”

I had a war to worry about. I couldn't possibly add on another problem right now. And again, it couldn't be about River and me.

“And you were born of darkness.”

I stared at her. “Do you know of Morana then?”

We stopped walking as she looked at me with fearful eyes. “How do you know of Morana?”

“I...” How could I explain this? “I... possess her. My mother, when she died, she gave me her magic. And when I visited Reales, it seemed to... wake up. I've been having awful nightmares, and I can shift into her, but she tries to take over me completely when I do. My elements fight her every time.”

“Death was not your mother's power. Death invaded her mind, her body. I was hoping it had died with her. You must get rid of her, Raven.” Her voice possessed a hint of worry. “That is a spirit that you do not want to keep. It is a spirit that should have been destroyed long ago.”

“I can't get rid of her,” I said. “She has become part of me. I've tried, but she traps me.”

“You will have to find a way to free yourself. Raven, if she is freed, Morana would wreak havoc on our world. Spirits of death should never live in mortal bodies.”

“She seems to want Zeke more than anything,” I grumbled.

“Your mate should stay away from her.”

“My mate,” I said with a sigh. “Mate.”

“You seem troubled.”

I stared quietly at the horses for a moment. “Can I be honest with you about something?” I saw her acknowledgment from the corner of my eye. “I know he is my twin flame. I've seen pieces of our past and future and feel that connection to him. But mate... I don't... is that something I'm supposed to

feel? Baldwin said he could tell I was Zeke's mate by his reactions, but I do not have the same...."

Damiana seemed contemplative. "You are his, Raven. It is evident."

"But... is he mine?"

Damiana joined me in watching the horses gallop. "How much do you know of your past, Raven?"

"My... my past?" I wrinkled my nose. "I know the backstory of my birth and how I came to be Queen of Seolia."

"Do not fret about the mating bond, love. There are much bigger things to worry about now, such as war."

Again, I looked at her. "Your intuition is unlike anything else."

"Your sister's energy is dark, unlike yours. And Edmund has never been good at lying to his mother. Thoya and Seolia have long been allies. That will not change."

"River... he's a weapon. He has control over his element that I do not possess with mine."

"It is a control that you can learn." She grabbed my other hand. "Elements are energy. It's all about connecting to them. All you need to do is learn how to channel the energy of each element."

"Can you do it for me?"

She laughed loudly, shaking my hands between us. "Regain your control, Raven. It will help you."

"Control," I sighed. "It is not something I've been privy to in my life."

She moved her hands to my shoulders. "Then it is time to take it for yourself."

Her smile was warm and genuine, and even though she hardly knew me, I believed she meant every word she said — that I could do this, that I could gain as much control with my elements that River had with his own.

“I promise to keep Edmund up to date regularly with any information I have.”

“Edmund will never leave you alone. I hope you realize that.”

Smiling, I rolled my eyes.

“If he didn’t love Ezekiel so much, he would be trying harder to poach you.”

“And if I didn’t love Zeke so much, I would let him.”

That made her laugh again. “Ezekiel is a handsome boy. He would visit and be in such a sorrowful state, but Edmund would have him smiling soon. Sometimes he’d stay for weeks, and we would wonder if he’d ever leave.”

“I wish we didn’t have to.”

“Both of you radiate such joy when you’re together.” She paused, tilting her head slightly as she noticed my neck’s scar. “What is that?” Her voice was quiet and full of curiosity.

“Oh.” I laughed a little while touching the scar. “Zeke has a weird fascination with biting me. He said it marks me as his, and he feels the need to do it frequently. Is that a mating thing?”

She gave me a small smile but said nothing else. I wanted to ask her more about magic and her past, but when we heard deep laughs from around the castle, we turned toward the noise. The two devilish brothers spotted us and smiled. “We were just talking about the two of you,” Damiana said.

Zeke ran to me and wrapped his arms around my waist, lifting me and brushing his lips across mine. “I missed you,” he whispered, kissing me again.

Stay with me here, was what I wanted to say. We wouldn’t have to hurt anymore.

“My turn,” Edmund said.

That only made Zeke squeeze me tighter and take a step away from Edmund, shaking his head. I pushed on his

shoulders as I laughed, trying to get him to set me down. He did but kept his arm around my waist.

“I have a gift for the two of you,” Damiana said. “A late wedding present, we’ll say.”

Zeke looked at me. “You told her, too?”

I shook my head. “No. Your friend did.”

Edmund winced, looking everywhere but at Zeke.

Damiana came to us and removed Zeke’s arm from around my waist. I grinned as his face dropped. “Calm down, Ezekiel,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

After threading our fingers together, she pushed us apart until there was a small gap between us. I tilted my head as she took a step back and focused her attention on our intertwined hands.

Bringing her hands up and clasping them together, she slowly spread them apart, and with them, a golden strand appeared between our bodies.

I gasped as I looked between us. Strands of gold weaved together, shimmering as they linked. It continued to grow until it was wrapped around our hands like a vine, twisting up our arms and binding us together. Even as I took a step away from him, it stayed cloaked around me, stretching as I moved.

“This is your love,” she said softly.

My eyes met his.

“You two are a gift. Your strand will only continue to strengthen. Forever bound, moving when you do. Even if sworn to another, you would always feel a pull toward each other.”

“But how?” I whispered, flickering my gaze again to the golden tether.

“That’s a question for the gods, Raven. But your energy, it’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Same for Ezekiel. His energy has changed since you two found one another.”

I looked back at Zeke. His face was full of emotion as he stared at the strand between us.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Damiana continued. “I would say there must have been something the two of you did in another lifetime that was godlike.” She nodded toward our strand as it glistened brighter. “Even now, his love for you only grows.”

The vine started to twist over our shoulders, and tears flooded my eyes as I looked at him again. He smiled at me, a tear falling down his cheek. I moved closer to him, and he mirrored it, the strand around us pulsing like energy humming through our bodies.

It reminded me of the dreams I used to have when he would push me out by touching my hand. It was alive and strong, even then. He loved me, and it was right there at my fingertips each time he created a dream for us. And I had spent many months doubting him when this golden strand had been between us, always holding us together when it seemed like I’d never see him again.

It was enough for me to throw my arms around his neck. The only magic I ever needed to understand and trust was the one between us. “I love you,” I said through tearful emotion.

“Oh, my love.” And then he kissed me.

The strand faded around us as Damiana dispelled our energy.

“I am still not giving up on her,” Edmund said.

Laughing, I wiped a tear from my cheek as Zeke sighed and pulled me tighter against him. I rested my cheek against his chest as I looked at Damiana. “Thank you,” I breathed. “For showing me. Helping me.”

Damiana put her arms around us both. Zeke welcomed her into our hug, cursing as Edmund came behind me and put his arms around only me. My cheeks hurt from smiling. “We will win this, love,” Edmund promised. “Together, we will win this.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



RAVEN

The following day was much less strained since we bid Mira farewell last night after dinner. Everyone kept appearing friendly toward her, and she seemed to fall for it, leaving us only with a warning of meeting her in Perosan in four weeks.

Judging by what Edmund said, I was fearful that Queen Petra and King Elric wouldn't be as accommodating.

We sent our trunks to our ships to be loaded so we could leave in a few hours. I was anxious to get to the trader's market, but Zeke seemed to be taking a long time getting dressed. "Are you trying to annoy me?" I asked while he slowly laced up his boots.

A ghost of a grin had been on his mouth all morning.

"We need to go. I want some of that fudge that Luca told us about." I looked at the door as someone knocked, groaning and dramatically falling onto the table. "We're never going to get out of here."

Zeke spoke with someone outside, his voice too low to hear anything. And then he shut the door.

"Who was that?"

"Let's go," was all he replied and started pulling me by the elbow toward the door.

“Who was that?”

“Don’t you want fudge?”

I did, but he was being weird.

Edmund and Gisela were waiting for us in the hallway with goofy grins.

“Lead the way,” Zeke said.

A carriage was waiting for us outside, but the town was within walking distance. I didn’t have time to ask questions before he opened the door and motioned for me to get in. I looked back toward town, but he palmed the small of my back and gently pushed me forward.

Huffing, I climbed in and looked at each of them as they followed in after me. “What is going on?”

No one answered me, and they all refused to meet my eyes.

Leaning up, I bit his earlobe. He yelped and shoved my face away. “Tell me,” I demanded.

He looked at Edmund instead of at me. It was like they had suddenly invented a silent language.

I crossed over the carriage and crawled into Gisela’s lap, grabbing her face between my hands and forcing her to look at me. “Don’t you love me?”

She poked out her bottom lip and looked at Zeke. I turned around to see him shaking his head at her. Gisela wrapped her arms around me and pulled me to rest against her. “There, there. You’ll know soon.”

Sighing, I glared at my husband, who was grinning in amusement and still refusing to look at me. Gisela played with my hair, running her fingers through it. “I think I shall keep her.”

I smiled.

“I can make you happy, love. I smell better, too.”

Zeke's eyes rolled. "Everyone is always trying to steal her from me."

The carriage began to bounce as it rolled onto gravel. We were definitely not going into town. I tried to lean up, but she held me down and covered my eyes with her hand. "You do smell better," I murmured as I inhaled her skin.

She and Edmund laughed, but Zeke only sighed.

We slowed to a stop, and Gisela finally released me. I popped up like a daisy and looked out the window, but all I saw was a manor surrounded by nothing but lush green grass. It was stunning, but why wasn't I allowed to know about this?

Zeke left the carriage first, holding his hand out to me. I stood beside him and stared at the manor, my lips slightly parted as I took it in. It was large and had multiple windows, similar to the castle. And like all the other buildings in Thoya, it was white with a black roof.

It had a grand staircase that led up to a porch decorated with two rocking chairs. Behind the manor was nothing but land and a small pond, big enough for a rowboat.

It was like a dream.

Turning to my three silent annoyances, I asked, "What is this?"

"Ours," Zeke replied.

My eyes widened as my head snapped back to the manor.

I had no words.

Zeke continued, "After about an hour of Edmund kicking my ass yesterday, I decided to invest our money in something else. He brought me out here, and I bought it without thinking."

This swelling feeling in my chest had to be my heart bursting.

"You're happy here, Raven."

Edmund and Gisela beamed at me as I nodded.

“And all I want in this life is to make you smile.”

I stared at this beautiful man in front of me, speechless.

“When we visit, this will be our home. Gisela decorated it yesterday. That’s why she left us.”

Gisela nodded in confirmation.

“Say something, baby.”

“I love you,” I said on a breath.

He smiled then, grabbing my face and kissing me. He bought us a home here. He understood how light I felt when we were together in this place. He was trying to plan our future, one step at a time.

“Can we go in?”

Laughing, he kissed me again and grabbed my hand. “Of course, we can.”

He pulled me up the multiple steps to our porch. The door was large, black, and heavy. Even the hardware and frames of the windows and doors were black. But as he guided me inside, I gasped. It was nothing but bright, and Gisela had spared no expense while decorating.

The bay windows were large and in every room downstairs. Gorgeous painted portraits of suns and horses covered the walls — even a black horse like Shadow. The downstairs was illuminated by sunlight, beaming perfectly on white furnishings placed sporadically throughout the rooms. The living area contained black bookshelves balanced against the far wall, full of colorful spines.

“Zeke said you like fairy tales,” Gisela said behind me. “There’s a lot there, but there are more books in town that you can rummage through.”

To my left was a kitchen full of baking supplies on shelves. “For your pies,” Gisela said.

I nodded, breathless as I took in the wonderment.

There was a large island with stools, four to be exact. She’d even bought us a dining table with six chairs, colorful

and bright, just like the rest of the manor.

Between the kitchen and living area sat a large fireplace. I could imagine Zeke reading to our children in front of it one day while I baked a pie.

He came to stand beside me and kissed my temple while grabbing my hand to lead me upstairs.

It was just as open as the bottom floor. He had commissioned portraits of my fire amongst trees, covering the walls.

I was overcome with emotion when he led me into a large bedroom with a fireplace, a white marble tub in the corner, and a black-framed bed in the middle. “Ours,” he whispered, taking a moment to look around before pulling me into another bedroom.

And as he smiled at me, I returned it. I knew exactly what he wanted to fill this room with and the next as he pulled me into another empty room. He stopped and spun me to him, cupping my neck before tilting my chin back to look at him. “This is our future, my love. And we’re going to have one. We can come here every summer, and you can let yourself be happy, let go of all our responsibilities. We can make it part of our perfect world, though the taxes are astronomical,” he said loud enough for Edmund to hear.

Edmund laughed from the hall.

“Our happy ending is here,” he continued. “Together. Making love and memories. Riding horses, bathing in the sun, whatever you want. I will give you whatever you want, Raven.”

“I want you,” I whispered. I wanted him, only him, always — though I would never turn down a gift like this in a million years.

Nodding, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine.

“We’ll send for you in an hour,” Gisela said from the hall.

He pulled me backward out of this room and back into ours. I was in shock and wondering how he’d been able to pull

all of this off in the three days we'd been here. He grinned at me, constantly wiping the tears from my cheeks.

“How?”

He led me to the bed. “The way you looked at it when we pulled into the dock. You loved it as much as I always have. When I saw how close you were getting to Edmund, I asked him if there were any properties nearby after you fell asleep the day we arrived. He knew this land was for sale, and when we planned to race, it was to come to see this property.”

“We did ride for a little bit, but it was to come over here. At the picnic, he simply nodded to Gisela, which was his way of telling her that I had bought it. She left to prepare it for you. I left with Edmund again yesterday to commission the paintings. I had to pay way too much to get them done in time,” he said with a laugh. “Damiana knew and distracted you. They want to be part of our family, Raven, and I know you love them.”

“I do,” I whispered, climbing into our bed. “But I love you so much more.” My voice broke, and he climbed in quickly with me, wrapping me in his arms. “Thank you. Thank you for how much you love me.”

“Baby, all I do is love you.” His voice was low, and he said it with so much honesty that I knew no truer words would ever be spoken.

I studied his face like I had so many times before. With each passing day, he became more devastating. I ran my fingers through his hair and smiled. There was so much adoration in his eyes that I may die happily, right in his arms.

I brought his face to mine and kissed him tenderly. All I wanted to do was love him — try to give back to him everything he had given to me. Create our own magic, like we did every time we collided.

Bunching my dress in my hands, I slid it over my body and discarded it to the floor. His eyes traveled across every inch of me. It was amazing to me that after having nothing but each other for weeks now, we still wanted nothing more.

When I reached for his shirt and tugged it up, he humored me and raised his arms over his head with a grin. I laughed as I tried to maneuver it over him, needing to lift it to my knees to get it off. As I did, he kissed my stomach and each of my breasts, bringing forth a soft sigh from me as I pushed down on the waistband of his pants.

He didn't make me work for it this time, instead sliding them off on his own and kicking them to the floor. He started to lie me back, but I shook my head and grabbed his wrists. "Sit back," I murmured, motioning toward the headboard with my chin.

He did as I asked, straightening and scooting back until he leaned against it. I crawled to him, and he tracked my movements, his lips parting as I moved to his lap and straddled him. Our chests were pressed tightly together, and my arms wrapped around his neck. "Do you know how much I love you?" My voice was barely a whisper. He still made me so nervous, even with the knowledge that he loved and wanted me.

I hoped the butterflies he gave me would never go away.

He nodded, but I shook my head slowly while lowering down on his length. "I don't think you do."

Rolling my hips once, he closed his eyes and wrapped his hands around my waist. "Raven," he whispered.

"I love you so much that I think I might die." I kissed him once, gently grinding my hips down against his, and drew a sharp, satisfied breath as he filled me completely. "I think I may combust," I whispered against his lips, no inches spared between our bodies. I felt him everywhere. "You are all I think about, all I dream of."

He opened his eyes to stare into mine as I rolled my hips again. I wanted to take this slow. I wanted to savor him — live in this moment forever. Our need to consume one another was a gift, but I didn't want to rush this moment. "I miss you even now." I brushed my fingertips along his eyebrows, cheeks, and bottom lip and kissed the tip of his nose. "I want a life with you."

His eyes began to glisten.

“I want our tiny little demons to love you.”

He dipped his forehead to mine, his breaths shaky as he pulled them in.

I cleared my throat to keep from breaking. “I want to love you until you can’t remember what it felt like to be unloved.”

A tear escaped down his cheek, and I kissed it away. “Look at me, baby. This is important.”

He drew in a jagged breath before he lifted his head again.

“I need you to know that every second with you has been worth it. I wouldn’t change the heartbreak of every fight, every second guess because it brought us here. I would do all of it again tomorrow if it gave me a love like this.”

His arms curled around my waist as he buried his face against my neck, tears wetting my skin.

“I love you, I love you, I love you.” I would never be able to say enough to him to accurately convey what he was to me.

I rolled my hips again, and he allowed me to love him for once. He allowed me the control to pleasure him.

His chest rose and fell quickly with mine, and when I leaned back, I held on to his neck but was far enough away to watch how we moved together. “We are absolute,” I whispered.

Our bodies fit so perfectly together. His eyes were also on us, too, with low growls escaping his throat, mangled with emotions.

“Come, my love. I want to be full of you.”

At my words, he wrapped a hand around the back of my head and brought me to him, crashing our mouths together in a passionate kiss.

I rode him through his climax, not slowing until he had nothing left to give. It was only then that I whispered his name and found my own release. “Yes, my love,” I cried softly. “Yes, to everything you are.”



WE REMAINED COMPLETELY STILL for a few moments after I stopped rocking against him. He was buried against my neck again, holding me tightly against him. I stroked his hair, our hearts beating steadily together. We made love every day, multiple times a day, but this was different. This was deeper.

The halves of our souls touched.

When he lifted his head, he gently pressed his lips to mine, our faces stained with tears. "I love you," he said with such gentle honesty.

And I knew he did. I would never doubt it again.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



ZEKE

*W*e returned to Seolia two days later.

I wanted to stay in the manor with her and continue feeling everything we did at that moment. I wanted to return to recreate it even now. When Edmund and Gisela returned to pick us up, we bid a tearful goodbye to our new home, and I promised her we would return as soon as all of this was over.

Something had changed between us since that day. Before, there was always a sliver of doubt about how the other felt. Now, it had been replaced by such a fierce devotion that I felt Zeus himself could not separate.

Before we departed Thoya, we took Raven to town and let her purchase too many gifts and enough fudge to last us an entire year. We had to bring a second carriage around to haul everything back to the ship.

Thoya proved to be a costly excursion for both of us.

Before we left, Damiana pulled me aside and said our strand was stronger than it had been when we arrived. All I could respond with was a hug because no words would ever convey the gift she'd given us and what we went through together there.

I had to pull Raven away from Gisela. She always surprised me with how big her heart was. She had become

close with two women I'd slept with and welcomed them into our family. I was unsure I could ever give anyone the same respect she gave to them and me.

I watched her now as she leaned against the ship's railing, waiting as we sailed into the dock of Seolia. Typically, I would hold her until we unloaded, but her wild hair whipped around in the wind, and her dark blue dress molded to her perfectly. With the backdrop of the water surrounding her, I wanted to paint a portrait and carry it with me everywhere.

She was an absolute dream. A nightmare.

She was everything.

She must have felt my eyes on her as she glanced over her shoulder, smiling broadly and without restraint. I thanked the gods for bestowing upon me the honor of loving her.

Pushing off the wall, I went to her and circled her frame with my arms. She spun around and buried her face against my chest, her ear pressed against my heart.

Love was not an accurate word anymore.

Complete devotion. Mad passion. Intimate adoration.

Gods, I wanted to protect her.

If I believed in anything more extraordinary, that would be what I prayed for.

The ship had docked, but we didn't move. We savored these last moments alone before being thrust back into war preparation. I didn't make a move to leave and could tell she was hesitant as she slowly lifted her chin to look at me. I kept one arm around her and brushed her bottom lip with my thumb.

"I don't want to," she whispered.

"We don't have to do anything."

She smiled at me. I would stay here on this ship, and she was well aware of it. I would have sailed across the globe and lived there. I would have drunk the ocean dry if she asked me to, and I would not be the first one to step off the ship.

And as if she could read my mind, she said, “You’re going to make me do it.”

I nodded. Another moment passed, and all we did was stare at one another, smiling at our stubbornness. “I guess we should,” she sighed.

I shrugged. We shouldn’t.

“I miss our manor.”

“So do I, my love.”

“I miss Edmund and Gisela.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “I miss our manor.”

She laughed. “Once we go, it will be real.”

“Let’s not go then.”

She groaned, and I chuckled, kissing the tip of her nose. Sighing, she slowly began to peel herself off of me. I hesitated but uncurled my arm from around her. When she rocked a little on her heels, I couldn’t resist and pulled her right back, leaning down to press my lips to hers.

She sighed into my mouth, snaking her arms around my waist.

I inhaled it deeply, wanting to taste her. “Stay,” I breathed.

“Okay,” she whispered against my lips.

