

HONEY AND ICE TRILOGY BOOK 2

A THIRONE
FEATHERS
and
BONE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANNON MAYER
KELLY ST CLARE

HONEY AND ICE TRILOGY BOOK 2

A THIRONE
of
FEATHERS
and
BONE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANNON MAYER
KELLY ST CLARE

A THRONE OF FEATHERS AND BONE

HONEY AND ICE SERIES, BOOK 2

SHANNON MAYER
KELLY ST CLARE



CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Up Next!](#)

[About the Author](#)

© 2021 Shannon Mayer, Kelly St Clare

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, write to the publisher, at "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblances to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Hijinks Ink LTD

Box 512

Qualicum Beach, BC

V9K1Z7, CANADA

 Created with Vellum

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the readers who dug in and realized two authors really are better than one.

Happy reading!

Hooves thundered upon the soft ground of the enchanted forest, tearing through the spring flowers. The land kelpie's bellows and snorts obliterated any sounds of pursuit from the Seelie court, and—bizarrely—the only other sounds to reach my ears were the pounding of my heart and Faolan's occasional grunts and curses.

Rescued. I'd been rescued from death by drowning after being falsely accused of killing my father, the king.

I clung for dear life to the thick icicles on the kelpie's mane. Though Faolan and I were lodged between two of the three sets of wings on the creature's back, I wasn't eager to fall off and encounter any of its vicious tail barbs.

"Where are we going?" I threw over my shoulder. Unimak was a damn island—there was only so far we could run before we got stopped by the ocean.

Faolan's arm tightened over the belted sack garment I'd been dressed in for my execution. His voice was hoarse and low. "Across the river, Your Majesty."

Your Majesty. Yeah, right. Maybe for the one second between an arrow piercing King Aleksandr's throat as he claimed me as his heir and Adair screaming that I'd murdered him.

The sudden lurching of my stomach had nothing to do with the kelpie's frantic pace and everything to do with the fresh memory of blood spurting from my father's neck, but I pushed that aside. Surviving the day came first. Analyzing the shitstorm could be done later.

Twisting slightly, I peered back and blanched.

“Company?” Lan asked like we were discussing the weather.

I swallowed at the sight of what appeared to be the entirety of the king’s guard and most of the Elite bearing down on us. If we weren’t on a kelpie, there wasn’t any way we’d have busted free of the castle and made it so far.

Facing forward, I replied, “I don’t think they want to borrow a cup of sugar.”

Lan drew the kelpie alongside the dividing Danaan River, and whereas the sight of our ‘company’ hadn’t inspired defeat, the churning, white-tipped water made me seriously consider surrendering.

My mouth dried. “Maybe—”

“We’re going over,” Lan said shortly.

Shit. I licked my lips. “The narrowest part of the river is in the human portion—”

“We’re going over now.”

Lan shifted his weight to the right, and a scream lodged in my throat as the kelpie’s powerful hind legs bunched.

And then we were flying. My chest tightened as solid land was replaced by freezing, dark water—similar to the water Adair had just tried to drown me in—and then rocky ground.

The air whooshed from my lungs as the three-winged fae horse landed the jump, and I think my heart stalled out.

“You alive?” Faolan teased.

It took me a moment to answer. At this point, after weeks of being hunted and wrongfully accused of destroying Underhill and generally mistreated, I really couldn’t be sure. But his voice reached through my fear of water at least, and my heart stuttered to life once more.

I dragged in a breath. “Still kicking.”

For how much longer, I couldn’t say. We’d just crossed into the Unseelie court, Lan’s territory, and that could mean anything. The Seelie and Unseelie magically balanced each other—because they were diametrical opposites. Designed to remain beside one another through the ages without *ever* touching or mixing so the equilibrium of life and death could be maintained. On the Seelie side of the river, the trees had thick trunks and dense green foliage, all of it sparkling with glitter. Although the Unseelie had kept the glitter for the tourists’ benefit, the trees were wiry and gnarled, surrounded by thorned brambles. It really set the tone for a much darker court.

Harsher rules. Harder hearts. Colder morals.

Or so I'd been told—though the same could be said for some I'd encountered in the Seelie court too.