I kissed her again. And again. “Really?”

Her nose wrinkled, and she slowly shook her head.

“That was cruel.”

She puckered out her bottom lip, and I nibbled on it, taking advantage of her daze. “My love,” she murmured, a gentle warning in her tone. “We must.”

I straightened, but my feet remained planted. She muttered a curse word and took a step away from me again, a frown forming on her lips. “Raven, I won’t let you leave if you’re upset.”

She plastered a big, cheesy smile on her face.

I laughed. “I can tell how genuine that is.”

“I can’t be happy right now, but I’m trying if that counts.”

I nodded. I would give her that. Neither one of us wanted to pop our blissful bubble. It was the closest we’d been to a honeymoon, and it was entirely too short.

We departed the ship, walking down the dock. The sun was setting, which meant training should be over, and we had plans to eat with our family tonight.

We linked fingers and swung our hands idly between us. For the first time since we wed, I felt like a husband. There was a calmness that had washed over me. I found my stillness in her.

When I told her I had begun to blur my memories of anyone but her, she found it highly amusing, reminding me that now we’d never know who I may have slept with when we traveled. I would have no way of warning her — it would be like a game of roulette. She then made a snarky remark that it would take me at least a year to shuffle through the memories. I promptly created a new, very dirty memory with her.

It would be one that I’d recall often.

I cleared my throat while thinking about it, and she glanced at me. “You can’t think about that when there are people around. You’re very obvious,” she said, tilting her chin down at my pants.

How was she continuously reading my thoughts?

“Baby, that is all I will be thinking about for a very long time.” I released her hand and slid mine over her ass, causing her heat to creep along her body. “You’ll be thinking about it, too.”

Now she was the one clearing her throat and running her fingers through her hair. I smirked, and she shoved at my arm before wrapping hers around my waist. “Shut up.”

We walked through the village. Everyone had become so used to seeing her as one of them that they no longer rushed

her. They gave us bright smiles and big waves, and she returned all of them. She hadn't been wearing her tiaras lately, and I hadn't asked why. She had become so comfortable in herself that she didn't feel the need to show off to anyone. Her people respected her as their queen, and everyone who met her instantly loved her. She commanded respect, even as small as she was. There was a fierceness to her that wasn't easily replicated, and she still couldn't understand the power she held.

As humble as she was, I didn't think she ever would.



AS WE WALKED into the castle, she rose to kiss me before releasing my hand. She wanted to find John to get an update on how things were while we were gone, and I needed to check in with Jeanine and Luca. I watched her leave with her usual peppiness, smiling as I turned in the opposite direction.

I knocked on Jeanine's door and was surprised to see Luca standing on the other side. He greeted me with a punch to my chest, and I was quick to return one to him, chuckling as he cursed. "Why are you in here?"

"Waiting for you two." He looked behind me, searching down the hallway. "Leave Raven in Thoya?"

"She wishes." I pushed past him and entered Jeanine's room, dropping my jaw. "Your view is better than mine." I walked to her balcony, pointed to the mountain, and looked back at her. "I want to switch."

Jeanine shrugged. "I will sleep with that creature anytime."

I narrowed my eyes. "Raven would be coming *with* me."

"Oh. Then no."

I hopped up to sit on the balcony wall. "How it'd go?"

"Cade stopped showing up the morning you left," Luca said, coming to sit beside me and leaning backward, garnering a yelp from Jeanine as she pulled him back up.

“You and Raven can never be alone,” I said, shoving him off the wall. “One of you would end up dying.”

“She could make a pile of snow on the ground to catch us.”

I rolled my eyes. “Her magic doesn’t work like that. I’ve only ever seen her create icicles. And a snowman.” My eyebrows drew in. “I don’t think even she knows what she’s capable of.”

“We need to work on that with her,” Jeanine said.

“I haven’t even told you the worst of it. Blaze and Morana combined in Thoya. She was upset, and Morana tried to take over, but Blaze fought her so hard that they created fiery ribbons. She killed a rabbit. Turned it to ash.”

Jeanine sighed, looking quite exasperated as she leaned back against the balcony door. She was worried for Raven, and though my jealousy could very well move every mountain on this island, I was appreciative of the amount of love she had for my wife. “What does she want to do?”

“Get rid of Morana. Damiana told her she needed to — that this spirit inside of her was what turned Celestina into evil.”

“That would make sense,” Luca said. “Wasn’t Celestina a beloved queen?”

“Until the end,” I said. “Raven is a beloved queen. I don’t want the same thing happening to her. I couldn’t live if I had to see her fall into the darkness like that.”

“Then we need to strengthen her control,” Jeanine said. “I have an idea, but it won’t be one that either of you will be pleased about.”

I shook my hands in front of me. “Don’t tell me right now. I want to live in this happiness Raven has put me in until tomorrow. Tomorrow, we’ll work with her.”

Luca punched my arm, causing me to have to grip the balcony wall to keep from falling backward. “The fuck, Luca.”

“Twenty more men pledged to fight and become Seolian soldiers. Since Cade refused to participate in training,

Theodore has stepped up to help us.”

I sighed. “Raven won’t be pleased to hear that. She’ll have to talk to him.” I ran my hand down my face. “Does he have to make everything so fucking difficult?”

“Apparently,” Jeanine answered with a sigh.

I hopped down from the wall. “I need to go find her. We’ll see you at dinner after we unpack.” I looked at the mountain behind me while rolling my eyes. “So fucking unfair.”

“I have the same view from my room,” Luca said with irritating smugness.

“Maybe Raven can move the mountain with Terra if we piss her off enough,” I said, walking toward the door.

“If anyone could do that, it would be you,” Jeanine answered.

And I took great pride in reaping the benefits of that angry little demon.



I FOUND Raven in the library, speaking animatedly with Grace about Thoya and all its beauty. She didn’t see me come in as I hopped up on one of the tables to sit, but Grace gave me a small wave. There had to be at least ten books waiting in our trunk for this doe-eyed librarian that Raven was so crazy about.

I picked up a book next to me and flipped through it, not paying attention to the words. I used to love reading, but I stopped having time. History books were my go-to, but this looked like a love story. I flipped to the last page.

“That’s not really how you do it,” Grace said.

I grinned. “I want to know if they have a happy ending,” I responded, skimming the page.

Raven bounded over to me and closed the book, throwing her arms around my neck. “They do,” she whispered before

brushing her lips across mine.

Grace cooed behind us, and Raven giggled through our kiss, making me smile. My cheeks were starting to hurt. I had never smiled this much in my life.

“Baby, I think you love me,” I said, kissing the top of her head.

“Baby, all I do is love you,” she replied, repeating my words from the manor.

And I swore I could fly.

She turned to Grace again and pulled her into a hug. “We must go unpack, but I’ll come to see you again soon.” Grabbing my hand, she pulled me off the table and waved goodbye.

But the second we were outside the library doors, she turned to me and jumped. I caught her and balanced her on my arm as she began to kiss me rather aggressively. I stumbled into walls while trying to feel my way to our floor, nearly tripping over the steps that led to our door. She bent her arm behind her and fumbled for the knob, twisting it. I kicked it open with the toe of my boot hastily.

She had sent me into a frenzy.

Kicking my boots off, I kept her balanced while she pulled her dress up and over her body, dropping it to the floor. Damn.

What had gotten into her?

We tumbled to the bed, and she rolled over me, pushing my shirt over my stomach. Her lips hadn’t left mine, but I had to break from her to lift it off while she pushed down on my pants. It was like I couldn’t get undressed fast enough for her.

She shoved them down, and before I could even kick them off, she lowered down, her eyes rolling back as I filled her. I wrapped my hands around her waist as I guided her against me. She was already panting, her tits bouncing as she rode me. We were in the library just moments ago, and now she was grinding on me, and I couldn’t get enough. Something had awakened in her since the manor.

Sitting up, I sucked one of her nipples between my lips. She moaned, rocking harder against me. She was pressed down so tightly that I could feel her swollen clit against the base of my cock. I was deep inside her, but it still didn't seem enough as she kept wiggling down, wanting more.

I knew she was close when she whimpered and had built up so fast.

“Come on, Raven. Come for me.”

Her scream was scratchy as she released, and fuck, she came a lot. I followed her over, but she continued to rock her hips while chasing her high.

I felt like I had a goddess riding me. Her hair was stuck to her forehead and neck, cascading in waves down her shoulders and breasts. With her olive skin flushed in my favorite shade of pink, her green irises seemed golden in the light from our balcony.

And she seemed absolutely starved for me.

She fell against me, keeping me buried inside her as her forehead rested against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “That was unexpected.”

Her laugh was soft and muffled against me. “Sorry.”

I grabbed her face and lifted it to mine. “Don't ever apologize for this. I would do it all day long.”

She nodded and rested her palms on the bed, peering up at me. My eyes moved across her collarbone and lingered on her breasts, my body threatening to come to life again.

“Something came over me.”

“Please keep it coming.”

“Do you feel it, too?”

I nodded because I did. I didn't know what *it* was, but something was different between us.

“I thought I was crazy.”

“No, baby. There’s something there. I’ve felt it since we left the manor.”

When she slowly lifted off of me, it was tempting to push her back down, but she lay next to me. I rolled over to face her, tucking some hair behind her ear.

“Why couldn’t things have been this easy the whole time?”

I laughed. “Because we’re both stubborn.”

She asked in a whisper, “Want some fudge?”

“Why are you whispering?”

She giggled. “Because I don’t want to share it with anyone else.”

I spanked her and laughed as she yelped when she crawled over me. She padded over to the trunks and threw them open, bending as she shifted through them. My mouth was watering, and it wasn’t from the fudge. “Ah-ha!” she exclaimed as she pulled out one of the tin cans, skipping back to me and crawling on top of me again.

Popping open the lid, she pulled a piece out and dangled it over my mouth. I tried to take a bite, but she pulled it back and bit into it instead. “I told you I won’t share.”

I wrapped a hand around her wrist and brought it back down, putting the rest of the piece in my mouth. She gasped and wrangled her hand free, leaning down and shoving her tongue into my mouth. I tried to laugh as she scooped some of it out, smacking her lips as she swallowed. “Fudge with a side of Zeke.”

She was being so fucking cute.

She grabbed another piece and put half in her mouth, beckoning me with her finger. I lifted to my elbows, and she leaned down, letting me bite down on the other half. The crumbs that neither one of us caught fell down on my chest. She was quick to chew and swallow her piece, leaning down and running the tip of her tongue over my skin to grab the rest.

I groaned, my fingers digging into her thighs. Before I knew what she was doing, she slid onto my hard cock again.

“Fuck, Raven,” I mumbled while watching her take another bite, her tongue teasingly running over her lips.

She started to rock slowly against me. I couldn't stop watching her mouth; she knew it, sucking the chocolate off her fingertips. I muttered her name, bucking up into her. She put a piece against my mouth, and I took a bite from it. Dipping down, she pushed her tongue into my mouth again and moaned softly against my lips as the fudge melted on our tongues.

This was a new Raven. A hungry one.

She picked up another piece and licked it before pressing it against my lips, spreading it across them, and then licking it away. My fingers pressed so hard into the skin of her hips that I feared she might break. I kept her pressed down hard against me as I thrust rapidly, watching as she spread more licked fudge across her nipples. I sat up quickly and licked it off her, and when she threw her head back and moaned my name, I lost it. It only took one more thrust before I came again, growling her name.

Seconds later, she shivered as she released, smiling as we slowed together.

“I told you it's delicious fudge,” she teased.

I shook my head in awe that I had already come inside her twice since we returned. “I love you,” I said because I had no other words forming in my brain.

“Baby, all I do is love you.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



ZEKE

We spent the day not unpacking. She spent her day riding me, and I spent mine watching her. When evening fell, she whined about having to leave the room. I couldn't help but laugh at her because it was usually me begging her to stay. I would have bought a manor long ago if I had known this would be the result. She didn't want to stop her assault on me, and I wanted to continue until our last breath.

Fuck war; I wanted to spend my days fucking her.

But when I reminded her that she wanted me to meet Isla, she relented and climbed off me, muttering to herself as she dressed.

My stupid smile hadn't left my face, even as we walked together to the dining hall. Lust still brimmed out of her every pore. When she glanced up at me, I shook my head. If she made a move for me, I would give in and take her in the hall. Her lips puckered into a pout, and I leaned down to grab them with mine, which was dumb. She shoved me against a wall, and my hands kneaded her ass.

"Baby," I mumbled against her lips.

She shook her head, tangling her fingers in my hair. I didn't want to stop, nor did she, but I needed to feed her. "Food."

“I’ve survived off you,” she countered, raising to the tips of her toes and sucking my bottom lip between hers.

I wanted to tear her apart. I wanted her name to be the only thing I said for the rest of time. I was frantic for her — my logical thoughts drowning in my desire for her.

I twisted us until she was the one pressed against the wall, pinning her with my body. She was giving me some of her best work with her tongue, trying to convince me to stay here.

And when she tried to climb me, I let her and lifted her until we were a mess of woven limbs. “Food,” I said again, pulling back an inch.

“You,” she whined before kissing me again.

When I pulled away again, she growled, which was the cutest sound she’d ever made. “Thirty minutes, then we can come back and fuck right here.” I didn’t release her, raising a hand to squish her cheeks together as she muttered a filthy word.

Snorting, I kissed her once more before I lowered her to the ground. “Half an hour.”

“Half an hour,” she repeated, but her tone sounded more like a mock as she pouted.

Grabbing her hand, I tugged her down the hall. “Where has this Raven been?”

She shrugged, refusing to meet my eyes.

“Are you going to pout all during dinner?”

Another shrug, but she grinned a little.

“You can’t survive thirty minutes?”

“I *can*; I just don’t want to. I may die right here. Would that change your mind?”

I shook my head. “No, because I’d die with you, and we would just fuck in the next lifetime.”

“Semantics,” she grumbled as we crossed the dining room threshold.

An older woman stood slowly from her chair and wrapped her arms around my love. I recognized her from the late nights of stalking Raven. She had a kind face, and I was grateful to her for raising Raven into the kind and loving woman she was. She took on a responsibility thrust upon her, but after listening to Raven's countless stories of Isla, it seemed like she never viewed Raven as a responsibility. She simply showed her love as a mother would.

Isla released Raven and beckoned me forward. The smile on Raven's face made me smile again. My cheeks twitched from this unfamiliar feeling on my face.

Raven stayed a step behind but said my favorite phrase: "This is my husband, Zeke."

I never tired of hearing that.

Isla put her hands on my cheeks and pulled my face down. My eyes widened slightly as I shifted my gaze to Raven, who chewed on her lip to suppress a smile.

"Hello, Isla," I said, unsure why she was holding my face. I felt like I was on display.

Finally, she patted me twice on the cheek and smiled at me. "You love her."

I nodded, holding her gaze. "I do."

"I can see it in your eyes. There have been many who have looked upon my niece, but not like this. The way you see her is something deeper."

Could she see directly inside of me? I didn't know what to say to that, so I nodded the best I could.

When she released me, she turned back to Raven. "He loves you."

Raven beamed and came to me, snaking her arms around my waist. "I love him."

I'd won approval from Isla, which I didn't realize I wanted until now.

After scooting Isla in, I pulled Raven's chair out and whispered into her hair, "Twenty-eight minutes."

She playfully shoved my face away as I moved to sit next to her. John and Alice filtered in, followed by Jeanine and Luca.

And Cade. Fantastic.

My mom came to me before I could sit down, kissing me on the cheek before going to Raven next and throwing her arms around her shoulders. "Hello, mother," I said with a laugh as she took a seat across from me.

"You were gone for a week. I am allowed to be excited," she scolded.

Smiling, I held my palms up to her. "You are. You're right." I reached under the table and grabbed Raven's hand, winking at her. "Twenty-seven..."

She rolled her eyes. "Shush, you."

I followed her eyes as she looked around the table; a mixture of emotions was moving through her that I couldn't pick apart. And when she finally looked at me, it was with glassed eyes. "What is it, baby?"

"Family," she whispered. "Everyone is here."

We were both sitting with our families, and she had never had all of us here before. It was something she had always wanted.

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her palm.

"I've never been to Thoya," Isla said, shoving platters of food toward me and motioning toward Raven's plate. "Make her eat."

I laughed as Raven sighed and began filling her plate with food. She glared at me, even more so when I stuck a piece of bread in her mouth. "Come on, baby. You'll need your strength for what I plan to do to you later...."

Her eyes widened as she quickly covered my mouth with her hand. "I'll eat if you'll stop talking," she said through

clenched teeth.

I was not used to behaving, but I would if it got her to eat.

She dropped her hand and nibbled on the piece of bread. “Thoya is beautiful. It’s enormous, with rolling hillsides and horses free to roam the land. King Baldwin has the loveliest family. His queen is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

I was staring at the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

She didn’t mention that Damiana was a witch, wanting to be respectful of Damiana’s secret, even amongst family. She had informed John earlier that Thoya was aware of the threat against us and that they were willing to help, but we didn’t want to give anything else away.

“Edmund and Gisela have become very good friends. We rode horses, and Zeke lost a bunch of our money.”

John sighed while looking at me, rubbing his temples. Our spending lately was clearly stressing him out. “I knew I should’ve given you an allowance,” he grumbled.

I glared at Raven for getting me in trouble.

“But that’s not all,” she said with a grin. “He also purchased a manor for us to stay at during the summer. It’s gorgeous. It has a pond and three bedrooms upstairs for when we have children.”

My glare turned into a smile while I stroked her hair.

“Children!” Alice squealed, clapping her hands together.

“Not yet,” I assured her.

“Children,” Cade repeated, looking at Raven. “Why are you talking about children?”

Raven shrugged a shoulder. “It gives us something to plan for.”

Say something, I dared him silently. My patience with him was wearing thin.

“Cade, I was informed that you stopped showing up to training,” I said. “Is there a reason why?”

Raven looked at me. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“You didn’t give me much time,” I said, holding my gaze with Cade. “We were rather busy today, little demon.”

She squeezed my hand under the table before also looking at Cade. “Why did you stop going to training? There have been twenty more men who have pledged to fight. I needed you there with them.”

“I didn’t see the need,” Cade responded, leaning back in his chair. “Jeanine and Luca seemed to do well without me.”

“Because Seolian men stepped up in your place,” Luca said. “Theodore, in particular. That responsibility shouldn’t have fallen on him.”

It was making me uncomfortable how intensely he was staring at my wife. “I didn’t see a point in being there without Raven. After all, we have been a team for over fifteen years,” Cade argued.

Jeanine shifted in her chair and looked at me, her deep pool of protectiveness over Raven threatening to spill. He was really going to test us here, in front of everyone.

Raven cleared her throat and reached for her glass, taking a sip and making a face. It wasn’t her favorite wine, and she had grown to dislike anything else, which made me chuckle as I watched her. I looked at the servant across the table and asked him to find a bottle of wine with the green label instead.

Cade looked around the table. “Raven, it’s too bad we don’t have one of your apple pies.”

Shame washed over Raven as the color seemed to drain from her face.

“Do you remember the last one you baked for me, darling?”

I glanced at Raven, who barely nodded at his question. What was the significance of the apple pie? But when I pushed into her mind to find out, she quickly shook her head and looked at me. “Don’t,” she whispered.

“I taught Raven how to bake when she was a child,” Isla said, interrupting the apparent tension in the room. “She burned quite a few.”

Raven laughed, her nose scrunching up. “The cottage smelled awful.”

“She didn’t burn mine,” Cade said. “Though it was cold by the time we got around to eating it.”

Ah.

“We leave for Perosan in four weeks,” Raven said, trying to change the subject. “Edmund said it’s not as beautiful as Thoya is.”

“It’s not,” John said. “It’s a lot of...”

“Raven,” Cade interrupted.

I had to pull my hand from hers as rage and frustration mixed. I was trying my damndest to keep my promise to her that I wouldn’t touch him, but he wasn’t making it easy on me.

“Do you remember the night we surprised Isla with a dinner we had cooked ourselves? It was what, two years ago now?”

“Yes,” Raven said quietly, giving Isla a small smile. “It was her birthday.”

I understood his motives behind this, as slimy as they were. He wanted to remind her of their life together before me, of the countless memories they shared.

“It was,” Cade said, smiling at her. “And do you remember dancing around her living room, laughing so hard that we nearly fell into the fireplace?”

Isla laughed. “I was worried you would catch the entire cottage on fire, which was ironic since I *lived* with fire for many years.”

That made Raven giggle.

And I felt like shit for being envious of a lifetime before she knew I existed.

“She almost did once,” Cade said, laughing with Isla. “We were in the back trying to teach her to light something on fire with her fingertip. She would’ve if I overlooked the cornstalk on fire.”

Raven rolled her eyes. “I would not. I would’ve caught it!”

Jeanine brought the conversation to a crashing halt when she asked, “Was that before or after you made her bury that part of herself?” She laughed mockingly. “Let’s talk about that part.”

Cade slowly looked away from Raven to Jeanine, narrowing his eyes. “Blaze was dangerous and out of control. Raven didn’t want to free her.”

“That’s not true,” Raven said, reaching for my hand again under the table. “I never wanted to hide her, but if I brought her out, I felt I was disappointing you.”

“You never disappointed me, Raven,” Cade said. “You were everything I ever wanted.”

I laughed, pulling my hand from hers to press my forearms against the table’s edge. “You didn’t want her until I showed up, and then she was suddenly all you wanted. Even then, you wouldn’t let her bring out Blaze during your nights of training. If you had, she would’ve had a better control against River.”

“And you know that how? Because you fucking followed her?”

“To keep her safe from you,” Jeanine said. “You’ve been a danger to her for years, manipulating her in every way to keep her just how you want her: alone and in desperate need of you.”

“She seemed desperate for me when she fucked me after he left!” Cade shouted.

“Cade,” Raven squeaked, burying her face into her hands.

“What was it, Raven? A week?”

My chest was rising and falling rapidly as I looked at John. “I think you need to take Isla back home. She doesn’t need to see what’s going to happen next.”

John and Alice stood quietly, coming around to help Isla out of her chair, who seemed shocked at the conversations unfolding before her. Isla went around the table to Raven and lowered the best she could. I couldn't see Raven's face as she dropped her hands to bury herself against Isla's chest.

"Cade, I am very disappointed in your behavior this evening," Isla snapped at him.

"Be disappointed in your niece for sleeping with the enemy."

I had been tied down long enough.

Standing from my chair, I circled the table quickly and pulled Cade from his chair by his shirt, throwing him against the wall. "We've been here before. Remember that? Since you're so fond of bringing up memories tonight." One punch to his jaw had him stumbling to the side, two punches had him knocking into the table, plates falling on the ground.

"Zeke!" Raven shouted, standing from her chair.

But I didn't care. He had insulted my wife, my *mate*.

And when he rushed my waist, I punched him twice in the ribs before bringing up my knee and hearing the bone of his nose crack.

Luca pulled me back, and Jeanine stood before me, knowing I wouldn't risk harm coming to her if I tried to go for him again. He was on his knees on the ground, groaning as he pinched his bleeding nose. "You will never speak of Raven again like that! You would be dead if it were up to me!" I shouted, backing up a few steps to prevent myself from giving in and finishing him off.

"John!" I barked, looking at him standing in the doorway. "Relieve him of his duties. I would prefer permanently, but that is up to his queen."

"Zeke," Raven repeated, putting her palms on my chest and imploring me to look at her. "I love you, but I have to heal him. You know I have to heal him."

“You don’t, Raven. You have to stop letting him get away with this shit!”

She rested her forehead against my chest, her fingers holding tightly to my shirt. “I know,” she whispered after a moment, lifting her head. “I know I do. I will temporarily relieve him of his position, but I need to heal him.”

“If he touches you, Raven, I swear....”

“He won’t. I won’t allow him to.”

I watched as she lowered to her knees in front of him and put her palm against his nose while he held the bottom of his shirt against his mouth to catch the blood. She didn’t speak to him, but he continued to stare at her with the same desirous look he always had.

And fear gripped me heavily as I realized he would never give up on reclaiming her as his own. This would always be a battle for us as long as he was in her life.

Standing after his nose healed, she looked at John with tearful eyes. “Please escort Cade to August’s cottage. He will be there for two weeks or until we feel he can return to the castle.”

“Raven,” Cade said, shakily raising to his feet. “Please. You don’t want to do this.”

“I don’t,” she admitted, tears streaking down her cheeks. “But you’ve given me no choice.”



WE WAITED until Cade was escorted from the palace grounds before returning to our chambers. I walked out to the terrace, leaning my forearms against the wall as I looked out into the village below. I saw him walking between two guards and standing at the cottage door, disappearing inside a moment later.

Raven came to stand next to me. She was full of sorrow as she also stared at the cottage below us. And this heaviness

between us was sticky. I felt torn between anger and envy for the times he touched her and the times he had seen her body as I had. I wanted to erase her memories, but she hadn't asked me to, and I wouldn't infringe upon her like that as much as I may have wanted to.

"Was it truly only a week?" I had watched her every move for weeks and felt I would have known if it were, but still. I wanted confirmation.

"No," she replied softly. "It was at least six weeks after I saw you last. And I regretted it."

Nodding, I watched as the guards returned to the castle, taking their place next to the main gate. "Raven, I will never be okay with him in your life." I turned away from the village and leaned against the wall, fingers gripping the edge. "Jeanine and I, we admit that we made a mistake. And I am eternally grateful that you have found it in yourself to forgive us and look past it."

She remained quiet as she stared at the cottage.

"But Cade won't let it go. He disrespects what we have by bringing it up. He disrespects you as his friend and his queen when he talks to you that way. It would be treason in any other kingdom."

"I know," she whispered, lowering her eyes. "I know it would be, but you are asking me to banish someone who has been by my side...."

"Raven," I sighed, pulling up from the wall. "You cannot keep using that as a reason to excuse his behavior. He *hurt* you. He *forced* himself upon you. He disrespected you tonight in front of our entire family, not only embarrassing you but me."

"I don't like hurting people." She stood in front of me and wrapped her arms around my waist. "It's harder when it's someone you trusted for so long."

I brushed my fingers through her hair. "Baby, I can't imagine how this must feel for you. And I feel terrible that

you're going through it, but show yourself the same respect you're showing him."

She peered up at me under those thick lashes of hers. "Come to bed with me."

I wouldn't push her anymore about it. Not tonight. She was hurting and needed me.

Instead, I picked her up and carried her to bed.

And after getting her permission, shattered the memories of any time he touched her.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



RAVEN

The following day, I felt hungover. I didn't drink anything, but it still felt like I had dreamt up last night, which couldn't have happened. Surely I didn't have to send my best friend away for two weeks while I figured out if I could ever bring him back. And surely he didn't talk about fucking me in front of my husband and the rest of our family.

But as I stared at the ceiling, I knew it was, in fact, real.

Cade was gone — at least temporarily. And I didn't know if I could ever bring him back without fearing that Zeke would kill him any time we passed one another in the hall.

Zeke slept peacefully beside me. He'd fallen asleep a couple of hours ago, but I couldn't turn my mind off. Because not only did I have to figure out what to do about Cade, I would be learning how to practice control with my elements today. And I needed to purge myself of Morana once and for all.

I was ready to be rid of her.

"Zeke," I whispered, rolling to my side. I wished I could see what he was dreaming of or if he had ever dreamed. I'd never asked him before. More than anything, I wished I could feel the mating bond like he did, but I trusted Damiana's advice and gave myself grace.

Twin flames were the rarest and most cherished bond, which was what we had. To me, nothing could top that, and while I wanted to connect to him in every way, we had our entire lives to explore the magic behind pairings. And hopefully, once this was over with Mira, we could learn more about it.

“My love.” I gently dragged the tips of my fingers down his jaw. “I’m so in love with you.” My vision blurred as I focused on how his chest was rising and falling in a slow, peaceful rhythm. “I wish I could sense you the way you sense me. The intensity of your love for me is unnerving sometimes.”

I sighed softly and moved my fingers down to brush across his collarbone. “Even the way I feel for you is overwhelming. I’ve felt many things in my lifetime, but I feel them all at once when I’m around you.” I grinned. “Before you, I never wanted someone by my side. I didn’t feel like it was a necessity. And now, I never want to be alone again. The idea of living without you hurts more than the betrayal I feel from my brother trying to drown me.”

My grin slowly turned upside down. “And it hurts, even more, to know that you’ve lived a life feeling anything other than love, that you’ve felt less than, because there is nothing more honorable than going to great lengths to save your family, Zeke. And you’ve always felt like the villain, but you’re not.”

I realized I was crying as a tear fell to the pillow under my head. “The villain doesn’t try to save the queen, Zeke. The villain doesn’t continuously fight for her or chase her up cliffs. He doesn’t end up at her door every night or shows her memories to fight the darkness growing inside her.”

His eyelids fluttered open slowly. “Raven,” he whispered.

“You are not the villain, Zeke. You have never been. You saved me.” I rested my palm against his cheek. “You have to forgive yourself. For me, I need you to realize how incredible you are.” I lowered my hand to rest above his heart. “This is wonderful and selfless and caring.”

His fingers wrapped around my wrist. “And yours. You *changed* me. I want to be a better man because of you. I want to be the person you believe I am.”

“Oh, my love. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” I kissed him softly. “You already are. I love you for who you are right now. I don’t need anything about you to change.” I stared into his eyes. “Tell me what you dream about.”

His arm wrapped around me, and he pulled me closer to him. “You, Raven. I’ve dreamt of you every night since we met. Before we met, I dreamt of green eyes and will continue to dream of them.”

“Promise always to meet me there.”

“I promise, Raven. I will always meet you in our dreams.”



I WAS BLOWING out nervous breaths as I waited for Zeke and Jeanine to meet me on the small patch of land underneath the hillside. I had been warming up my elements, shifting back and forth, and familiarizing myself with them again. It had been a while since I needed them, and it felt good to shift into each one. But now, it was time to work on my control.

Jeanine said she had an idea for Blaze and wouldn’t tell us what it was. I crouched down next to the water and ran my fingertips through it. I was waiting for it to form into a monster and drag me under, but it ebbed and flowed peacefully. Maybe Mira had talked to River like she said she would.

Shifting into Frost, I created a layer of ice across the top, reinforcing it with another layer. I was about to add a third layer when the bed of ice suddenly cracked in a hundred different places, the ice exploding and shooting pieces into the air. “Hello, brother.”

“Raven!” Zeke called from the top of the hillside.

I stood and turned to face him, motioning toward the water with my hand. “He’s... awake,” I said through a laugh. “He

broke my ice rather forcefully.”

“I don’t want you going near the water alone,” he said. “Not until we have a way for you to defend yourself.”

“We’re surrounded by water. I can’t avoid it forever.”

“Exactly,” Jeanine said, curling a finger and beckoning me closer. “That’s why we’re going to build a defense system for you. Shift into Blaze.”

Shifting, I stood with my hands on my hips. “What’s this idea you have?”

Jeanine scratched her forehead while scrunching up her nose. “Neither of you will like it, but Raven’s greatest emotion is envy....”

“No,” Zeke said quickly. “Wherever this is going, just... no.”

“Zeke, Blaze is her strongest shift. Whenever she’s envious, she gets angry. Anger will be how she controls Blaze. River can move water with his mind. Raven should be able to do the same with heat.”

I looked back and forth between the two of them. “I’m lost. What do you want me to do?”

Zeke sighed. “She wants you to burn her without touching her.”

“And how would I do that?”

“By getting angry,” Jeanine answered. “You need to be able to channel your heat without creating fire. You need to move heat with your mind.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not really in an angry mood.”

Jeanine gave me an apologetic grin. “You will be.”

“I really don’t think we should do this....” Zeke said, but was cut off by Jeanine grabbing his shirt and bringing his lips to hers.

Heat flared as my palms immediately lit up, and I hurled balls of fire toward them, lighting the grass around them

ablaze. “Enough!” I shouted, stomping my foot. The ground split underneath it and shoved them apart as land rumbled under their feet.

Zeke caught Jeanine as she nearly fell into the ditch, causing my eyes to narrow. He looked at me and shook his head, trying to take a step toward me, but I pushed him to the side with a breeze.

“Raven!” Jeanine shouted. “This does nothing! You have to move it with your mind, not your hands.”

“I don’t want to do this!” I called back, pushing Zeke back a step with another breeze. “I can’t relive my nightmare! It will wake Morana.”

A look of determination crossed Jeanine’s face as she stomped toward Zeke again, pushing against my wind. Zeke shook his head at Jeanine and took a step away, but she lunged for him and caught him in another kiss. I screamed in frustration and stomped again, breaking more ground.

We had gathered a crowd at the top of the hill, soldiers watching us as I tried ripping the ground enough to split them apart again. But whenever I did, she would find him again and shout at me to channel the energy.

Tears fell down my cheeks as I watched their embrace, and everything around me seemed to slow as I channeled my envy and heartbreak, thrusting my hand out toward Jeanine and releasing.

But it wasn’t flames that shot toward her — it was a hazy burst of heat that seemed invisible to everyone else as she jumped back, yelping in pain and covering her lips with her hand.

I fell to my knees, preventing him from coming to me with another gust of wind that pushed against him. “Raven!” he yelled, trying to push against it.

“You promised,” I cried. “You promised it would never happen.” I tried to fight her, pushing Morana away but screaming as my nightmares restructured in my memories.

“Raven, please.” He cursed as I pushed him farther away. “Goddamnit, Jeanine, I told you not to do this!”

“But it worked!” she exclaimed. “She burned my lips without touching me.”

The breeze died down. There was no heat, no ice.

Nothing but endless void.

“Luca!” Zeke shouted while running to me. “Send everyone home!” He fell to his knees before me and grabbed my face in his hands. “Baby, look at me. Fight her, Raven; you have to fight her.”

Around us, black mist started to fall from the sky, and the white clouds turned gray. Zeke looked up, covering his eyes to avoid the raindrops that fell. “Raven, don’t do this. Baby, it wasn’t real. She was trying to help you.”

“I always knew you were a liar,” I sighed, looking past him to her. “She is your lover.”

“No.” He stood with me, blocking her from me. “She is your best friend. We feel nothing for one another. I love *you*.”

The wind howled around us, waves crashing against the land.

“Prove it,” I challenged, bringing up my left hand. “Let me kill her. If you truly love me as you say, you will let me take her life for my own.”

“I can’t do that. That’s not what Raven would want.” He grabbed my hand and kissed it. “And it is time for you to leave my wife alone.” He pinned my arm behind my back, and I growled, trying to pull it free. I kept trusting this stranger, and he continued to trap me.

Once I was freed, I would be taking from him first.



I STOMPED my foot in my glass box, crossing my arms over my chest. I was sick of being trapped in my own mind. I

understood the logic behind Jeanine's idea, but it wasn't the brightest one while the spirit of death lurked inside me, waiting for something like that to happen.

Huffing, I pressed on each of the glass panes. I couldn't remember how I escaped last time. The walls just... disappeared.

I screeched as Zeke appeared out of the black mist, nearly stumbling into the box. "Get out, Raven. Find your way out." He spoke in a hurried voice, looking behind him.

I glowered at him. "Did you enjoy catching up with Jeanine?"

He returned my glare. "Now is not the time. You want this spirit out of you? You have to fight her."

"Fight her with what, precisely? I can't control my emotions, and it woke her up.

"I don't know," he snapped. "But I've pissed her off, and I doubt she'll continue to forgive me."

"Maybe she's tired of forgiving you," I retorted, raising an eyebrow.

"Raven," he sighed, turning to face me fully. "You know I didn't want to be kissing her. I kept trying to push her off, but she's quite strong. That's my own fault, I guess."

"Maybe I'll accidentally kiss someone and see how you feel."

"Don't," he growled. "Don't taunt me. It makes me sick that you are not the last one I kissed."

"Do not believe him, girl with fire."

I looked behind him at Morana appearing from the shadowed mist, slowly walking toward us. "He is full of lies." She waved her hand once to the side and the image of Jeanine and Zeke from moments earlier reappeared. "Look how much he's enjoying her."

I averted my eyes and shook my head. "No, Morana. Enough is enough. You're not supposed to be in a mortal body.

You need to vacate mine.”

“This mortal body?” She created another image, only this one of Cade and me.

Zeke turned white as a ghost and turned his head. He had scattered my memories, so I didn’t recognize the one she was showing me, but it still made a wave of nausea fall over me. “Stop. You have brought us enough pain.”

“It was easy becoming part of your mother.” She loosened the ribbons from her fingers, and they circled her. “She was so broken being away from your father all the time. When I whispered in her ear that a war would fix their separation, that was all it took for her to allow me in.”

She shot the ribbons toward Zeke; they wrapped around his ankles, keeping him chained to the ground. He cursed while trying to free himself, and I tried breaking the glass pane with my elbow.

“The number of lives that would’ve given me...” she trailed off with a sigh. “Of course, when that man stabbed her, I was able to bleed into you. But you were a stubborn girl and wouldn’t let me free.”

“Stubborn is probably one of the nicest ways I’ve been described,” I grumbled, attempting to kick my way out, but nothing worked.

“And when this stranger came into our life and invaded your dreams, I finally had a way to introduce myself to you. Only he’s not a stranger, is he?” She closed the distance between her and Zeke and pressed her palm against his chest. “I have been around for many lifetimes, lived in many different mortals, but every one of them disappointed me.”

“Maybe you’re the problem,” I chided. “Did you ever think of that?”

Morana maliciously cackled, bringing her eyes back to me. “Such a weak girl, the girl with fire. So easy to trap — so easy to trick.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Zeke snarled, trying to free his feet from her traps.

“I think the weak one is you, Morana. You’re useless until you find a body to live in.”

“Useless!” she repeated with a scowl. “Useless! Morana is not useless. One of the oldest spirits of death, one of the wisest.” She poked a finger against Zeke’s chest. “I have danced with your shadows before, beautiful stranger. They want to rule beside me.”

“He rules beside me, Morana. His shadows belong to me.”

She sneered. “Always the girl with fire, always been the girl with fire. All lifetimes, all deaths, always the girl with fire.”

Zeke stood taller while looking at me. “What do you mean, Morana? All deaths?”

“Always the girl with fire,” she repeated, staring at his chest. “Shadows and fire, shadows and fire.”

I couldn’t untangle her riddles, but I had a feeling this was not the first time we had met this spirit of death. “Morana, have we known you in past lives?”

“Enough speaking!” she squealed. “Girl with fire is trapped, and shadows will be mine.”

And then I realized — it wasn’t me Morana had wanted.

It was Zeke and his shadows.

“He’s not your beautiful stranger, is he? You know him.”

“Yes,” she hissed. “He was meant to be mine.” A cry of pain came from him as her fingers seemed to dig into his chest, his body falling back against the glass box.

I screamed and banged my fists on the glass. “Stop!”

He wailed in agony as his knees started to buckle, but she held him up by her fingers in his chest. “They want to come out.”

No, no, my love. Not like this, not by someone else’s hand would he let that dark part of himself free.

The girl with fire. I was the girl with fire.

But unlike the day when Blaze came back to me in the forest, I didn't need to pool my pain to awaken her. All it took was Zeke's agonizing cries for her to warm my body.

I snapped my bloodred eyes open, the glass box disappearing. Zeke fell backward to the ground, breaking Morana's concentration. "He is mine, Morana! You cannot have any part of him."

Her eyes flared as she looked at me and immediately shot a cloud of black mist toward me. I shifted into Terra and blew it away with a gust of wind. "You are fighting against the universe, Morana."

Shifting into Blaze again, I shot a line of fire toward her and shifted back into Terra, fanning the flames into a circle around her. "You will leave me alone." I shifted into Frost and rained down icicles, piercing the arms of her — my — mortal body.

She screeched while trying to avoid them. "You will kill us both, you stupid girl!"

I slowly walked through the flames surrounding her until we were face-to-face. "If that's what it takes to free this world of your evil, then that is worth sacrificing me."

"I have the knowledge, girl with fire," she bargained. "I can answer your questions, all your questions, girl with fire. Your lifetimes..." She paused before a wicked smile splattered across her mouth. "Your mate. Do you want to know of your mate, girl with fire?"

I went still, blinking my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Many lifetimes, girl with fire. We have lived many lifetimes."

From behind her, Zeke walked through the flames. *My* flames — the only one who could, the only one that mattered.

And as I looked at him, I shook my head. "He is the only one I care to know."

He wrapped his arm around her throat, his other pinning her hands behind her back. “Do not make any lethal stabs.”

She thrashed against him as I created an icicle in my hand. I had to choose a spot on my body that wouldn’t kill me — one I could heal from. Easy enough, except trying to decide where to stab yourself was never a light one.

“If this doesn’t work, Zeke, we could die.”

“I know,” he stated. “I love you.”

“If you do this, girl with fire, your life will be nothing but misery. I will haunt you, curse you...” she seethed, trying to free herself from Zeke. “It will be full of pain.”

“Yeah, well.” I took a step toward her and flipped the icicle in my hand. “What else is new?” I drove the tip of the icicle through her torso, falling backward as a black cloud shot out from the wound and surrounded me. It dove toward my face, and I shifted into Blaze, thrusting my palms out. Fire collided with the spirit, causing it to shrivel and screech.

And as the black mist started to clear from my mind, Zeke rushed to me and placed his hand over my bleeding stomach. “Foreplay,” was all I managed to get out before I was gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



ZEKE

*F*oreplay better not have been the last word I ever heard from that mouth of hers.

Though fitting.

Her head was resting against my lap while Luca ran down the hill toward us, discarding his shirt and placing it over her wound. The bleeding wouldn't slow, and her healing seemed to be taking its time in closing the wound. I was trying not to panic but failing. I could feel myself growing light-headed, my energy lessening, and I wondered if this was how she felt when I was stabbed.