“Why exactly did you choose the Unseelie court as our escape route?” I ventured, sparing another glance back.

The king's guard had just reached the river's edge. They'd slowed, and I could imagine their dilemma. Should they cross and risk the Unseelie queen's wrath? That was the one-million-dollar question.

Did they even have the clearance to make that kind of decision? And if not, who was brave enough to give the order and take the rap from the queen consort, who'd be in full vengeance mode?

“Because it was the only place to go. Cinth's rescue mission was full of heart, but it had a few logistical problems.” Lan slowed the kelpie once we were out of sight, whispering soft words to the fae creature.

A grin widened my lips. “Cinth pulled that together?”

“Would you expect anything less? From what I know, word reached Rubezahl that you'd been claimed as a prisoner by the Seelie court. Cinth raised hell itself to come after you.”

“She had a plan to get away after, right?” The thought of her being taken twisted my guts up into a serious knot.

“She's safe,” Lan said. “Has a glamor covering her tracks.”

I closed my eyes, exhaling. Good. “Ruby was there too.”

“No. He sent some outcasts but didn't come himself.”

Huh. So that red crossbill on Bres's shoulder probably hadn't been an avatar after all. I'd had a strong inkling, but then again, I'd been on death's doorstep, my mind not working on all cylinders.

Opening my eyes again, I studied the thorny brambles that were slowing the kelpie's pace. The forest became more manicured the closer a person got to the Seelie court. Here, the wilderness pressed in on us in what seemed a clear warning not to proceed.

I rubbed my arm as a thin branch whipped across my bare skin. “How did Cinth rope you in then?”

“We . . . crossed paths,” he said stiffly. “I was watching over you.”

I blinked and clenched my jaw as blood flooded my cheeks. Color me forgetful, but between Daddy Dearest pushing aside his shame to name me as his heir and my stepmom trying to kill me, I'd forgotten Lan's part in all of this. “That's a nice way of saying you were following me on the Unseelie

queen's orders from the fucking start."

Was that why he'd kissed me? As a way to keep me close? That thought dug into me, and as much as I hated it, the stupid thing had merit.

The soft thud of the kelpie's steps altered to a clatter as we hit uneven cobblestones. I'd only ventured into the Unseelie court once, on a school trip I'd taken what seemed a lifetime ago. While our court was all about rank—those who had it and those who didn't—their queen didn't arrange her subjects in tiers. It was every Unseelie for themselves. They found a corner, and if they could fight to keep their corner, they got to stay.

Lan was silent at my back.

"What did you say to your friend again?" I said sarcastically. "The queen wanted me alive, right? Tell me, grandson of Lugh, how long have you known who I really am?"

He flinched at the reminder of his lineage. "I've known since the queen gave me her orders. She told me so that I would understand the gravity of keeping an eye on you."

He'd known all this damn time. His small acts of kindness made more sense now. The breakfast, the flirting, the kiss. To keep me close, he'd pushed away his natural tendency to think less of me.

Lovely.

I had no words, which for me was rare.

His grip on my waist tightened. "You know I took a binding oath to obey her orders. I have no choice in that, regardless of my own feelings."

My brows shot up, and I found my tongue. "And you went above and beyond, Lan. Really, you should be proud of yourself. I'll make sure to give you a fucking five-star review for your acting skills. They are impressive, if I do say so."

Because when we were trekking through the forest, he'd kissed me like no one else existed. I had foolishly started to believe that we were a team. In this mess together. That I could almost . . .

Almost trust him.

I pressed my lips together and plucked his arm from my body, straightening on the kelpie's back to put distance between us—distance I shouldn't have ever relinquished. Distance I wouldn't dare to relinquish again.

He started to say something, but I shook my head angrily. "Save it. Thank you for getting me out of the Seelie castle, but I'm worth more than the way

you've been treating me over the last few weeks—and not because of who my father is. Was.”

Fuck me and my stupid, girlhood crush on the bad boy with a heart.

Lan fell silent, and we rode up the east peak toward the castle. Moss bordered the dark stones, and at intervals I caught sight of small plants growing from between the bricks—which would have been comforting if the flowers weren't black and the berries weren't blood red.