And I wondered if we would ever stop putting ourselves in these situations.

Jeanine tried to talk to me, asking me what had happened, but I couldn't speak. Blood was all over my shirt, my chest burning from scratches — scratches Morana had made from trying to free my shadows.

My shadows; I felt them at that moment.

But none of that mattered to me right now.

I had to stand there and watch Raven stab herself. I watched her bleed and fall, and I couldn't help her. My sole purpose in this life was to love and protect her — when the one she needed the most protection against was herself. I didn't know how we would be able to purge Morana from her

body, but she did. She knew what it would take and never shared that with me.

And I couldn't say with complete confidence that I wouldn't have tried to stop her.

Because now she was bleeding out in my lap, and I was dying with her.

"He's in shock," I heard someone say. John, maybe.

Jeanine snapped her fingers in my face, but noises around me were muffled. It wasn't until someone tried grabbing Raven from my lap that I finally came to and shook my head. "No," I snarled.

"Zeke, she needs help. Her healing isn't closing the wound fast enough." It was Luca trying to pick her up.

"The will," I rasped, my eyes fluttering shut. "Did she sign it?"

"Yes, Zeke," John said, and even through my daze, I could hear the emotion in his voice. "But you have to stay with me, son. You can't leave me."

I stared at my hands, covered in her blood, as my brother picked up my wife and started running with her up the hill. My ears were ringing, and my chest hurt — it was challenging to pull in breaths. Hands were on my face, blonde hair blurred in my vision, and I was tumbling backward into someone's arms.



I WALKED through a meadow full of flowers and bright skies. I didn't recognize this place — so many flowers, so many colors. This wasn't a place I could've come up with alone. And when I looked around the field, I saw her.

She was spinning in one of her blue dresses, her hair wavy with a crown of white flowers on her head. I was in a trance as I put one foot in front of the other, walking toward her. She stopped spinning once she saw me and gave me one of her brightest smiles.

“You found me!” she exclaimed excitedly, holding her arms out toward me.

“Where are we?” I kissed each of her hands, and though I was overjoyed to be in this place with her, I felt sorrow as I stared at her face. “Raven, what are we doing here?”

Her smile lessened as she shrugged a shoulder. “The place where our souls are reborn, I think.”

I looked around before looking back at her. “Reborn? As in..., we died?”

“Almost,” she answered, wrapping her arms around my waist. “I think we are almost.”

I shook my head and uncurled her arms from around my waist. “Raven, no. I’m not ready for that life to be over with you. I’m not ready to live another life without you.”

“But there is no pain here, Zeke. All we ever feel is pain. Don’t you want to stop? I’m so tired, Zeke.”

This wasn’t my Raven — my Raven was determined and fierce and infuriating. My Raven wouldn’t give up on that world, on the people she loved.

“My love.” I cradled her neck with one hand and gave my best attempt at a gentle smile. “The pain will lead us to something beautiful. We have so much ahead of us, Raven. So many wonderful things.”

Fear crept into her face. “But Morana said she would curse us — that everything would be full of misery.”

Leaning down, I kissed her while holding her tightly against me. She threw her arms around my neck, her tears wetting my cheeks. “I refuse to let you live a life of misery, Raven.” I rested my forehead against hers as we swayed in this field full of all the colors I thought she embodied — bright, joyous, and loud.

“I promise to be by your side through all of it, Raven. If it’s miserable, then at least we’ll be together.” I kissed her again. “I need you to wake up, my love. I need you to be the last one I kissed.”

“I forgot about that,” she grumbled, scrunching her nose.

Chuckling, I kissed her nose. “Don’t give up yet, Raven. You have so much left to accomplish.”

“I’m scared, Zeke. I fear there’s so much we don’t know....”

“There is,” I agreed. “But, my love... the memories you showed me, the flashes of us. You saw us in the future, and I think....” I stroked her cheek with the back of my hand. “My love, I am fearful this is our last lifetime together. Why else would you see glimpses of our future?”

Her eyes widened, more tears pooling. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “No, that can’t be true. Our bond can never be broken. Remember what Damiana said? The gods created our strand. This can’t be it.”

“I don’t want to find out, Raven.” I stared into her eyes. “I am not ready to be without you, to live without hearing your laugh or seeing you roll your eyes.” My chest hurt from the pain of imagining a lifetime without her. “I am not ready, Raven. We still have a future together, my love. We need to find our happy ending.”

“I don’t want an ending,” she whispered.

I sank to the ground, pulled her into my lap amongst the colorful flowers, and kissed her gently. “We will have a beautiful life, Raven. One full of laughter and arguments and making up. And a tiny version of you becoming Queen of Seolia. We will have it all, Raven, but I need you to wake up. I need you to heal yourself.”

She picked a pink flower from the ground, similar to the one she wore the night of the Festival of Dreams, and stuck it behind my ear. I arched a brow when she started to giggle while tugging on my shirt. “Always in black, even in the afterlife.”

I smiled. “You are all the color I need, my love.”

Raising her palms, she put them flat against my chest. “Blaze,” she whispered, and though she didn’t shift, purple

flames lit between our bodies. “Stay by my side, Zeke. Don’t ever leave me.”

“Never,” I swore. “Raven, I will never leave you.”



WHEN I WOKE UP, I was in a bed that was too short for me. I shot up and looked around, blinking to clear my vision. Jeanine, John, and Luca were crowded around another bed, talking amongst themselves. I stood from the bed and staggered toward them, looking over Jeanine’s head to see Raven’s eyes fluttering open. Instant relief washed over me.

She met my eyes briefly before her face twisted, her hand moving to cover the wound in her torso. “Ow,” she mumbled, grabbing the attention of the other three.

John audibly sighed in relief while Jeanine burst into tears. Luca noticed me hovering and moved out of the way so I could sit on the end of Raven’s bed.

Her slight grin was one of amusement. “Don’t make me regret this.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I leaned down and kissed her, lacing our fingers together. Gently removing her hand from her wound, I inspected it. The skin had closed, and there wasn’t any fresh blood on the bandage. “Did it heal on its own?”

John nodded while handing Jeanine a handkerchief from his pocket. “Finally. After you passed out, we got her back here, and it started healing.”

Chuckling, I looked at her again. “Your stubbornness prevented you from healing.”

She winced before giving me an innocent smile and reached up, sliding a hand under my shirt to heal the bloodied scratches.

Luca asked, “Can you tell us what happened?”

Raven explained how she managed to free herself of Morana, about needing to stab herself and lighting the spirit on fire to keep her from reentering her body. And all the while, I held her hand and kissed it every few seconds because she was here. She didn't give up. She trusted that we could make the remainder of this life worth living.

And we would — for each other and those in our lives which continued to stay by our side.

And when I started to laugh, Raven looked at me curiously. “I just realized....” I sighed, trailing off while shaking my head. “In your nightmares, that wasn't your mother. That was Morana.”

Raven slowly sat up, trying to reconcile what I could mean.

“Morana embodied the last mortal body she inhabited,” I continued. “She still took form as Celestina. It wasn't until she was able to enter into you that her form changed. That wasn't your mother haunting us, Raven.”

The realization was on her face. “That was Morana giving me nightmares.”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

Jeanine asked, “If you purged her from your body, where did she go?”

“The last I saw of her, she was withering. Maybe she's gone,” Raven answered.

Luca asked, “Can spirits die?”

Raven and I shrugged. “She said she's lived many lifetimes, so I am doubtful she is gone forever,” Raven sighed.

Jeanine clapped her hands together. “Now that she's gone, we can get back to controlling your elements.”

Raven frowned. “There needs to be a different way of going about that.”

It was Jeanine who winced this time. “I'm sorry. I thought it would be the easiest way to anger Blaze.”

“Oh, it worked,” Raven answered with a small laugh. “But there are other ways to anger her. I’d rather you not kiss my husband again.”

“I second that,” I said, smiling at Jeanine. “As much as you may want to kiss me....”

She rolled her eyes, gagging. “Please. I’d much rather kiss your wife.”

Luca asked, “Who wouldn’t?”

“Okay,” I said, motioning for them to leave with my hand. “We’ll work on her elements tomorrow. Let her rest and recover tonight.”

To prove their point, Jeanine and Luca each kissed Raven’s forehead and then snickered at me as they walked out of the infirmary. John squeezed Raven’s shoulder. “Happy to have you back, Raven.” And then he looked at me and cleared his throat. “And you, son.”

Simple words, but I knew they held a heavier meaning.

“Thank you,” I said as he walked out of the room.

Raven crawled into my lap and nuzzled her face against my neck. I peeled the bandage from her wound, which had completely closed, but looked like it may leave a small scar. “Your body had no scars before you met me,” I said with a sigh. “Now you have three.”

“I would take a hundred more if it meant saving the world with you.” She lifted her head to look at me. “I came back to life for you. Don’t ever doubt the things I would willingly do for you.”

“I’m trying.” I kissed her forehead. “I just hate that it always leaves you in pain.”

“I believe someone once told me that the pain will lead to something beautiful.”

I grinned. “Whoever it is, he sounds handsome and very brilliant.”

She snorted. “He’s entirely too full of himself. Someone has filled him with way too much confidence.”

“Could it possibly be...” I kissed her once. Twice. “An enchanting witch?”

“A majestic, breathtaking, demonized, enchanting witch, why yes, I think it could be.”

I laughed and covered her face in kisses. “My wicked and wonderful wife, we will get through this. But for now, let me carry you to bed and dream with you.”

Nodding, she brushed her fingertips along my jaw. “Create dreams of promise for us, my love.”

“I will, Raven. We will dream of our future.” I kissed her again. “Our future full of joyous misery made just for us.”



RAVEN HAD FALLEN asleep as I prepared to leave her for the day. It had been three days since her accident, and we had stayed in bed almost the entire time. Jeanine and Luca refused to let me return to training, and I didn’t argue with them. I wanted to be by her side while she recuperated her strength and had been content to watch her sleep, which was what she had done almost the entire time.

She had become addicted to our dreams. It was fun creating them for her — her favorites were of us at our manor in Thoya, fishing in the pond, or me chasing her through the massive yard. And when the dreams started becoming too tempting to stay in, we realized it was time to face our reality again.

She had completely healed from her self-inflicted stab wound, and I needed to get back to training. I didn’t need it somehow getting back to Mira that I wasn’t holding up my end of the bargain. The last thing we needed right now was River showing up and drowning the island.

I grinned at her while pulling on my boots. I woke her up in her favorite way, even though she needed to sleep, but her

taste always got me through the day. She would meet us later to practice more with controlling her elements, but she would be going to the docks with John first because of new shipments coming in for the armies. She wanted to be there to ensure everything she ordered would be delivered. She always tried to do the most for people, even when they were here under orders to destroy the island.

Standing from the chair, I admired her naked body, only lit by partial rays from the sun. She was celestial — had to be. I would accept no other explanation for her beauty.

Leaning down, I brushed my lips across her temple gently, smiling as she exhaled a deep breath in response.

We'd fallen asleep only hours ago after making love for the first time since her accident. I was gentle with her, and she didn't fight me on it, while that would usually irritate her. Because our love continued to grow more profound by the day, and it had become more than just possessing her body — I held her heart in my hands and wanted to show her how well I was going to take care of it. How grateful I was that she had come back with me.

I didn't want this life with her to ever end.

I quietly exited the room, clicking the door shut behind me. I was on the first step before I heard it open again, glancing back. She was leaning against the doorframe, holding a sheet over her body as she bit her lip. Her hair was wild and mussed from sleep and sex, and she was my favorite shade of pink.

I all but melted right into the floor.

“You didn't kiss me,” she pouted, puckering out her lip.

I returned to her quickly, and she shot me the most flirtatious smile. Cupping her throat in my hands, I pushed her chin back with my thumbs and slowly pressed my lips against hers. She sighed into me, her fingers gripping tightly to my shirt.

When I pulled back, I kissed the tip of her nose and forehead. “I didn't want to wake you... again.”

“I have a new rule,” she said, her voice laden with sleep. And raspy. So sexily raspy. “You cannot leave without kissing me first.”

It was tempting to take her back to bed. Send Mira a letter telling her to go fuck herself. I would spend my last days in bed with my wife while the world imploded around us.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she whispered, raising to kiss me again.

“Never.” I fisted her hair in my hands and met her kiss. I needed her, but she needed sleep. Groaning from want, I broke from her and rested my forearm against the doorframe.

She was obvious as she dipped her chin, slowly moving her eyes over the entirety of my frame. Inch by inch, my resolve to walk away was wavering. “Stop looking at me like that.”

A seductive little grin tugged up on the corners of her mouth.

“Baby, go to sleep.”

With her grip still on my shirt, she tried to tug me back into the room. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders to still her. “You sleep. I’ll get sweaty for you, and you can meet me in a few hours.”

She frowned. “Why is it so easy for you to turn me down?”

I laughed at her question. So infuriating, my little witch.

Taking her hand, I pressed it against my erection pushing against my pants rather uncomfortably. “You think this is easy for me? I don’t want to break you, Raven.”

She started stroking me slowly while nodding her head. “What if I want to be broken?”

“If I don’t walk away now, I won’t be able to.”

This evil creature dropped the sheet from around her body and tilted her head to rest against the doorframe, continuing to stroke me. My gaze lowered slowly down her exposed body.

Breathing had suddenly become very difficult. “Raven...” I warned. “This time won’t be gentle.”

A sigh of satisfaction. “Good.”

Bringing her to me, I spun her and pressed her chest against the door as it closed behind her. Kicking her feet farther apart, I pulled her lower half back until she was against my crotch. I could have come from only that — her ass grinding against my cock with fabric between us.

She looked at me over her shoulder while I shoved my pants down, fisting my shaft and ramming roughly into her. She cried out from the sudden burst of contact, her fingers gripping the door’s wooden frame. My thrusts were tight and quick. I wanted her to scream loud enough to wake everyone.

Her back arched as she fought against me, allowing me a new angle to drive into her. I kneaded her ass with my thumbs as I watched myself pound her from behind, savoring her moans.

It would never be enough. I would never have enough of her.

When one of my hands snaked up to wrap around her throat, her moan vibrated against my palm. “Say it, Raven. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“I want you to choke me,” she rasped.

“Fuck,” I whispered as I tightened my hold around her throat, driving into her so hard that I wasn’t sure how she was still standing unless it was purely from my fingers digging into her hip.

Her body trembled as her pussy tightened around me, her moan strained as it escaped. I saw her cum glistening on my cock as I pulled out to the tip and shoved it back in. “Fuck, Raven, I don’t want to stop.”

Moments passed and all I could think about was her, all I wanted to feel was this. I had turned her around and carried her inside, falling onto to the floor with her in my arms but remaining with her wrapped around me.

“Why can’t I have enough?” she asked breathlessly, her nails digging into my chest as she rolled on top of me. “Why is fucking you the only thing that makes sense?”

“Fuck, Raven, come again. Come again so I can.”

She listened for once and came again, gifting me a passionate kiss to push me completely over the edge.

My mind shifted to what Baldwin had said: if magic was only now intensifying and would continue to do so, would we ever be able to stop?

“What the fuck, Raven?” I breathed while I slowed.

She could only laugh in response, moving off me and collapsing to the floor, breathless. I was still panting, my hands shaking through gently caressing her face. “Thanks for kissing me goodbye,” she teased.

Laughing, I sat up to grab my pants that I had successfully tripped on while walking inside. “You will be the death of me, you wicked witch.”

She shrugged and sighed, running a hand through her sweat-slicked hair. “I’m just trying to get it all in before you’re too old.”

I scowled at her, absolutely offended. “I am never going to be too old to fuck you.”

A playful grin. “Don’t you need to go? Or will you stay on the floor with me all day?”

Smiling as we stood, I opened the door and kissed her once more. She twisted on her toes and flashed me another mischievous smile before disappearing into our bedroom. “I love you,” she called out.

I stared after her, even after she vanished. She was like a fever dream at all hours of the day. “I love you,” I responded, still within a Raven-daze.

Closing the door, I jogged down the stairs with full intentions of replaying that encounter all day in my mind.

Grace held her palms up to me after I nearly smacked into her in the hallway. I couldn't help but laugh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I'm sorry." I shook my head, trying to clear the memory of Raven, but it stayed put.

Clearing my throat, I looked at Grace. "You're here early. A lot of books to sort today?"

She laughed as she looked past me into the open library doors. "I'm on my last shelf in here. Raven has two more libraries I need to sort through while also trying to find out more information on River."

I hadn't realized we had two more libraries. Raven was slacking on her tour duties. "Any luck?"

She frowned as she shook her head. "I have no information on our queen, let alone on a secret twin raised in another realm. John is searching for a historian to add Raven to the lineage of Leonidas and Celestina, but as far as River goes...."

"Queen Damiana mentioned a prophecy of twins born of darkness."

"A prophecy," Grace repeated. "Been a while since I read about one of those, but that's something I could go off of."

"Well, as our official lineage...."

"Researcher," Grace finished with a laugh.

"Right, lineage researcher...." I smiled at Raven's title. "You can do it."

"Headed out?"

I nodded with a sigh. "Duty calls."

"I just passed the other two, so you're not far behind."

Dipping my chin, I took a step around her. She called my name softly, and I glanced back at her. "Should we be afraid?"

My eyebrows drew in.

"I just... I don't want to leave Seolia. I don't want to see it destroyed."

I patted her shoulder gently. “Grace, I can’t lie to you and say that I’m completely positive that we’re going to win this, but I can promise you that we will do everything we can to ensure that we do. We have a plan.” I gave her a small, reassuring smile. I didn’t like many people, but I liked her. And Raven loved her. I didn’t want this sweet girl to fear losing her home.

“I like you better,” she said.

I cocked my head, unsure of what she meant.

“For Raven. I’ve always thought she should be with Cade, but she never smiled or laughed like she does when you’re around, and you’re not even that funny.”

Warmth spread to my very core.

“She told me when you returned from Reales that it’s always been you, and you’re married. I just wanted to say that I understand why, and I’m happy for the two of you.”

“Thank you, Grace.” It was awkward and unfamiliar, but I found myself hugging her.

She laughed at my attempt to be an average human for a moment.

“I have to go, or Jeanine will kick my ass.”

She smiled and gave me a small wave before disappearing into the library. I jogged down the hall and didn’t stop until I was outside, a large smile plastered on my mouth. Raven told Grace that it had always been me. She’d said that to me before, but I didn’t know she shared it with others.

It made my dark soul a little lighter.



THE SUN WAS RELENTLESS. Every man was shirtless, sweat dripping to the ground. Spring had definitely sprung, and with the lack of clouds in the sky, it was warmer than usual. We were running low on water, and these men wouldn’t last unless I resupplied us with some.

Sighing, I glanced over at Jeanine, who was doubled over as she attempted to catch her breath. Luca had all but given up as he fell to the ground, pressing his forehead against the rocks.

I fucking hated Mira. None of this was necessary.

My hair was too heavy with sweat to smooth back, causing it to fall into my eyes, making them burn. I wiped the sweat from my brow with my discarded shirt and groaned. “This is fucking insane,” I bit out.

The men lined up and waited for my next order. Everyone looked exhausted. We had gone nonstop since returning from Reales weeks ago. “Down that hill is the channel. You have half an hour to swim and cool off,” I shouted. Eyes widened at my generous and out-of-character offer. “The longer you stand here gawking at me, the less time you’ll have.”

All at once, the thundering of feet sounded as they jogged down the hill and to the water’s edge. I collapsed to the ground and hung my head between my drawn-up knees. I was so goddamn frustrated that I tensed when I felt a hand on my shoulder and then in my hair.

“My love.”

Her soothing voice broke me out of my thoughts, and I raised my head. She looked angelic as the sun lingered behind her. “I can’t tell if I’m hallucinating or you’re really here.”

“I have water and food,” she said. “Dock workers are bringing them up.” She hit my shoulder with a small jug. “But yours is a special delivery.”

Grinning, I grabbed her wrist and pulled her down into my lap. She shifted into Frost and formed ice over her fingertips to run them over my forehead and down my cheeks. “I’m sorry you’re having to do this,” she whispered, dragging her finger across my lips.

I kissed her fingertip. “I would do anything for you.”

“But you shouldn’t have to do *this*.” She cupped her cold hands around my neck.

I brought the jug of water to my mouth and practically inhaled it. Her cold fingers ran across my scalp. “You need to be wildly unhinged.”

I shivered. “I’m doing this so we can be wildly unhinged together, and you’re doing what you need to do. You shouldn’t have to spend our money to supply all of these men with what they need.”

Her voice was soft as she answered, “I don’t mind. I like taking care of people.”

I kissed her while her frozen hands skated down my chest, and then she laughed through our kiss as Jeanine laid down in her lap. “Can I get some of that icy magic?”

Raven’s hand left me to brush across Jeanine’s forehead.

I asked, “Can you bring winter back?”

She giggled. “You overestimate my power.”

“I think you underestimate your power,” Jeanine said.

I nodded in agreement before I grabbed her hand and put it back on my forehead. I closed my eyes as her fingers brushed my skin, shivering again as her tongue ran across the base of my neck. She smacked her lips dramatically, and I chuckled, peeling my eyes open. “Is your blood cold?”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek to suppress a grin and was about to say something when the weight on my legs increased. “Orgy?”

Raven laughed loudly as Luca settled in next to Jeanine. Holding out both of her palms, she created two icicles and handed them to Luca and Jeanine. She made two more and handed one to me, keeping the other for herself. My eyes darkened on her as she began to suck on it, giving me a coy grin.

“You’re cruel,” I muttered.

She teased me further by running her tongue along the length of it.

I glared at her.

“Eat your icicle and stop brooding.”

Huffing, I broke the tip of it off with my teeth and chewed on it.

She looked around. “Where are your heathens?”

“Swimming,” I responded.

She looked at me in pure shock.

“I can be nice sometimes.”

“It’s a rarity,” Jeanine piped in.

Leaning down, I ran the tip of my tongue along her collarbone. She tilted her head on instinct and sighed. I did it again, and her entire body shuddered. It snapped her out of the daze that I desperately wanted her in. She shoved my head away. “*Stop.*”

I bared my teeth at her demand.

Jeanine asked, “Are they being gross, Luca?”

Luca shrugged. “Probably.”

We both laughed, glancing up as men began to make their way back up the hill. It had only been a few minutes. “The water is warm,” Theodore said upon approach.

Raven sighed and tore her legs out from underneath Jeanine and Luca’s heads. They groaned as they fell to the ground. I grabbed her as she stood, tugging her dress to bring her back down. She merely swatted my hands away. We all pouted as we watched her walk away.

But then my lips parted in awe as she formed icicles in her hands for each man as they ascended the hill. They crowded around her and waited for their turn.

I stood and pushed my way through the crowd to her, stroking her icy-blond hair and aiding her in passing out the icicles. Pulling her to me after the men had seconds, I kissed her forehead. “You’re incredible.”

She gave me a slight shrug.

“No, baby. You are. Please give yourself some credit.”

She pushed up to her toes and planted feathery kisses along my chest. I sighed, gripping the waist of her dress. “I didn’t say to tease.”

Her eyes lit up. “Want to see something?”

She took my hand and pulled me down the hill, throwing glances over her shoulder. She didn’t want anyone to follow us, which added to my curiosity.

When we were far enough away to satisfy her, she formed another icicle in her palm and bit down on her bottom lip as she took the sharp end, slicing open her palm. I should have been more surprised when she did things like that, but she was as twisted as me and enjoyed the pain.

I watched her blood trickle over the icicle as she turned her hand, lust pouring out of her as she watched them combine. This was her thirst for life, for drawing blood. And I was enamored as I stared at her.

When the icicle was well-covered in her blood, she wiggled her fingers on her other hand. The blood droplets encased in icy dust, freezing them and ceasing their trickling. My mouth was dry as I took the bloodied icicle from her. Her fingers curled over her cut as she healed herself. “Did you know you could do this?”

Her mischievous grin was the only answer I needed. She had been experimenting when I wasn’t around.

“Try mine.”

She nodded and created a new icicle in her hand. I extended my palm to her, and she sliced through it, turning my hand for the blood to pour over the icicle. Even as I realized how fucked up we were, it turned me on to see how much she enjoyed this.

She flipped my palm back over to stop the flow and repeated the same motion as before, freezing my drops of blood until they were wrapped in a dome of ice shavings. I practically panted as I watched her craft. Her tongue ran across her lips as she stared at the icicle.

Slowly, her eyes met mine. We both wanted the same thing.

I was hard in anticipation as she grabbed my hand and brought it to her mouth, licking across the cut until it had completely closed. My blood was on her lips, and she ran her tongue across them until they were cleaned.

Any other person would have found this vile, but not us.

“We can’t be human,” I whispered. It didn’t make sense — how we craved something we shouldn’t ever want from another being.

“Whatever we are, it’s not from any place good.”

“Maybe we need to explore this more,” I said. And honestly, we did. There had to be an answer for this intense desire for one another. Not that I would ever complain, but this was unlike anything else I had ever seen or experienced for myself.

But with her right in front of me, I wanted no answers. I only wanted her.

Squeezing the back of her neck, I brought her to me and painfully crushed my mouth against hers, groaning from the taste of my blood on her tongue.

Luca called my name from the top of the hill. I needed to go back.

When I broke from her, it was with extreme hesitancy. I tasted her darkness wanting to be freed. Her eyes flickered behind me as Luca called my name again, an unholy grin spreading across her lips.

I wasn’t staring at Raven. I was leering at whatever creature inhabited her when she let this part of herself out. And I realized it wasn’t Morana that had her thirsting for blood — that was all Raven.

This sweet, ravishing woman had a dark side reserved only for me.

I brushed my thumb across her bottom lip. “Hold on to it.”

She sucked the tip of my thumb between her lips, biting down gently.

“Raven,” I sighed, pushing more of my finger into her mouth.

She sucked right before she released my thumb. “Go,” she whispered.

I shook my head. I wanted more of this. More of her. She had reawakened my thirst, which had been buried since we returned from Reales.

“We can play tonight when you come home.” She took a dramatic step away, even though she knew nothing could ever stop me from getting to her. “Go, my love.”

“I am going to devour you, little mouse.”

“We’ll see if you can find me.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



RAVEN

N ightfall was hours away, and I needed to return to the docks. I ordered more than just food and water for the armies, and I needed to assist in getting all of it sorted. We had filled most of the dock's positions since the majority of workers left to join our army. The turnover hadn't been quite as dramatic as I expected. Everyone was anxious to do their part in protecting our home.

Though, I hadn't seen Cade since banishing him from the castle. I was hoping he'd come to his senses and return to help train the army, but he remained holed up in August's cottage.

Phantom pains spread across the scar from Morana's exit. While I would have been happy to use her for Mira's death, it was better to purge myself of her. She came with too much of a risk to those around me and her trying to overcome my elements was not a sacrifice I was willing to make. If I could learn to control Blaze with my mind instead of my hands, perhaps I could burn Mira from the inside out.

And I decided to not believe her about the information she offered to me — she would have said anything to stop me from purging her from my body. The only man I was fated to be with, the only one I cared to know about, was my husband. No one else mattered — no past life, no past lovers.

Climbing over the grassy knoll that led to the dock, I tilted my head at the gigantic ship docked. John was up ahead,

talking to another man I didn't recognize. When he noticed me, he waved me over, both men bowing to me. "Queen Raven," John said.

It was bizarre to hear him call me that. I understood that it was out of respect when others were around, but he felt like my father, making me laugh whenever I heard it.

"Were you aware that we're still receiving shipments from Reales?"

I looked from him to the large ship that sat in our harbor, rocking in tune with the waves that seemed like they wanted to push it away and out of Seolia.

"I assumed they would stop after we left, but they're here to import goods."

I wrinkled my nose. "What kind of goods?" Reales was falling apart. The only ships in their harbor were their own. The other kingdoms had stopped delivering to them, and with most of their shops closed down, I couldn't imagine what they would have that we could need.

The man held up a list. "There are non-perishable food items from Queen Mira and some wine."

I perked up at that. We were running low on mine. "Did she send food for the army?"

He nodded.

That was helpful, though it wouldn't help our cause if the army believed she cared enough about them to send food. It seemed silly to turn away food and wine.

"We'll help you unload, but please tell Mira we have enough supplies to last until we return to Reales. Convey to her that we no longer require her assistance," John said.

Without answering, the captain looked at me and produced a letter from his waistband. He handed it to me hurriedly, and when I asked who it was from, he remained silent and retreated to his ship.

I looked at John. He took the letter from me and flipped the envelope over. "It's not stamped with the royal seal. This

isn't from Mira.”

He pulled it open. “Queen Raven, we’ve never met, but I work in the castle and am risking everything to get this letter to you. I don’t know who or where he came from, but Mira is conspiring with someone outside our realm. I’ve tried to pick up bits of their conversations, but he has his own army and says he knows you. He is not an ally, and I must caution you. These men have moved into Reales and are unlike anything I have ever seen.”

And just like that, the letter ended.

“That’s it?” I snatched the letter from his hands. “What does that even mean?” I reread the letter aloud. “What other realm? Who else knows me?”

“Raven, I honestly don’t know. I rarely let anyone in to see you, and Cade didn’t either. We kept visitors within our realm. No one from outside ever visited here or Reales after your birth. Rudolf shut down the ports to visitors after you arrived.”

“And what does it mean ‘they’re unlike anything I’ve ever seen’?” I shook the letter around in front of him. “Who ends a letter like that?!” I stalked off toward the ship and stomped up the ramp, locating the man who gave it to me. “Who is this from? Who has come to Reales?”

His eyes darted around at my question, and he took a step to the side, nodding for me to follow him. John came with me, and when silence drew out again, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Do not make me get my fiancé.”

His eyes widened. “I have a family.”

I sighed. He was fearful, which meant he wouldn’t tell me a lot.

“But there are a lot. They’re...” He looked around again before leaning closer to me. “Different.”

“Different,” I repeated. “Different *how*?”

“Unbreakable, Queen. They’re unbreakable.” His tone was hushed, hurried. And then he left us standing there, retreating down below deck, hoping we wouldn’t follow him.

I huffed out a frustrated breath, and John stared at me. We both had no words for that.

“Do we need to inform Zeke?”

I ran a hand through my hair as my headache reformed. I hadn't missed it. I did need to tell him, but not yet. I needed him to be relaxed first. “Yes, but not right now. I'll tell him tonight after he comes home.” I looked at the letter in my hands. “That man is not going to tell us anything else, and I don't want to push him in case Mira decides to take it out on his family. But who could be unbreakable? Do you know anything about any countries outside of our realm?”

“Not much. They're far, and many people fled to come to live within our realm.”

“But why?” Neither one of us knew. I never studied other places because I never imagined I would need to know about them. Ask me anything about our four kingdoms, and I could recall quite a bit, but everywhere else was a mystery. “And why did they come to Reales? Does it have anything to do with River?”

“All great questions,” he replied, frustrated. We were both tired of being surprised by Mira. “I'll take the letter back to the castle. I want to reread it and comb through our libraries for anything I can find. I'll leave it in your chambers before Zeke returns.”

I nodded and handed it back to him but then curled into him. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “I hate her, John. With everything I am, I hate her.”

“I'm sorry for playing a part in this,” he said. “If I had known....”

I nodded again, knowing this was not what he wanted for our kingdom.

He led me off the ship as evening began to set. I needed to return to the castle and change before Zeke tried to find me. Knowing him, he would end training early to start our game. But I couldn't stop thinking about that word.

Unbreakable.

They would only be unbreakable until I found them.



DARKNESS SURROUNDED me as I trudged through the Black Forest in my jumpsuit. He would know where to find me. There weren't many places to hide on the island.

I had taken a bath and soaked my hair in my soap so that he would pick up on my scent easily. While it would be intriguing to stay out here all night to test how skilled he truly was at hunting, I needed to share the letter with him sooner rather than later.

I passed by the remains of the men I had burned so many months ago, snickering to myself. He'd seen me do that and still wanted me — even as I burned through the throats of two men right in front of him.

My twisted deviant.

Grunting, I jumped to grab a low branch and hoisted myself up until I could stand. I jumped again and reached for a higher one. I was wearing all black and blended well against the trunk, which was still dark gray, even though spring was in full bloom.

I idly swung my leg back and forth, looking around. I didn't see him yet, which gave me time to think about the letter.

Before Zeke came to the island, I hardly met anyone other than the merchants traveling here for festivals or to deliver shipments. Cade was always with me, and royals never crossed here. We always went to them.

I was completely stumped on how anyone from another kingdom or country could know me unless it were someone I'd fucked during one of our festivals. Even that was a long shot because they would always spill their life story to me and were always from within our realm.

Unbreakable. Unlike anything anyone had ever seen.

I felt I should know what that meant, but it made no sense.

Twigs snapped and pulled me from my thoughts. Grabbing the trunk, I quietly peered around it and grinned as I saw him. He looked like the devil traipsing through with something shiny in his hand, spinning it so nonchalantly between his fingers.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. It was a dagger. He wanted this to be a bloody fight.

He stopped right below and drew in a deep breath, picking up on my scent. I remained still with a held breath.

He took slow steps forward, looking around. When he was far enough away, I released a quiet breath. I had to move quickly to get off the tree. His strides doubled mine, and he would catch up to me quickly. "Little mouse," he singsonged.

I bit my lip and silently slid off the top branch, kneeling on the lower one. I could only make out the outline of his body, but he would realize my scent was fading and circle back.

I inhaled a deep breath and dropped, cursing as he chuckled from the sound of my boots hitting the ground.

I broke into a run.

Weaving through the trees, I sprinted deeper into the forest. The adrenaline from being caught was spurring me on. Jumping, I grabbed another branch and swung myself up. I scrabbled for the next branch and pressed my back against the trunk as I silenced my breathing again.

He stopped underneath my tree, his gaze traveling over ones next to me. Growling, he twisted the dagger between his fingers. I wanted to lick the veins constricting in his hands. "Come here, little mouse."

I shook my head. I knew he would never hurt me, but I had never seen this side of him. He was hunting me, and it made my skin feel tight.

Forming an icicle in my hand, I hurled it sideways and listened as it broke against the trunk of another tree. His head whipped toward the sound, and he jogged away from me,

giving me a chance to descend my tree quickly. But as my boots thumped against the ground, his growl was pure frustration.

I sprinted. I heard the sounds of waves in the distance, which meant I was approaching the edge of the island. I would run out of spots to hide, and I couldn't spend all night climbing trees.

I looked at my hands and tried to think of something to help me. When he laughed from behind me, I held my palm in his direction and shot a breeze toward him, glancing back as he stumbled.

He glared at me, kicking into a faster sprint. I threw a curse word back, shooting one more breeze before I lunged for another branch. I was almost up when his hand wrapped around my leg and yanked me down, catching me as I toppled.

I thrashed against him and created another icicle, jamming the sharp end into his arm wrapped around me. He hissed and loosened it enough for me to shove him off.

I broke into another run, but he was on me fast.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he pulled me to him and spun me, pinning my body against the thick trunk of a tree; his forearm laid horizontal across my chest, and his eyes darkened on me.

Unrecognizable, even with his shadows.

I started to form more icicles, but he grabbed my wrists in one hand and pinned them above my head. Lowering his arm from my chest and raising his dagger, he dragged the tip along my lips. I narrowed my eyes at him. If he wanted blood drawn, I was happy to assist in drawing his.

“That was quite the chase, little mouse.”

I couldn't even recognize his voice. It was hoarse and full of sinful malice. I had to keep reminding myself that this was my husband.

The tip of his dagger swept down my mouth and chin, the tip pressing flat against the pulse drumming in my throat. He leaned in, his breath hot on my skin, his sigh one of satisfaction. "I want to feast on your fear," he snarled.

He pulled back just enough to meet my eyes as the tip of his blade barely pushed into the skin where my neck met my shoulder. Blood trickled out, and I tilted my head away from the break. He tossed the dagger down and licked up the cut with his tongue. "Sweet baby," he purred.

A slight grin spread on my lips. That was what he always called me when his darkness infiltrated his soul.

As soon as he pulled up, I grabbed his bottom lip with my teeth and bit down hard, flesh splitting. He cupped his hand under my chin and tried to pry me off, but I didn't release it until his blood pooled on my tongue.

Panting, he stared at me. I dragged my tongue across my lips.

"I'm going to make this hurt," he warned.

"Do your worst," I replied.

His grin was damnable as he slowly unzipped my jumpsuit and roughly yanked it off my body, waiting as I kicked off my boots and stepped out of them. I should have fought him harder, but he was too tempting when he looked at me like this.

I wanted to see his immeasurably evil side.

"On your knees," he demanded.

I shook my head. I hated being told what to do.

He ground his hips against mine, pinning me to the trunk again and making me hiss from the bite of the bark against my skin. "I'm feeling generous enough to let you come, but not unless you do as I say and get on your knees."

I really wanted to fight him. Every instinct was telling me to, but I needed him to be relaxed.

He cocked an eyebrow as he sensed me filtering through emotions and took a step back, his gaze on me curious. I slowly fell to my knees before him. "Turn around."

I did and felt his eyes burning into me.

"Put your hands on the trunk."

Leaning forward, I placed my palms against the trunk. He stood behind me and drew his hand down my hair. "It's a shame I have to destroy something so beautiful."

I looked over my shoulder as he lowered to his knees behind me and then to his back, scooting his head between my legs. "You're hiding something from me," he said.

Before I could respond, the tip of his tongue licked along my clit. I gasped, pressing my fingers into the trunk. "Say it, Raven."

"I'm hiding something from you," I repeated.

His tongue pushed into my core, and I whispered his name as my eyes closed. But nothing was loving about this. He tortured me, bringing his tongue out before pushing it back in, never allowing me to build. I tried to take control by lowering myself down, but he stopped me with his hands wrapped tightly around my waist, stilling me. I growled and slapped the tree.

He continued, and I cursed at him, frustrated by no release. And then he was gone, raising back up until he was on his knees. I glanced at him to watch him remove his shirt, and it only added to my irritation. He knew it, too, judging by the smug grin on his stupidly perfect face.

He pushed his pants down until they rested against his knees, slowly stroking himself. I glared at him. If he was going to make it hurt, he needed to fucking do it instead of dragging it out. I was desperate for him, but he pushed me back down when I started to lean up. "I didn't say you could move, little mouse."

He wrapped my hair around his wrist and brushed his lips across the top of my spine. "Remember that I love you," he whispered.

That was his only warning before he yanked on my hair simultaneously as he thrust into me. I cried out from the ache, but he didn't stop, pulling my head back until the skin around my throat stretched painfully. My body felt like it may crack into pieces from his pounding. Tears formed in my eyes, but there was so much pleasure shooting through me that it fought against the pain.

Slowly, he dragged his tongue up the length of my spine, not stopping until he was sucking on the top.

"Fuck," I rasped. That was a new sensation, and it tingled everywhere.

He tugged on my hair again, and I groaned, sliding my hands up the trunk to keep myself braced. If he stretched my neck back any farther, my spine might split.

And when his palm was brought down against my ass, I gasped. He did it again, and I cried out his name. "Goddamnit, Raven, my handprint looks so good on you."

"Do it again," I begged.

He brought his palm down again, the sound echoing into the emptiness. And again until my skin felt raw under his touch. "Baby," I breathed. "Mark me."

He stilled. "Where, Raven? Tell me where you want me."

"Everywhere," I whispered. "I want you everywhere."

Chuckling, he pulled on my hair until I rose and rested against his chest. "You want my bite marks all over your body, baby?"

Nodding, I snaked my arm around to grab the back of his head and brought it down against my shoulder. "But start here."

He sank his teeth into my flesh, and I cried his name, shattering around him. He sucked from the bite while his hands circled me to hold me tightly against him by my breasts.

He came while continuing to suck, the bite deep enough to leave another scar. And as I closed my eyes, I heard what I had on the ship to Thoya.

My screams.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered, chasing the screams. Screams of heartbreak — of agony. Cries of pain. Him. But it was all black; I couldn’t see anything. I thought this was over, believing the sounds I heard had been from when Morana was hurting him, but it wasn’t. This was something different.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and he slowly released me, licking over the bite. “Raven.” He lifted me enough to pull out of me and then cradled me in his lap. “You heard it again, didn’t you?”

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I held him tightly. “Someone is going to hurt you, Zeke. And I can’t....” I closed my eyes again, trying to find the memory. “I can’t see anything.”

“Raven.” He shushed me and shifted me until I was straddling his lap. “Baby, look at me. No one is going to hurt me. You won’t let that happen. I won’t let that happen.”

“But the letter, Zeke, the letter....” Reaching behind me, I grabbed my boot and pulled the letter from the bottom. “We received a shipment from Reales today, which we thought had stopped. It wasn’t anything interesting except for this.” I handed the letter to him. “It wasn’t sealed, and John said it’s not from Mira.”

He flipped it open, silent as he read it.

“John said no one from any other kingdoms or countries ever visited me. The captain wouldn’t tell me who this was from, and he wouldn’t give me any more information, but he did say these men are ‘unbreakable.’”

Confusion clouded his eyes. “Unbreakable? Did he say how many?”

I shook my head.

“Baby, I could’ve searched his memories. You should’ve found me.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, sighing. “I forget that you have your own weapon. He seemed fearful of you and scared for his

family. I didn't think; I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, Raven. You don't want to use me like I don't enjoy using you, but we're partners. We need to be comfortable enough to call on one another's abilities."