I held back a shiver as we passed through the parapet. The guards glared at me before they shifted their distrusting gazes to the fae at my back and begrudgingly stood aside. The kelpie stopped before the iron-embedded castle doors, and I slid off of its back, hissing at the sting on my wrists as they caught at the horse's pale blue and white coat, leaving a smear of red. The Seelie guards' iron shackles had really done a number on me.

Drawing blue energy from the stones underfoot, I used it to fuel my indigo magic and numb the pain, thanking the stones for their aid afterward. A tiny trail of brilliantly green moss erupted around my feet, which only gained me more glares from the guards.

Whatever. They could suck it after the day I'd had.

Human servants pushed open the doors, eyes downcast, and Faolan strode ahead of me to enter Queen Elisavana's foreboding home. Unlike the golden brilliance of the foyer in the Seelie castle, we immediately entered a long and low-ceilinged guest hall, as freezing as it was uninviting. My footsteps echoing on the dark stone, I followed Lan down a corridor, trying to compose myself for her company—not easy to achieve when wearing a sack dress and covered with blood and scratches. My stomach rumbled loudly, adding to my discomfort.

Faolan paused outside a nondescript wooden door, shoulders tense. He shot me a look, just long enough for me to see the buried gem hue of his dark irises was more chaotic than ever before. “Orphan . . . “

“What?” I crossed my arms.

The door swung inward. A male queen's guard stood there, smirking. “We ain't got all day, Seelie. We're all eager to hear about your latest fuck-up.”

I frowned, glancing between him and Lan. But the guard wasn't joking around. They weren't friends, if Lan's white-lipped fury was any indicator.

Faolan stepped closer to the guard and peered into his eyes. “That would require you to move, soldier.”

“Seems like you have a problem then,” came the sneering reply.

Lan rested his hand on his sword. “Do I?”

The guard’s focus dropped to the hilt and his eyes flashed with something colder before he looked up again. He forced a smile. “Just playing around, Seelie. Queen Elisavana is eagerly awaiting an explanation for current events.”

That . . . didn’t bode well for me.

The guard stood aside, and as I passed, I met his gaze without flickering an eyelid. He was nothing compared to a skirmish with toddler giants and encounters with glittering, gray spirit people.

I’d expected a cold, barren meeting chamber, so I was surprised by the thick tapestries covering the walls and the warm fire filling the hearth halfway down the left wall. Another expectation dashed—the queen wasn’t perched on a throne but was instead standing before a table laden with food.

Faolan halted and swept into a low bow. “Your Majesty.”

“Rise, grandson of Lugh,” she said in a soft voice that sent a bolt of wariness up my spine. “And tell me why I just received a missive from Queen Consort Adair that is *almost* threatening.”

That got me. I’d fully expected Adair to weasel her way onto the throne herself. “Who is the new king?” I asked.

“Whatshisbucket,” she replied with a wave of one hand, her fingers trailing through the air. “Can never recall his name. Aleksandr’s younger brother. The confused and rotund one who doesn’t seem capable of hurting a mosquito army leeching him of necessary blood.”

Graphic. Accurate too.

My brow cleared. Of course. Uncle Josef would be next in line after me. I recalled the way he’d comforted Adair at my execution. I would have wondered if he’d planned my father’s assassination and my demise, except the queen was right—he didn’t seem to possess any killer instinct whatsoever.

“And you shall obey the proper etiquette when you address me.” The queen’s voice didn’t alter, but fresh wariness hit me.

I bowed in my sack dress. “My apologies, Your Majesty.”

Her cool, blue gaze finally settled on my face, only to immediately snap back to Faolan. “Why did you bring her here?”

He stood at ease. “I was following my orders.”

She snorted, popping a raspberry in her mouth with a delicate turn of her

wrist. “Indeed.”

“Did I misunderstand them, Your Majesty?”

“The better question is, did you understand them at all?” Her expression hardened. “I will confer with you this evening, grandson of Lugh.”

The dismissal was plain, although she hadn’t given *me* leave to go.

What had he gotten me into now? Another execution?

Faolan darted a look my way and opened his mouth but appeared to think better of objecting. Maybe it was my icy scowl?

The queen beckoned me toward the fire, and I turned from Lan to join her. As we sat, the door closed; a quick check confirmed we were alone but for the sneering guard at the far end of the room.