I ran a finger down his jaw. "I enjoy using you for so many other things. What do we need to do about this?"

"We have two options. I could go there—"

I put my fingers against his mouth. "Are you not listening to me? Someone is going to hurt you, Zeke, and Mira is working with another army. You are not going there."

"Raven, she will not let anyone touch me as long as she needs you."

"But the screams, the curse..."

"Raven, we are not cursed." He kissed the bite on my shoulder. "I promised you I wouldn't leave you, and I intend on keeping that promise. We're going to ask Edmund to invade Reales with us. It sounds like we'll need all the numbers we can manage."

"What about Perosan? What about Mira? Do we ask her?"

"Edmund was right about Perosan. Their hatred for Reales spans back a century. I'd imagine their army is the second largest, behind Reales, in fear of another invasion. We could use their numbers, but we need more time. If Mira knows we've learned of her secret, she'll kill the ones who told you and send River before we're ready."

And when he sensed my fear, he shook his head. "Baby, no one is going to touch me. Maybe I got a splinter."

I laughed through my gloom. "A splinter would make you cry in agony?"

"Maybe it was a huge splinter."

I rolled my eyes and nuzzled against his neck. I wasn't sure if fear or disbelief had him not taking this seriously. "I'll work on my elements tomorrow."

“Magic,” he said, putting the letter beside us. “They must have magic.”

I nodded. “You said magic lives outside our realm.”

“Nova.” He lifted my head by the chin. “Melik may have answers. We could go to Nova.”

“With all the time we have? And with how I burned his arm?”

He smiled. “He left me with an open invitation. If we can find the time, I think it would be beneficial to see what he was talking about.”

“Nova,” I repeated, bouncing slightly in excitement. “I’ve never been outside our realm. I want to go to Nova.”

He kissed along the base of my neck. “Let me love you properly before we face tomorrow.”

We didn’t leave the forest until dawn, falling asleep with the waves amongst the trees.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



RAVEN

Zeke gave the armies the morning off to help me practice control with my elements. I was snapping my fingers rapidly, bouncing on my toes as they lined up in front of me. Luca was chuckling while watching me, and Zeke kept telling me to stop bouncing. “Just focus,” he said, like it was as simple as that.

Jeanine was standing in the middle, growing bored of me not being able to burn her. We had been at this for over an hour and I hadn’t managed to do anything near what I did the day Morana was freed. I couldn’t seem to get angry enough about anything to focus my energy on projecting heat.

“Do I need to kiss your husband again?”

I stopped bouncing and narrowed my eyes. “No,” I answered through clenched teeth.

“Burn me, or I will. There’s no demon spirit to stop me this time.”

“Jeanine,” Zeke warned.

“If Jeanine kisses Zeke, can I kiss Raven?”

“Luca,” Zeke barked, shaking his head. “As the older brother, I am allowed to kill you.”

Luca winked at me. “I don’t think she would mind. Would you, Raven?”

Zeke growled and started walking toward Luca, but I pushed him back with a gust of wind. “No, Zeke. You can’t hurt Luca.” I looked at Luca. “Behave.”

“Stop distracting her,” Jeanine sighed. “How can we anger Blaze?”

I looked at Zeke, but he shook his head. “No.”

“Zeke, it may be the only way to get me angry enough. You have to.”

Jeanine and Luca looked at Zeke. “She wants me to bring back memories of her seeing me with Jeanine. That’s no different than her just kissing me right now.”

“It’s completely different,” I argued. “That was in the past. If you do it now, I may kill her.”

“I don’t want to do any of it at all,” he said. “There has to be another way we can anger Blaze without me constantly reliving my past.”

“Her envy is her strongest emotion,” Jeanine reminded him. “You have her so lovesick all the time that it’s harder for her to bring out now.”

I bit the corner of my lip to stop myself from smiling as I thought about how much I did love him. He mirrored my grin, which garnered an annoyed sigh from Jeanine.

“He was seeing a girl in Reales,” Luca said, making my eyes snap to him. “She had auburn hair and long legs. Smelled so fucking good all the time.”

I narrowed my eyes on Zeke, who was glaring at Luca. “Was her name Thia?”

Luca snapped his fingers. “Yes, Thia. Fuck. He ordered more soap than we could’ve ever used in a lifetime...”

Zeke sighed as he looked at me. “You’re trying to burn the wrong person, my love. You can’t harm me.”

“I want to,” I snapped.

“I wasn’t *seeing* her. It was only once.”

“Not helping,” I bit out.

“But you can feel it,” Jeanine said, clapping her hands together. “Raven isn’t using her hands, and you can feel her heat?”

“I always feel her heat,” Zeke answered. “Though it’s a little more prominent now.”

“She needs to burn one of us,” Luca said.

“Raven, do you want to hear about the times he kissed me?”

I slowly moved my eyes to Jeanine. “No.”

She tilted her head. “How about where he touched me?”

“Jeanine,” Zeke warned again. “I don’t think you realize how bad it will burn...”

She reached out and touched his arm. I took a step forward. “Stop.”

He tried to flick her fingers away as she slid them up his arm. I needed this to stop. I needed to learn how to transfer heat, or we would have to keep practicing like this, and I couldn’t stand the idea of anyone’s hands on him, even if she was my best friend.

I zeroed in on her hand and used a combination of my envy and anger to push heat outward, holding my breath as I tried to steer the invisible layer of warmth toward her hand.

When she screeched, I released my breath. She shook her fingers out in front of her, cursing.

Zeke looked at Luca. “Can you tell her the truth now?”

Luca snickered. “He wasn’t seeing her. She tried, but he kept denying her. I was the one who kept ordering soap.”

I shifted into Terra and stomped my foot in his direction, causing him to stumble sideways as the ground split. Zeke howled in laughter while Jeanine came to me.

Shifting into Frost, I soothed the burn on her hand and healed it. “I need to learn how to project it without getting

angry. It needs to come naturally.”

“Let’s try it again.” She took a step back while I shifted into Blaze and shoved Luca to the middle of the line. “Your turn.”

Luca groaned and squeezed his eyes as he waited for imminent pain.

Digging my nails into my palms, I focused on his arm and drew another breath. The layer of heat floated slowly toward him, and the harder I tried to shove it toward him, the dizzier I became. And all I was doing was trying to move a little heat. River could move water thousands of miles away.

Luca yelped and covered the minor burn on his arm. I doubled over and put my hands on my knees, sweat beading on my brow. “I can’t move very much without tiring out. This is going to take time.”

Zeke stood before me and gently raised my chin. “You can do it, my love. You are capable of great things.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “Let’s practice with Frost. Give Blaze a break.”

Shifting into Frost, I healed Luca’s burn before Zeke led me to the water. “Fire can’t fight against water, but ice can. If he comes at you with water, you need to be able to create layers thick enough that he can’t break through.”

“And they can’t be thin layers, Raven,” Jeanine said, coming to my other side. “They need to expand far enough to give you time to run or shift. How far can your ice go?”

Stomping my foot at the water’s edge, ice shot out and stopped after ten feet. Jeanine took a hesitant step onto the ice and bounced a little. “Thick enough to hold me.”

I nodded. “I froze a pond in Reales when I was running away from those men the day I arrived, but it melted quickly.”

“Try reinforcing it with your mind,” Zeke said, palming my lower back. “Add a layer, expand it.”

Biting on my bottom lip, I focused on the ice patch and tried to build upon it. But as it cracked down the middle,

Jeanine quickly jumped off and to the ground.

I sighed. “River. He feels my magic.”

Luca asked, “Can you feel his?”

“I...” trailing off, I looked out into the water. “I knew it was him that night. I could tell by the way the water moved.”

“That’s how she’s going to learn to defend against him,” Jeanine said, looking at Zeke. “She has to get into the water.”

“No,” Zeke responded quickly. “No, I am not risking her like that.”

“Zeke, she’s right. I have to be able to fight against the water.”

“Raven, you ironically don’t have the safety net of Morana anymore. You won’t be able to escape him like before. You will *have* to get yourself out.”

I slid out of my boots. “I know. I will.”

“Raven,” Zeke tried again, grabbing my hand. “He pulled you down too quickly last time. I couldn’t get to you.”

I rested my hand against his cheek. “Then you’ll meet me in the meadow.” I kissed his cheek. “I can do this, Zeke.”

“What the fuck is ‘the meadow’?” Luca asked, looking around. “Can I go?”

Rolling his eyes, Zeke kissed my temple and let go of my hand. “Remember not to panic. The more you panic, the more control he’ll have.”

Nodding, I drew deep breaths and stood at the edge, looking down into the dark-blue water. I could do this.

I crouched and dove, going in deep.

I resurfaced twenty or so feet away from the shore, waiting. “River,” I whispered, dropping ice shavings into the water around me. “Come out to play, brother.”

The water changed direction, pushing me farther away from shore. Zeke took a step closer, shouting my name. I was

trying to do the opposite of panic, but the fear of being pulled under last time was pushing to the front.

Maybe I had been too confident too soon.

He pulled me under.



MY LEGS WERE STUCK in his water vortex as it dragged me lower. Thrusting my hands out, I created a layer of ice beneath my feet, and when the water around my legs touched it, it unraveled and gave me the chance to kick off of it.

Each time our elements collided, his would break.

The vortex rebuilt and chased me up to the surface, allowing me to grab two breaths before it dragged me back under.

If he could feel me, maybe that meant....

Shifting into Blaze, I warmed my hands and shoved them into the vortex around my legs. It immediately broke apart, and I resurfaced, staring at my hands.

He could feel my heat, and it must break his concentration.

I began swimming back to shore, but the vortex circled my legs and whipped me under with more force.

I had angered my dear twin.

Shifting into Frost, I stuck my hands against the vortex and froze it, kicking it toward the bottom as I swam to the top again. Zeke stood in the shallow end, reaching his hand toward me.

I went to grab it, but a wave of water rising behind me had him bracing. I twisted quickly and shoved my hands out, building a wall of ice and blocking the water from falling on us.

In shock, I stared at the wall, curved in a descending wave.

Zeke put his arms under my shoulders and pulled me back just as the water began trying to crack through the ice, desperate to get to me.

Putting my hands behind my back, I stared at one crack in the wall and tightened my jaw. Slowly, inch-by-inch, I closed the crack with my mind.

That left all the other cracks, and Zeke pulled me onto land just as the water broke through and barely missed us.

Panting, I laid my head down on the ground. “Heat,” I said on a breath. “He can feel my heat. He doesn’t like it.” I took Jeanine’s extended hand and stood, slipping my boots back on. “I need to practice with Blaze more. It seems to break his concentration when I heat the water.”

“And you,” I looked at Zeke. “When I have to protect you, I can do... more. I’ve never been able to freeze a wave like that.”

“Do we need to sacrifice Zeke then?” Luca asked with a rotten grin.

Zeke shoved Luca a step. “Let’s practice with Blaze again.”

“Easy for you to say,” Luca said. “She can’t burn you!”

“Why?”

All at once, we all looked up to see Cade. “Why can’t she burn him?”

Zeke looked at me. I opened my mouth, but wasn’t sure what to say. I couldn’t lie to him. Cade was staring at me, his brows drawn down in confusion. “Raven?”

I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth and nibbled on it nervously before finally sighing. “We’re twin flames. My elements can’t harm him.”

Cade seemed to wither visibly. And then, he was angry. “Un-fucking-believable.”

As he turned, I followed him, but Zeke grabbed my wrist. “Raven.”

I brought his hand to my lips. "Give me a second."

He released me with a sigh as I jogged after Cade, who was walking the back route across the island instead of up the grassy hill. We would be in the forest soon. "Cade," I called. "Cade, please."

He whipped around, glaring. "You know, I was wondering what he could have that would make you choose him over me, and now it makes sense. You felt obligated."

I flinched, balling my fists. "I did not feel obligated. I fell for him before I knew what we were to one another."

"Was that before or after you fucked me, Raven? During?"

"Cade, you have to stop using that against me. Just because it didn't work out between us..."

"Because of him!" he shouted, taking steps backward. "It didn't work out between us because of him!"

"No!" I shouted, following him deeper into the forest. "It didn't work out because you *lied* to me. You were the one person I trusted more than anyone, and you lied to me my entire life!"

"Please," he bit out. "You would've forgiven me. If Zeke had never shown back up, everything would be fine, and we would've been married. You were going to marry me, Raven. Was that all a lie?"

"No," I responded quietly. "No, Cade, it wasn't a lie. I told myself I could marry you, that I would be perfectly content with you. I had planned on letting him go, but I knew..." trailing off, I blinked back tears and tried to keep my voice steady. "I knew I would always wonder about him, and that wouldn't have been fair to you."

"Just because you're twin flames doesn't mean you have to be together. We can try again, Raven. Things can go back to normal."

I shook my head. "No, Cade. I am not with him solely because we're twin flames. And there is no normal between

us. You kept secrets about my life from me, Cade. I can't just...."

"You can, Raven. You can forgive me. We can be together...."

"No!" I shouted. "We are not going to be together! I have made my choice, Cade, and it's him. It has always been him. You let me down, Cade. You lied to me, you *left* me in Reales — you promised to always be there for me, but you left me there. You left me there to learn about River alone..."

"I don't need another one of your fucking sob stories, Raven. All I've done for years is listen to you whine about not knowing who you are, being so alone, all your fucking identity issues...."

I felt sick. This was someone I had confided in most of my life, and now, he was making me feel embarrassed by everything I had shared with him. "And you knew," I cracked out, trying to push down the welling in my throat. "You could've told me who I was and given me the chance to explore where I came from...."

"You were *mine*," he barked. "Did you ever wonder why no one seemed to want to court you? Because I wouldn't fucking let them. Your friend, Edmund? He tried. He wanted to visit, but I burned his letter. Men from surrounding kingdoms? Burned those letters, too. No one was ever supposed to find you, Raven."

I was absolutely speechless.

"I regretted letting Zeke into that throne room the second you saw one another. You were supposed to be mine, Raven. You were never supposed to find out who you were."

Everything inside of me felt cold and heavy. "You've controlled me my entire life. And when I finally could free myself, you couldn't stand it."

"You were always supposed to be mine."

I shifted into Blaze, or... Blaze shifted into herself as anger brewed. "I was *never* yours. I thought of him every single second that I was with you. I was always *his*."

He took steps toward me. “Fucking say that again, Raven.”

I held a palm out to him. “Touch me, and you will burn.”

He paused for only a second before he moved again. “You won’t fucking touch me.”

“Maybe not,” Zeke said from behind me as he, Jeanine, and Luca stepped out from behind trees.

“But we will,” Jeanine finished for him.

“Cade, you are hereby relieved of your duties as a royal adviser.” I placed my hands on my hips. “You will be allowed to collect your things from the castle, but you are no longer a member of my court.”

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t mean that.”

“No, Cade, I do mean it. Your behavior over the last few weeks has been deplorable. I do not want someone like that representing my kingdom, and you admitted to destroying letters sent to your queen. That’s treason. Take your dismissal as a kindness.”



AFTER RETURNING to the castle with Zeke, we stood in John’s office and told him everything that had just happened with Cade. Godfrey would escort Cade back into the castle to collect his things, and then he would stay with his parents until we had more permanent lodging available. Or, maybe he would decide to take up residence in another kingdom.

John asked, “Do you want to replace him?”

I scratched my head while scrunching up my nose. “I don’t know. Do I need to? Can we make Grace an adviser?”

“Grace is busy trying to find more about the prophecy,” Zeke said. “I don’t think we need to add more to her plate now.”

“Plus, she’s young,” John said. “Smart, yes, but we need someone with experience in mingling with royals and knows

of policies.”

“Jeanine?”

Zeke shrugged as he looked at John. “She does have experience, and she pledged allegiance to Seolia. She’s a resident.”

John nodded but then looked at me. “She’s a bit hot-tempered. Is that a wise choice?”

I grinned, picking up a quill to sign the parchment detailing Cade’s dismissal from my court. “So am I. Jeanine is a leader, and she loves me, not in an ‘I’m-going-to-hide-letters-from-you-because-I-want-you’ type of way. She will be a great addition to our court.”

John took the parchment and added it to his ever-growing pile on his desk. “I will call her in later to make it official. I am sorry about Cade, Raven.”

Frowning, I shrugged a shoulder. If things hadn’t deteriorated so quickly between us for weeks, I would have been more upset about dismissing him. But in the back of my mind, I knew it was only a matter of time before something snapped. I was naive to believe that Cade could’ve ever accepted Zeke moving into the castle. “Maybe he’ll realize his choices were not the right ones after some time.”

Zeke kissed the top of my head. “Come on, my love. I will walk you to mother’s shoppe, and then I need to return to the armies. I’ll let Jeanine know to stop by later, John.”



HE HAD an arm draped around my shoulders, leading me toward Alice’s shoppe. I’d planned on helping her today since we were opening it up soon to the villagers. She had been in there day and night, sewing new dresses. I needed to plan a ball or banquet to give everyone a chance to show off their purchases. Maybe it would take our minds off the upcoming war.

“We haven’t spoken much about it,” Zeke said, kissing my temple. “But I’ve missed feeling you without her. She would drag you down so far into the gloom that I could not feel any of your emotions.”

“I missed it, too. I didn’t think I ever would but feeling everything is better than feeling nothing. And I’m not living in fear that she will take over.”

“Does make me wonder, though.” He sighed. “Where she went. If she’s still... out there.”

Frowning, I nodded. “I hope we never have to find out.”

Before he pulled open the door to Alice’s shoppe, he turned me until my back was against the wall. “Do you want to talk about Cade? Or do you want time to process it?”

I dragged a finger down his chest and hooked it into his waistband. “I... don’t know. There’s so much going on that I don’t know if I’ll have time to reconcile it truly.”

“You did the right thing. And I am not saying that as your husband or someone who truly loathes his entire existence.” He flashed me his charming smile. “I am saying that as a prince. You were in your right to dismiss someone who has spent the majority of your reign deceiving you.”

I sighed dramatically. “You want to hear the absolute worst part of it?”

He nodded, rubbing my arm gently.

“That I could’ve married Edmund. I mean, if Cade hadn’t burned his letter....”

“All right.” He pulled me up from the wall. “That’s enough talking, little demon.”

“Can you just imagine the two of us together?”

He pulled open the door. “Have I ever told you that you’re much prettier when you’re quiet?”

I gasped and smacked his stomach with the back of my hand. “Your son,” I said, looking at Alice. “He needs to be reprimanded.”

Alice looked up from her station, pausing her sewing. “Ezekiel, are you frustrating our queen?”

“Never,” he replied, pulling me to him again. “She’s positively mad about me, mother. It makes her say crazy things.”

I clicked my tongue. “And he’s a liar. Alice, I am beginning to wonder about the man you raised.”

He began tickling my sides as I tried to swat his hands away. Alice snapped her fingers at him. “Leave her alone and go away. I need her to model for me.”

He wrapped his arm around my chest and dipped down, kissing along my jaw. “I think I’d rather like to stay and watch.”

My cheeks reddened. “Don’t be inappropriate around your mother, please. We already gross everyone else out.”

“Go, son.” She shooed him with her hand. “I’ll bring her back to the castle this evening.”

“Only after she kisses me,” he argued, spinning me around to face him. “Madly, passionately.”

“Wildly, fervently?”

“Fiercely, my love.” Placing his hands on either side of my neck, he tilted my chin back with his thumbs and did just that — kissed me passionately and madly and fiercely.

And when he released me, it was enough to leave me breathless.

“We better stop now, or else mother might blush,” he said with a rotten grin.

“Leave now, or I will start detailing the times your father has kissed me.”

Zeke’s face twisted as he released me, backing away. “I’m going. Please spare me from such cruelty.” He winked at me. “This evening, you are mine.”

“I am always yours, you buffoon. Leave.”

Sighing, he turned and disappeared outside. I watched from the small window as he jogged down the path that led him around the mountain and was smiling as I turned around to face Alice again. “What do you need from me?”

She pointed toward a rack of dresses, never looking up from the one she was working on. My jaw dropped. There had to be at least fifteen. “You better start now, or he’ll break down my door come nightfall.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



RAVEN

I was pulling on my dress after finishing trying on the plethora of dresses from the rack. Some of them fit me, and some didn't, but she just needed to see the shape of each one. There had been one I wanted for myself, and she was letting me take it back to the castle.

Sliding my shoes on, I draped the dress over my arm and waited for her to finish. "Have you thought of a name for your shoppe yet? I use an artist for signage and can have one made for you."

Alice stood from her station and stretched her arms above her head. "Has Zeke not told you that he has already had a sign commissioned?"

I arched a brow. "No, he hasn't mentioned it."

"He was insistent that the sign has a dress of green and ivory painted on it, similar to the one you wore the night you wed. And the name will be 'Under the Stars Shoppe.'"

A slow smile spread across my mouth. *Marry me under the stars*, he had said. And sometimes, I wondered if I would turn into a star from how brightly I burned for him.

"Alice, the shoppe should represent you...."

She put a hand on my cheek, her eyes twinkling with nothing but admiration. "You represent me, my girl. You are

my daughter, giving my son something to dream about again. I am honored to showcase your love for one another.”

She dropped her hand from my cheek to grab mine. “Now, we better go, or there’s no telling what he might do.”

Laughing, I squeezed her hand as we left her shoppe and closed the door behind us.

I glanced over at her. “Did you know my mother well?”

She nodded once, holding my hand. “I did. She was kind. Quiet and not near as bubbly as you, but there was no evil in her. Not until...” Sighing, she looked at me. “Not until she became pregnant with you.”

“And River,” I added on quietly. “The change in her... it was while she was pregnant with us?”

Alice nodded in confirmation, and I stared straight ahead. “She suddenly became very... dreary and unwelcoming. It was out of character for her.”

Twins born of darkness.

We were halfway to the castle when she snapped her fingers. “I forgot to lock the door. You go on; I’ll walk back.”

I shook my head. “No, I can go. You continue to the castle. If you see Zeke, tell him I’ll be right there.” I traded her my dress for her key. “It’s fun to irritate him sometimes. And don’t let Jeanine steal my dress.”

Alice laughed and kissed my cheek. “Thank you. I am going to make John draw me a hot bath.”

“As you should. Men should always serve us,” I called over my shoulder as I began to jog back toward the shoppe. While it was amusing to irritate my husband, I had missed him and wanted to return to him quickly. We had become so busy dispelling demon spirits and fighting water that we’d hardly had time for one another.

I wanted to be alone with him more than I needed to take the next breath.

Locking the door to Alice's shoppe, I turned and began walking back toward the castle when I heard my name called. The owner from The Stag Shack was dragging someone outside, and I immediately sighed, wincing as he pushed Cade forward a few steps.

"He's bothering patrons. I need him escorted away from my establishment."

I looked around. No guards were nearby to escort Cade back to his father's cottage, leaving me the responsibility. I couldn't very well leave him to wander around the village drunk.

I hesitantly approached, and Cade slurred something that sounded like my name as he fell into me. "Cade," I groaned, hoisting him up to where he could stand and lean on me. "Let's get you home."

"Home," he repeated, laughing loudly. "You banished me from my home."

I didn't respond and slowly walked with him toward August's cottage. He turned his face into my hair and inhaled, whispering my name. I pulled my head away and shook my head. "Don't, Cade."

"You love me," he slurred, putting his arm around my shoulders. "You love me, Raven; why fight it?"

"I do love you." With my arm around his waist, I tried tugging on his shirt to straighten him up again. "But not in the way you want, Cade, and it's causing problems between us."

"Does he make you come as I did?"

Shuddering, I looked toward the castle in hopes that I could find a guard to take my spot. "Please stop talking about that."

He grabbed my wrist and brought it to his face like he was studying it. We were almost there. I just needed him to make it a few more steps. "We need to put these away."

"Put what away? My hands?"

Without answering, he pulled off of me and stuck my arm behind my back. “Dangerous.”

“Cade...” I tried to pull my hand from his, but he grabbed my other and pinned them behind my back. “Let me go, Cade.”

He leaned in to smell my hair again. “I miss you smelling like me. You smell... different.” Growling, he dragged his nose down my head until his mouth was against my ear. “Like him.”

“Cade.” I tried yanking my arms free, but his fingers tightened around my wrists. “Free me.”

“Raven,” he whispered, pressing his forehead against mine. “I love you.”

I could smell the alcohol on his breath and turned my head away, but he started backing me up until I was pressed against a cottage wall. “Don’t you want me, Raven? Can’t you feel how much I want you?”

I could feel how much he wanted me against my hip, making me panic. And I couldn’t panic if I wanted to take control. “Cade, please let me go. I need to get you home.”

I lit my hands and spread the fire to my wrists, causing him to shout obscenities and release me. I ducked out from underneath him and started running toward the castle, but he was behind me and overpowered me quickly, grabbing the skirt of my dress and pulling me toward him again.

His arms wrapped around me, keeping mine pinned to my sides as he dragged me backward. “Cade!” I shouted, bringing my elbow back against his stomach, but it did nothing to deter him. Tears sprung to my eyes as I fought against him. “Cade, please let me go!”

“I’m going to remind you how good it feels for you, Raven. Of how good we are.”

“Cade,” I screamed as he pushed me against a wall. “Cade, no! I’m saying no. I don’t want this!”

He took the fabric of my skirt between his hands and started ripping it from the bottom. “You do, Raven. I can remind you....”

I brought my knee up and into his stomach, shoving him off as he doubled over. Stumbling from behind the wall, I sprinted toward the castle, shouting Zeke’s name. He had to be close, he had to be...

I was pulled to the ground as Cade crawled over me, trying to kiss me. I lit my hands and put them anywhere I could against him, crawling out from underneath him only to have him pull me back down.

“Stop fighting me!” he shouted, grabbing my wrists.

My vision blurred from my tears as I fought him, screaming for anyone to hear me, to find us. And suddenly, his weight was gone, and all I saw was his body being dragged backward and away from me.

I sat up to my palms and tried to crawl away from him, jerking to the side as I felt someone from behind pulling me into their lap. “Raven, Raven, shh....”

Jeanine.

I curled into her; my sob mangled as it escaped. She held me against her, covering my eyes from what I knew was happening. I could hear Zeke yelling something as bone cracked, as guards came running down the road to pull him off of Cade.

Luca appeared at our side and picked me up, cradling me against his chest and walking away with me toward the castle. When I tried to look back, he nudged me forward with his shoulder. “Don’t, Raven.” He kissed the top of my head. “You don’t want to see.”



I WAS LYING in Luca’s lap, too fearful of falling asleep. It had been over an hour since they found me, but I had yet to see my husband or John. Jeanine was standing in the corner of the

room with Alice, reviewing what had happened. Alice had returned to the castle and into the warm bath she wanted, only to come out to this and blame herself for letting me return alone.

I wanted to tell her it was okay, that she couldn't have possibly known, but I hadn't found myself able to speak yet. All I did was stare at the door, waiting for my husband to find me. I needed to see that he was okay and wasn't also blaming himself for something that no one could've anticipated.

Because I didn't.

Cade had been annoying, and I could understand why he was angry. I had dismissed him after he had expected me to come home and choose him, but there was no excuse for what just happened. Even if I wasn't married, even if I weren't with Zeke, I said no. That should have been enough.

Luca wiped the tears falling from my eyes. He hadn't moved since bringing me into this room. Jeanine lit a fire, and Luca sat on the floor and kept me on his lap, brushing my hair with his fingertips or wiping my tears. Never prying, never asking what happened or how I was feeling.

He was just there for me, the way a brother should be.

When Jeanine disappeared into the hallway, I didn't move. Alice laid a blanket over me, covering my ripped dress. "Raven," she said softly. "Do you need anything?"

"Him," I whispered.

"Jeanine went to find out where he is." She sat down on the floor beside Luca and rubbed my arm. "I am so sorry, Raven. I shouldn't have left you."

"My kingdom is safe. This wouldn't have happened if Cade..." my voice broke as I trailed off, covering my face with my hands.

"Raven," Luca whispered, rubbing my head. "I'm here, Raven. You're safe."

But I didn't know if I'd ever feel safe again. Between this, River, Mira, and their new army... would I ever truly be safe?

Or was this just my life now? The only place I ever felt safe was in my husband's arms, but we both had jobs to do. I couldn't rule a kingdom from his lap.

Morana had tried to warn me. If I rid myself of her, she would ensure my remaining days were full of misery. Maybe this was just the beginning.

One of my guards appeared in the doorway, and Alice stood from her place beside me. She spoke lowly with him, but I still couldn't find the energy to move or lift my head from Luca's lap.

Alice turned toward us. "Raven, Zeke wants me to help you bathe. He'll be up soon but has requested Luca."

"Where is he?" I cried, rising from Luca's lap. "I want to see him. Where is he?"

She crouched in front of me and wiped the tears from my cheeks. "He's going to be here soon, but we need to clean you, and he doesn't want you alone."

Luca helped me to my feet and kissed my forehead. "I'll go talk to him, Raven. I'll tell him how much you want to see him." He looked at Alice. "Where is he?"

"The dungeon," she answered, holding me against her chest as I began crying again. "He's with your father in the dungeon."

CHAPTER FIFTY



ZEKE

I stood, leaning against the dungeon door, as I stared at Cade. He was in a cell — probably the first prisoner Seolia had seen in decades — his face bloodied from my fists. I should've done more. He should be dead. It took four guards to pull me off him, and he had already passed out. He didn't wake up until moments ago and did not seem surprised to be sitting behind bars.

Godfrey and two other guards were in here with me. Protocol, Godfrey had said, but we both knew it was to prevent me from finishing the job. And I would've. Give me ten minutes, I had tried to bargain, but he wouldn't. Unlike Reales, Seolia had a way of dealing with prisoners, and without direct orders from Raven, they couldn't leave me in here to do as I pleased.

Jeanine opened the door and nodded for me to follow her out. I looked at Godfrey. "He will not leave this cell," he swore.

And I believed him. He cared for Raven. I was sure it was almost as difficult for him not to seek vengeance as it was for me. He had protected Raven for years — kept her secret. He had seen Raven and Cade together and knew how much she trusted him.

Maybe if I offered to let him get in a couple of punches, he'd let me finish off Cade.

“Zeke,” Jeanine said.

Sighing, I looked again at Cade, who was dodging my stare. I wasn’t even sure he could still see after I had knocked him senseless. Not that he ever deserved to look upon her face again.

I followed Jeanine into the hallway and leaned against the wall. “How is she?”

“She hasn’t moved,” she said, looking down the hallway like she could see Raven. “She’s been in Luca’s lap for an hour, staring at the door. All she asks for is you.”

“I have to see this through, Jeanine. I cannot go to her until this is taken care of. I will not be able to look at her until I know she’s protected. I am her husband, and I wasn’t there. If I hadn’t found her....”

“Don’t, Zeke. Don’t do that to yourself. You were there. You found her in time.”

“I can’t keep living my life like this, Jeanine. I am in constant fear for my wife. If it’s not her magic trying to kill her, it’s her brother. If it’s not her brother, it’s Cade. If it’s not Cade, it’s this war.” I pushed off from the wall and ran a hand through my hair. “When is it going to stop?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “But it will, Zeke. We will find a way.”

“And this goddamn prophecy.” I rested on my palms against the wall, staring at the floor. “Twins born of darkness sent here for the rebirth of magic. Raven doesn’t think it’s about her and River, but who else could it be about? They were born of complete darkness — of death. Her thirst for blood? The control he has on his element? There’s no other explanation. They are the dark.” I quieted for a moment before looking at Jeanine. “I didn’t see River in Mira’s memories. I haven’t told Raven. None of it makes any sense.”

“Zeke, these are answers we’re not going to get tonight. Leave that part to Grace. Focus on this and then return to Raven.”

“I failed her, Jeanine.”

“Zeke.” She placed her hand on my back. “You did not fail her. If you failed her, she wouldn’t be waiting for you right now.”

I would not break. Not here. Raven needed me to be strong for her.

Straightening, I nodded and put my hand on the doorknob. “I need to finish this before I return to her.”

John and a man I didn’t recognize were standing in the dungeon, speaking with Godfrey. John looked at me and motioned toward the man. “Zeke, this is Cade’s father, August. He wants to take Cade home.”

“No,” I stated. “That’s not happening.”

August looked at me. From his stance alone, I could tell he had been a soldier. He was trying to appear intimidating but was failing miserably. “And who are you?”

“My son,” John answered. “And the Prince of Reales.”

He should’ve bowed to me but instead stared, unimpressed. “I’ve been a resident of Seolia longer than Raven has been alive. I served Leonidas. I was the one to who he entrusted his baby daughter....”

“Ah,” I interrupted. “The man who also knew who she was and neglected to tell her. The man who raised the scum in a cell right now, the scum who tried to rape Raven tonight.”

“He would never do something like that!” August shouted, taking a step toward me. “He loves Raven more than you realize and would never force upon her something she did not want.”

“Would you like to see her ripped dress? Do you want to hear about how he had her pinned to the ground? How he was trying to kiss her even as she screamed at him to stop?”

August scoffed. “I want to speak with Raven. She will tell me the truth.”

“You will not go near Raven. Neither one of you is ever allowed near her again.” I did what he was too cowardly to do and closed the space between us. “Here is what’s going to

happen. Cade should be dead. I would've killed him myself if not for the laws of this kingdom. I still might."

"But you will leave this kingdom," I continued. "You will take your son and never set foot in Seolia again. I don't give a fuck where you go. You will not receive anything from us to do so. I want all of you gone. Tonight."

I took a step closer until I could feel his breath. "And if you ever," — I spoke lowly — "Try to reenter this kingdom, you will be arrested on sight, and not only will I kill your son, I will see that you never see the outside of a cell." I looked at John. "Inform Edmund what has happened. He will not take kindly to someone trying to hurt his friend. In fact, Raven is beloved all over this realm, so if anyone hears of this, and I will make sure they do, you may not be welcomed anywhere."

Cade was brave enough to speak to me, his words slurred and garbled from the swelling on his face. "And what gives you the right?"

Chuckling, I stepped around his father and stood directly before him. He should be grateful for the bars between us.

Leaning in, I grinned. "I am her *fucking husband*."

He stumbled back a step. "You're lying."

"He's not," Jeanine said, standing beside me. "I was there the night they wed, as was John. We were all there to see them sign their marriage declaration."

Cade looked sick, and not from the multiple lacerations to his face.

"John, do whatever you need to make it official. I want them out of this kingdom and on a ship tonight."

"John," August said. "John, we've been friends for years. You're not going to actually...."

"August," John said. "That's my daughter-in-law in there, and Cade crossed a line. As of this moment, you are now banished from the kingdom of Seolia. You will be escorted to your cottage to retrieve your things and then put on a ship to sail... well, anywhere but here. If you return, you will be

arrested, and Zeke will be free to do with Cade what he wants. To be honest, I'm tired of giving him chances."

"You," I pointed to a guard next to Godfrey, "Fetch my brother. He's with Raven in the sitting room. Tell him to meet me down here. Godfrey, please escort August to his cottage to pack up what he needs. We will follow you to the docks to see them leave."

"Yes, sir," Godfrey said, sending his soldier out to find Luca.

His acknowledgment of me had August scoffing as Godfrey grabbed him by the arm to lead him outside. "I can walk there on my own, Godfrey. As someone who served beside me, this is highly disappointing."

"I serve my queen," Godfrey said. "And owe no allegiance to anyone who tries to harm her."

I watched as he led August back outside, highly satisfied with his answer. I turned back toward Cade, rolling my eyes as he glared at me. "It's over for you, Cade. Killing you would be my first choice, but it is just as satisfying to know that you are aware of just how much she belongs to me."

"Just because you are a pairing doesn't mean she's yours," Cade bit out.

"Fuck," Jeanine muttered from behind me. "You're still going to argue?"

"Not only is she my twin flame and my wife, but my mate. And if things were how they used to be before magic was abolished, no law could stand in my way of killing you. And I will work to have that re-established as quickly as possible."

Luca opened the door, calling my name.

"Watch him," I said to Jeanine, following Luca into the hallway. "I need you to pack Cade's things and meet me at the docks. He's being moved tonight."

"Raven really needs you," he said. "She's a mess, Zeke. Mom took her to help her bathe, but she's crying for you."

The guard who left to find Luca returned. “Queen Raven is in her chambers, sir.”

“Thank you. Stay with Cade. I need to check on her. Please inform my father not to move him until I return.” I wasn’t mentally prepared to see her yet, but I couldn’t keep her waiting for me. And if she was crying for me, I refused to make her wait until Cade was gone.



I INHALED a deep breath to steady my nerves and opened the door to our chambers. I could smell her pear-scented soap, but she wasn’t in the bathroom.

Peeking into our bedroom, I nearly fell apart.

She was curled into a ball on my mother’s lap. Alice brushed her fingers through Raven’s wet hair and hummed something soft to her. Raven’s eyes were closed, and I was hoping she had fallen asleep, but when she heard me enter, her eyes popped open, and tears started to fall.

I rushed to her side as she sat up and reached for me, crying my name in a scratchy, broken voice. I replaced my mother on the bed and pulled Raven into my lap. “Don’t go far,” I said to Alice.

“I’ll be in her office,” she replied, closing the door behind her.

“Baby,” I said softly. I felt sorrow and fear on every inch of her skin as she clung to me. “My love.”

“I feel like it’s my fault,” she whispered through her tears.

“Raven, no.” I shifted on the bed and pulled her up until she had to look at me. “Raven, you did nothing wrong. There is no excuse for what he did.”

“I thought I knew him. I thought... I never thought....”

“I know, Raven. I’m so sorry.”

“Where is he?”

I kissed her forehead. “In a cell. We’ve banished him and his family from Seolia. They are never allowed to return.”

This pure-hearted creature in my arms began crying again as she buried her face against my neck. I rubbed her back slowly and kissed the top of her head. “Raven, I hate to have to do this, but I must return to the dungeon. I have to be there to escort him to the ship.”

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Please don’t leave me again.”

“Baby, I’m not leaving you. I have to see him leave, Raven. I have to know that he can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Let me go with you.” She lifted her head from my neck. “Let me go. I want to see it, too.”

“Raven.” I shook my head. “Baby, I don’t want you near him.”

“I deserve that peace of mind, too. And I need...” she inhaled a shaky breath and wiped tears away with the back of her hand. “I need to see my friend leave.”

“I don’t want you speaking to him, Raven. If I take you, he can’t know you’re there.”

Nodding, she sat up. “I’ll shift and wear a hood, but I don’t want to be away from you again.”

I tucked some hair behind her ear. “May I kiss you?”

Her face crumpled as she pressed her forehead against mine. And her inhales were squeaky, her face covered in fresh tears. And I was hesitant as I gently took her chin between my fingers and kissed the tip of her nose. “Baby, it’s okay. I can just hold you.”

“I want you to kiss me,” she whispered. “I am just ashamed that someone else almost did.”

“Oh, my love. Do not ever feel ashamed around me. You are everything pure, Raven. Everything good.” I couldn’t hold back my tears any longer as I placed my hand against her heart. “You are such a light in this dark world, Raven. And I am so sorry that someone tried to take that from you.”

Our tears combined as she kissed me and held herself tightly against me. And I snaked my fingers into her hair and kept her pressed against me for as long as she allowed me.



AND WE STAYED like that until it was time to send him off.

She listened to my plea and stayed behind Godfrey, hidden from their view as Cade and his parents loaded onto a ship. Cade held my gaze the entire time, but I didn't move; I didn't look anywhere but at him leaving our island.

Raven didn't move until their ship was out of sight, and then she collapsed into my arms. I held her through the waves crashing against the docks, through the sun rising, cradling her against my chest as she finally fell asleep in my arms.

I stayed with her and only held her as she wept. For herself, for her friend.

And I made a silent vow to myself that the next person who touched her would suffer a death worse than the demons of hell had endured.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



RAVEN

*I*t had been nearly two weeks since Cade was banished from the island.

I had been at training with Zeke every single day — not because he asked me to be, but because I was fearful. I knew Cade was gone, but I didn't want to be alone. Word had slowly spread through the kingdom about what had happened, and though they didn't talk to me about it, John said everyone was shocked to hear that the man who had been by my side for so many years attempted to...

I didn't like thinking about it.

Jeanine had taken me down to the mossy land beneath the hill almost daily to continue working on controlling my elements. If I were ever to get in a situation like that again, I needed to be able to use my mind as a defense in case my hands became inoperable. I had gotten better but hadn't returned to the water. I wasn't fearful of River... or not *as* fearful, but I didn't feel ready yet to fight him.

Our nightly visits to Duck's had resumed. We needed some normalcy back. Arthur promised to be restocked with rum tonight. Zeke gave the armies a day off tomorrow so we could open Alice's shoppe, which had been delayed since that night.

Some good had come out of it, though. With the vacated cottage, we welcomed a new family into Seolia. It was a

family of six — two mothers and four children. I wasn't sure where they had come from. I didn't recognize the kingdom's name, but they wanted a change of scenery. They asked if there were any available shoppes because their dream was to open a bookstore. And since Seolia didn't have a bookshoppe, I promised to find them somewhere to live their dream.

As long as they didn't steal my librarian.

I kicked my foot back and forth against the ground and waited for our orders. I'd decided to train with the armies today instead of working with Jeanine. I had attempted to get to know some of Mira's soldiers, but our plan to bring them to our side was going much slower than anticipated.

Feeling left out, I jogged over to Zeke, and he reached for me, bringing me to him in a passionate kiss. "I wish you'd only wear this for me," he said, referencing my jumpsuit.

"You're the only one who gets to touch."

He growled into my ear, tightening his hold on me.

"Are we going to train, or will you three stand around and talk all day?"