“Kallik of House Royal,” the queen said after arranging her dark-gray, chiffon gown so it hung in regal folds. “You bring many troubles with you.”

I nodded. “Did the king’s guard cross the river, Your Majesty?” Did I need to say ‘Your Majesty’ each time? Better safe than sorry.

She smiled, and it contained not a single ounce of warmth. With Adair, the expression might have been simpering. With this woman, I was left convinced of her capability to kill me with a snap of her fingers.

So that was comforting.

“They would not dare,” she answered. “Not yet.”

I tilted my head in question.

She lifted a shoulder. “There is not much the Seelie court would risk roiling us over. The death of their king is one such thing. Adair wants your blood, Kallik. She could be willing to spill the blood of my subjects to get to you. Even if she starts a war in the process.”

“I didn’t kill the king,” I interrupted her.

Her brows arched ever so slightly. “No? And am I also meant to believe that you had no part in the demise of Underhill?”

Okay. I might have reached my threshold, and my brows flicked downward as my own ire surged. “Do you refer to Fake Underhill or the real one?” I matched her smile.

Only hers grew wider. She stared into the fire. “I imagine it’s hard to shoot an arrow from directly next to a person, especially without carrying a bow.”

No kidding. Therein lay the gigantic hole in Adair’s accusation. Except no one had dared to question her story. “Also hard to achieve an entry wound of any kind through the front of someone’s throat when you’re standing

directly beside them.”

Her hands trembled slightly, but her face lacked any emotion when she returned her attention to me. “The issue, young fae, is that your fate hinges not on the truth but on what the Seelie *believe*. In other words, what is correct and true might not matter. Adair does not yet possess the courage to openly accuse me of aiding you. Instead, she links you to the outcasts in the Triangle. In time, however, she may gain enough momentum to cast blame on my court too. Why would I grant refuge to King Aleksandr’s murderer, she may remark, if I did not order his execution in hopes of taking over the Seelie court?”

I released a quiet breath.

Goddess of the above and below, she was right. If I stayed here, the already strained relationship between the courts would further sour, perhaps beyond repair. Unseelie and Seelie had warred on and off throughout the ages. Given Underhill had been sealed shut for much longer than most people knew, it was already a precarious time for the fae. The danger of madness hung heavy in the air, the result of a fae going too long without setting foot inside our native land. Already, I’d encountered a group of young giants and a stray who would’ve lost themselves to madness if not for Rubezahl’s intervention. As things stood . . . I wasn’t entirely sure insanity hadn’t crept up on *me*. Not after what I’d done to that Unseelie after kissing Faolan. I forced back a shiver. “You can’t grant me refuge.”

“What I would suggest,” she said carefully, “is that you take time here to recover and consider your position. There is always a path forward that takes us toward what we want.” Her cool eyes gleamed. “Is there a path you should be on?”

The queen’s tone quickened my pulse. Was she speaking of the door to the true Underhill? The one the spirits had led me to? I’d come so frustratingly close to opening it . . .

I’d left Unimak hoping to clear my name. To prove, once and for all, that I had not destroyed the entrance to Underhill. I’d failed in that—Adair had convinced the Seelie court of my guilt—but I’d also uncovered a much larger issue. The true fae realm had been closed to us for a very long time, and many lives depended on its restoration.

My life. Cinth’s life. The lives of Ruby and Drake and the other outcasts. Human lives. Even the lives of the fae who hated me.

I didn’t say any of that to the queen, however. She knew far more than

she was letting on—something I'd gathered from information Lan had once imparted to me—but Trust wasn't my middle name.

At all.

“Take some time,” the queen repeated, rising. “Adair will not make a move on behalf of King Whatshisbucket just yet.”

I hurried to stand, too, certain the orphanage matron had yammered on about that in her etiquette lessons. “Okay. Thank you, Queen Elisavana. I appreciate it.”

Her gaze dropped to my torn and burned wrists, and a shadow darkened her eyes, gone the next second. “Do not thank me just yet, Kallik of House Royal.”

I hovered, uncertain how to interpret her words. What did that mean? Was she going to chuck me over the parapet after all?