Laughing, he turned back to the group and received nods of acknowledgment from Luca and Jeanine. "We've decided it's time to make Theo an official leader. Your men are getting stronger, and since we've deployed more men to stand at the castle gates, I need another handler."

I nodded with a small smile, disappointed that we needed guards at all, but we seemed to sleep better with the added protection. "Can I be the one to tell him?"

Zeke kissed my forehead before nodding.

Theodore waited patiently and smiled at me as I bounded over to him. "Theodore, because of your never-ending support of me and our army, we would like to extend an invite for you to be a leader — if you want to be, of course."

He extended his arms to me, and I walked into them. "Thank you. For everything."

“Anything for my queen,” he replied, squeezing me before he released me and walked over to stand with them.

While Luca and Jeanine spoke with him, Zeke beckoned me to him with a finger. I gave him a seductive grin as I sashayed back to him. “Oh, don’t do that,” he sighed, hanging his head. “I have to wait all day to have you.”

“We don’t have to do anything.”

He smiled, and as he was about to kiss me, Luca shouted right next to us to line-up. I jumped from the boom of his voice and shot him a glare while he winked at me. “Damn brothers,” I mumbled while I stomped off to take my place in line.

Turning around in my spot, I faced my commander.

“One-hundred squats!” Zeke shouted.

I groaned. I hated these. Every night he would tell me that they made my ass look good, but I didn’t care. It burned.

A *hmph* noise escaped me as I braided my hair quickly before extending my arms and starting. Zeke mouthed that he loved me, but I stuck my tongue out at him. He knew I couldn’t stand these.

I had to pause every so often because my thighs were biting. And then I’d resume and try to catch back up.

“One-hundred high jumps!” he called next.

These were actually kind of fun. I liked to see how high I could get.

“One-hundred push-ups!”

At that, I put my hands on my hips and arched a brow as he snickered. He was fucking with me.

Lowering to my knees slowly, I licked across my lips. His eyes narrowed on me.

Jeanine looked at him, waiting for him to begin, and I snorted while falling to my palms and lifting to my toes. I allowed myself to hate him a little as he started the count.

My arms nearly buckled as he called out the last one. Resting my forehead against the ground, I drew a deep breath, but he was jogging in place when I looked up.

Fuck, he was making us run.

I stood and rolled my neck, stretching my legs behind me as he called for us to follow him. I jogged up by Jeanine, and she rolled her eyes at me, also irritated by the overzealous warmup.

Giggling, we grabbed hands and swung them between us as we ran. Well, we didn't run. We chatted while walking briskly, falling to the back of the group.

"He's being particularly irritating today," she said.

I nodded in agreement. "Was he like this in Reales?"

"There's a reason men hated him."

Laughing, I looked up ahead. I could see the top of his head as we circled the mountainside.

"I think he's trying to impress you."

I scowled as my body ached. "This does not impress me." But then I thought about his sweaty body at the end of each workout and shrugged. "Okay, maybe a little."

Jeanine laughed but then nudged my arm. "How is your heart today?"

I gave her a slight shrug. "Each day is a little easier. How are you and Luca?"

She blushed. "We've been trying to see one another when we can. It's kind of great, actually. We've agreed to keep it casual, but to have... *fun*, in the meantime."

"Fun," I repeated with a laugh. "After this ends, we'll ensure you two get more time alone."

"If one of us doesn't die, that is."

Frowning, I looked at her. "No one is dying. You and I will grow old together and die happily in their arms."

She was quiet. Solemn.

“Jeanine, your best friend can heal. I’ve got you.”

Tugging me to her, she kissed my cheek.



WE HAD FALLEN WAY BEHIND, and they were already sparring when we returned to the group. Zeke was pacing as he waited for me, shaking his head once he spotted us.

“Whoops,” Jeanine said before jogging off to her group.

I put my fists up. He wouldn’t let me spar with anyone but him unless Jeanine begged.

He wrapped his hands around my wrists, leaned into me, and captured my mouth with his.

“My favorite kind of sparring,” I said.

He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it.

My eyes fell to his chiseled stomach. “Okay, this is actually my favorite kind.”

His grin was rotten as he planted his feet and raised his fists.

“You going to hit me, baby?”

Nodding, he took a step closer and went for my shoulder. I blocked it and returned it with a hit to his stomach. He mockingly gasped and tried for my ribs, which I also stopped and clocked him in the jaw. He moved it back and forth, smiling at me with prideful eyes.

I bounced a little on my toes. “Come on. You’re going easy on me.”

A sly grin. “I’ll be hard for you tonight.”

I pouted. “You’re not hard for me now?”

He straightened at my question and knocked my fists to the side. Digging his fingers into my waist, he pulled me to him and kissed me again. With his hips pushed against mine, I felt just how hard he was for me.

Luca asked from behind me, “Why don’t we all get this treatment?”

Laughing, I pulled away from my husband, but he dragged me back — most likely to cover his erection. “Marital obligations,” I sighed.

He pinched at my sides, and I yelped, shoving his hands away. “See how mean he is to me?”

“You’re going soft in your old age, Zeke,” Luca said.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing as I felt the opposite against my back. “He is,” I agreed. “It’s sad, really.”

He started to tickle me again.

“I feel partially responsible,” I managed to get out through my giggles.

When Jeanine jogged up, he squished me against him, covering himself on all sides. “Let me spar with her now,” Jeanine said.

I peered up at him, grinning as he shook his head wildly.

“Go spar with your annoying brother,” she said to Luca, shoving him toward Zeke.

Zeke pinched my sides so hard that my breathing was strained.

Clearing my throat, I tried to make my tone serious. “Can you give us five minutes? I need to talk to him about something kingdom-related. You two spar, and we’ll be right back.”

Jeanine rolled her eyes and punched Luca’s arm. He winced and shook it out but began playfully sparring with her. Zeke pulled me backward until we were far enough away from people that he could turn, walking into a valley. I laughed as I leaned against the mountain.

“I am happy you find this so amusing,” he said while caging me in. Leaning into me, he resumed our passionate kiss.

I turned my head. “We only have five minutes. It takes me that long to get this jumpsuit off.”

“I need this gone. I can’t go back there as hard as I am.” He took a small step back and looked me up and down. “Especially when you look like that.”

Hooking my finger into his waistband, I brought him back and slid my hand into his pants, wrapping my fingers around his length. I began to pump him slowly, but he grabbed my wrist. “I want to be buried inside of you.”

“You will be tonight. And I’ll be screaming for you.”

Groaning, he released my hand and thrust up once.

“I want to ride you, baby.”

Sighing into me, he rested one of his forearms against the mountain. I moved my hand quicker, squeezing up from his base. “I want your tongue licking everywhere, tasting me, sucking me.”

His breathing became jagged while his other hand slid over my ass, squeezing. I whimpered from the pressure, and he pulsed in my hand, always loving the sounds I made for him. Brushing my thumb across his tip, I grinned as he shuddered. “Say my name, Zeke.”

“Raven,” he whispered.

I brought his head down and kissed him. He pushed his tongue into my mouth, his hips bucking into my hand. He pulsed again, and as I bit down on his bottom lip, it sent him over.

He repeated my name over and over as he came, coating my hand. I didn’t stop until he was sated entirely, until I saw that satisfied grin on his mouth — the one I always brought out.

I pulled my hand out right as he kissed me again. At the threat of hardening again, he didn’t linger since we didn’t have time to lose ourselves. “Baby,” he breathed. “I love you.”

It felt more like praise than a genuine admission, and I clamored for it. “Love me tonight.”

“All night,” he confirmed. “You’re not sleeping at all.”

It took me a few days after *that* night to make love, but ever since then, we hadn’t been able to stop, just like before.

He was not only an addiction but my safe place.

Against our better judgment, he kissed me again, his hand cupping the back of my neck as he tilted my head back. Just as I felt his tongue start to slip in, our names were called.

He cursed as we turned our heads.

“If you two are done!” Jeanine shouted, putting her hands on her hips.

I laughed as Zeke sighed, grabbing my hand and interlocking our fingers. We followed her back, and he kissed my knuckles before letting me go, winking at me before finding Luca to spar.

“Raven,” Jeanine said. “I love the two of you.”

I smiled. Me too.



LATE AFTERNOON CAME upon us quickly. The groups had split, and I was with Jeanine, who wasn’t evil with her drill choices. I needed to go, but I was having fun watching her yell at everyone but me. I seemed to get extra special attention, but the men didn’t seem to mind.

Luca would find reasons to come talk to her every half hour or so. Watching them interact made me giddy. Jeanine, the most formidable woman I knew, would blush. She would become positively weak around him every time he smiled at her. And I understood that feeling well.

So well, in fact, that when my husband came to find me, I bit down on my lip while watching him walk to me.

Glorious, glorious, that body of his.

Sweat dripped off of him, his hair falling into his eyes and sticking to his neck. And that charming smile of his pinned to

me. “You’re leaving me, aren’t you?” Before I could answer, he grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me — delaying the inevitable of separating. “Stay. Everything is fine at the castle.”

“I know, but I’ve been here so often that I haven’t held an audience in nearly two weeks. I need to ensure everyone has what they need from me, but I’ll see you tonight at Duck’s. Time will fly by.”

Scoffing, he shook his head. “Time drags when we’re apart.”

He was entirely right. Time seemed to punish us each time we parted. “I need to eat dinner with your parents, and then I’m going to take a long, hot bath. You wore me out today, Commander.”

His eyes darkened, his gaze falling to my mouth. “I like when you call me that.”

“I’ll call you that tonight.” I pushed up to my toes to kiss him, and then we were surrounded.

“They’re so annoying,” he mumbled, turning me to rest against his chest.

Luca asked, “We’ll see you tonight?”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Arthur promised he would be restocked for us tonight. We can have a competition to see who can drink the most. *Without* vomiting.” I looked at Jeanine.

She grimaced. “I hadn’t eaten anything that day. It doesn’t count.”

“My shoes would beg to differ,” I argued. “I’ll have to return to Thoya to get new ones.”

Zeke whispered in my ear, “Right now?”

I grinned. I wished we could. I missed Edmund and Gisela and our manor. “I need to go. John keeps asking the cooks to serve salmon. I need to catch them beforehand and beg them not to. I’m salmoned out.”

Luca asked with a laugh, “*Salmoned* out?”

“Raven likes to make up her own language,” Zeke said.

I pouted, highly offended.

“I like it. We should say that when Zeke bugs us,” Jeanine replied.

I peered up at him. “You make me salmoned out.” He flicked my nose, and I shoved his hand away. “He’s so mean,” I whimpered and walked to Jeanine.

She wrapped me up in her arms. “She’s going to leave you for me. It’s only a matter of time.”

“I’d like to see her try,” he argued, glaring at me.

“No need to fight over me. Plenty to go around,” I said like I wasn’t the smallest one in the group.

Luca pulled me to him. “Me next, then.” He wrapped his arms around me, pinning me against his chest.

Zeke rested his hands on his hips, staring at us impatiently.

“You wouldn’t hurt your brother,” Luca said.

“Like hell,” Zeke responded, reaching for me and possessively holding me against him. He was done sharing. “Scatter, troublemakers. Go work.”

They groaned but waved to me as they departed. I smiled as I watched them return to their groups, and then he spun me around, locking his arms around my waist. “Are you going to leave me for Jeanine?”

I shrugged. “She’s a good kisser. Only time will tell.”

“Better than me?”

“No one does it like you,” I promised.

He kissed me again until my lips were raw from his passion—kissed me until I had to break for air.

“Stay,” he begged again. “I like seeing you here. I know you’re safe when you’re here.”

“I know, my love, but we agreed it was time for me to start walking alone again. Guards patrol often. I will be perfectly safe.”

“Let me walk you back for one more day.”

I smiled. “And then tomorrow, it’ll be another day. This is our home, Zeke. We can’t be fearful of it.”

Pressing his forehead against mine, he sighed. “I know. You’re right.”

“I promise to miss you every moment.”

“Every second,” he replied, kissing me again.

I had to be the one who gently pushed him away. “I’ll see you soon, my love.”

“I love you, little demon.”

I watched him walk away from me, and I stood still for a moment more, my eyes flickering between the three of them: my family, my protectors.

He noticed me staring with shimmering eyes and smiled. I mouthed to him that I loved him, and he returned it.

Turning away, I threw one last glance over my shoulder.

This was what happiness felt like.



AFTER ANOTHER DINNER OF SALMON, I was leisurely skimming my fingertips over the bubbles in my bath. I was sore, but it was a good sore. Learning how to fight and control my elements made me feel more protected. Cade was an isolated incident, but I still walked around with more awareness now, and I hated that I needed to.

Sinking into the tub, I scrubbed my hair. It was getting dark outside, and I needed to meet them at Duck’s. Zeke had been waiting for me at the gate every night, but we decided to be a little braver tonight and have him wait for me outside Duck’s instead.

It'd been over two weeks since someone in Reales sent us the letter. We shared it with Jeanine and Luca, agreeing that our best course of action was to continue with our plan. There wasn't much else we could do. I wasn't about to let one of them travel to Reales alone.

Standing from the tub, I pulled my plush robe on and padded to my wardrobe as water sloshed everywhere behind me. Since we planned on drinking copious amounts of alcohol tonight, comfort was important. I pulled on a pair of loose, soft black pants and one of Zeke's shirts, tying it at the waist.

Walking into my office as I braided my hair, I was sliding my boots on when I noticed a bottle of my favorite wine sitting on my desk. I bounced over and grabbed it, spinning and flicking the top off. It wouldn't hurt to get a head start on the rest of them. We were in a competition, after all.

I took a sip from the bottle as I hopped down the stairs, peering into the library as I passed by. Grace was sitting at one of the tables, pouring over an open book. "Go home, Gracey!"

She looked up from the table, smiling as she waved. "I want to finish this chapter. I am trying to learn more about the prophecy but haven't had any luck."

Sighing, I took another sip of wine. "We have a new family in town who wants to open a bookshoppe and came here with boxes full of books. Maybe they'll have something. I'll be in the village tomorrow to open Alice's shoppe and will ask them."

She nodded but didn't look up from the book.

"Grace, it's late. I don't want your mom to worry."

"I'm almost done. I'll be out in ten minutes, I promise!"

Nodding, I waved goodbye to her, though it was pointless. She was too focused on what she was reading.

"Mm," I hummed, flexing my fingers. There was a slight burning building in my fingers. For a moment, I worried Morana had somehow crept back in.

And as I took another sip while walking into the courtyard, I stumbled a step.

I'd only taken three sips. I had built up quite a tolerance to this wine and wouldn't feel like this after three sips.

Leaning against the doorway, I blinked and tried to refocus. The ground seemed to multiply, and the burning was spreading through my arm. "What..." I mumbled, shaking my head a little.

"It works fast, doesn't it?"

That voice.

Looking up, my head tilted as a blurry figure approached me from the shadows.

"And hard to detect through smell alone."

He came close enough to recognize. His hood was flipped up, his face still showing slight bruising around his eyes. "Cade," I murmured, trying to take a step back but staggering to the side.

Burning slowly spread through my chest. My entire body felt numb.

Dropping the bottle of wine to the ground, I tried running toward the gate, screeching as I came upon the bodies of two guards. "Nonono," I slurred, dropping to my knees beside them.

I put my hands against their throats but felt nothing. No pulse, no breathing.

"I guess it ended up being a good thing you made me train."

I could hardly hear him through the ringing in my ears.

"I picked up some invaluable lessons."

I tried to crawl through the gate. If I could just...

He grabbed my ankle and slowly dragged me back. "Where are you going?"

Tears sprang to my eyes as I tried to pull elements through the haze, but they were...

Paralyzed.

“Aconite,” I mumbled. “Witches.”

“Excellent, Raven.” He used the toe of his boot to roll me over to my back. “But I’m not going to kill you, Raven. I’m going to love you.”

“Cade.” I tried to shake my head, but the burning was spreading, and I couldn’t feel anything but that.

He leaned in, and I could see the unkind smile on his face through the terror, through the fear of never seeing my husband again. My love; his heart would break.

“It’s going to be okay, Raven. I’m going to fix this for us.”

“Cade...”

His fingers curled into a fist.

And it all went black.

BONUS



TURN THE PAGE FOR A BONUS CHAPTER FROM RIVER'S POV.

WATER AND FIRE



RIVER

I stared at Mira down the table in this dull, lifeless room where she always sat for meals. With my leg bent and ankle propped up on my knee, I would be considered too casual in any other kingdom while sitting in the seat meant for the Prince of Reales, but after acquainting myself with Mira over these past few weeks, it was evident that tradition and protocol did not matter to her.

A timid servant entered the room; her eyes widened as she looked around the table, colors draining from her cheeks as she locked eyes with the male sitting on my right, equally bored.

Dipping into a pitiful bow and thrusting her hand out toward Mira, Mira didn't look up from her plate as she took the letter from the servant's trembling hand before sending her scurrying out of the room with a flick of her wrist.

Upon opening and reading the letter, Mira sighed and reread it before setting the letter down on the table. "Raven has been taken by her former adviser — the one who came here seeking refuge with his family days ago."

I kept my expression calm, my eyes slowly shifting to Felix on my right as he asked, "And why would he do that?"

Before she could answer, the letter lifted from the table and floated in my direction but was grabbed by Silas on my

left. He read the letter before handing it to me, which I promptly set down without looking at it. “Where would he take her?”

It was apparent that Mira didn’t know the answer to that question as she refused to meet any of our gazes. Felix finally asked, “If she dies, our union will be severed. The price was your life....”

“Ezekiel will recover her,” Mira said hastily. “I am not worried about it in the slightest. He’s a hunter and will find her soon.”

Silas looked at me, unsurprisingly silent, as he exercised his talent of placing fear in those around him simply by his stare. “You will go to her.”

And me, equally unsurprised by his request, shrugged a shoulder. “I do not know where she is.”

Silas and Felix exchanged a look, and to those who didn’t know them well, it would appear as if it were emotionless. But for me, having dwelled in their kingdom for a lifetime, caught the unspoken. “And how am I to travel there? They will expect a ship. They will not understand how the letter arrived to me the same day I appeared.”

Silas seemed to consider before returning to his invisible mask of desperation. “You will think of something. “I did not travel this far and wait this long only for her to pass through another lifetime again.”

“The letter said she was poisoned,” Felix interjected, taking the letter and reading the passage aloud again. “He may not be able to feel her if she is incoherent.”

“Precisely,” I agreed. “I cannot wander through the time antre, hoping her elements beckon.”

Silas, running low on patience, again turned his attention to Mira. “Think, mortal. Where would he take her if this kingdom wasn’t a solution?”

“Thoya?” she answered unconvincingly, causing me to roll my eyes.

“Thoya isn’t an option,” I sighed.

“Perosan, then. It is the only kingdom in our realm that leads into the vast forests beyond.”

The vast forests beyond, indeed.

“Go to Perosan,” Silas demanded, ignoring the male walking into the room. “Find her. If she is found deceased, our union with this kingdom will break, and we’ll be free to do as we please.”

“My Lord, your feast is prepared,” Louis said, bowing at the waist.

Louis was a weak male, desperate to please the ones above him. I found him rather annoying, but Silas kept him around because he would drown himself if asked, and for his own amusement, he might request it one day.

Felix stood from his chair, never waiting a moment more than needed for his meal. “Let’s go, cousin. Leave the traveling to River.”

Silas held my gaze as he stood, straightening his formal jacket until it was free of wrinkles, baring his teeth enough to show me his apparent frustration at this wrench in his plan. “Find her.”

No verbal acknowledgment would mean anything, so I nodded once, waiting until he followed Silas out of the room before standing from my chair. “Your idea for realm domination should’ve stayed only that, Mira. An idea. Binding yourself to this union showed how truly weak-minded mortals are.”

Her newfound fear of us earned me her silence as I left the room, walking outside to the cathedral I had made my temporary quarters in. I was offered chambers in the castle, but it was unappealing. I preferred refuge away from the rest, which gave me space away from curious eyes while I tried to find my twin.

Most nights, I could quickly locate her since she seemed to dwell near the water often, but right now, there was only silence.

As I entered my tight quarters and lit candles, I was surprised to find that I wasn't alone.

Sitting on the end of my bed, staring back at me, was a face I hadn't looked upon in a very long time.

"River," she said. "We have a lot to talk about."

Closing the door behind me, I looked down the hall first to ensure we were alone. "Aunt Petra, I believe we do."

THE END

THE STORY CONTINUES IN THE NEXT INSTALLMENT OF 'THE
FOUR KINGDOMS' COMING MID-2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WHITNEY HAS BEEN AN AVID FANTASY READER SINCE SHE WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD. NEVER IN HER WILDEST DREAMS DID SHE BELIEVE SHE WOULD EVER PUBLISH A BOOK, OR CREATE AN ENTIRE NEW FANTASY WORLD FROM THE DEPTHS OF HER BRAIN.

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