She tipped her head toward the door. “Go. Eat. Bathe. Sleep.” As I turned to leave, she added, “And perhaps take a moment to ponder that you had no part in the king's death.”

Well, that was kind of hard to forget. I looked back at the dark-haired and coldly beautiful queen.

She regarded me solemnly. “In other words, someone else did, and perhaps you know who that person is.”

The Unseelie queen's words reverberated in my skull as I followed the human servant down a long, carpeted hall that led deeper into the castle. Did I subconsciously know who'd killed my father? Was that what Elisavana had meant?

My frown felt etched into my face, and the human servant—a young woman with deep brown eyes and matching hair—squeaked as she paused in front of a closed door and looked up at me. “This is your assigned room. There is a bath drawn for you and someone will be along with fresh garments. If you need help dressing—”

I held up a hand and smoothed my features. “Sorry, it's been a rough couple of days. I'm good at dressing myself.”

Her smile was fleeting as she curtsied and backed away.

“Wait.”

She froze.

“I'm starving, can I get something to eat?”

I'd have laughed at the relief on her face if I didn't so clearly understand what it meant. She was used to being treated like shit. “Of course. Of course.”

With that, she turned and bolted from my presence.

“Thanks!” I called and let myself into the room.

There were no lights on, and I fumbled to find a connection to something I could draw heat from, something to create a flame.

Looking at the room through the lens of my magic, I could see there was the slightest flicker of banked fire in the embers in the large fireplace directly

across from me. Making my way over to the stone structure, I pulled the red threads of the element forward and fanned the flames, physically blowing on them until they caught at the coals. Sometimes, the solution wasn't purely a magical one—something full-blooded fae tended to forget.

Throwing on a few pieces of wood from the stack beside me, I soon had the fire raging and casting not only light, but a steady, soak-you-to-the-bone heat. I sighed. *That's better.*

Turning, I scanned the room.

The bedding was a deep burgundy, the covers and curtains hanging off the posters made of heavy velvet. The floor was a rich mahogany, as was the remaining furniture—a table, set of chairs, and a writing desk—but all other details faded as I stared at what was set in the center of the room.

A massive tub that could easily hold four people. Sunk into the floor. I could've killed myself falling into it while crossing the room, but I was willing to forgive it for the near miss. Steam curled off the top of the water, condensation coating the hammered copper edge. By the smell of lavender and eucalyptus, someone had filled the water with herbs that would help my injuries.

With a groan, I undressed. Every move pulled on my multitude of cuts and scabs, and I grimaced more than once, slowing my movements until I was finally naked.

I had no weapons to speak of, they'd all been taken from me, and that—more than the lack of clothing—left me feeling . . . exposed. Circling the room, I found a letter opener on the desk with a sharp point, along with a fork that had been left behind at some point.

Not exactly high-impact weapons, but I'd take them.

Perching at the edge of the tub first, I slid in, the water drawing a hiss from my lips. The heat was just this side of too much, but I sunk in all the way to my chest, then leaned back with a weary sigh.

Fuck. What a . . . day? Week? Month?

I was weary beyond comprehension.

There was a bench under the water, and I laid my letter opener down on one side and my lethal fork on the other. Maybe I'd dub my fork Prongs of Death. That'd have my enemies fleeing in terror.

My eyelids drifted closed, and I considered the queen's words—again. Maybe she hadn't been implying I already knew who'd killed my father. Maybe she just believed I could figure it out.

Who would *benefit* from my father being dead?

The obvious answer was his heir—me. But since I knew I hadn't done it .

..

Hmm, Adair would have been my number one suspect, but she hadn't actually gained the throne. Uncle Josef was next in line after me. Of course, if Adair had ever produced a sibling for me, that sibling would have been ahead of me—the legitimate heir over the bastard mutt—but she hadn't. As far as I knew, there weren't even any distant cousins in the Irish courts or the courts in Louisiana, where Drake was from, who could make a competing bid for the throne.

Unless King Aleksandr had other enemies I was unaware of, there really wasn't much more to the potential assassins list. Despite my rocky relationship with my father, he'd been well loved by the Seelie.

I circled back to Adair and Josef, recalling the sight of his hand on her back. The soft touch she'd given him at the ball.

Gentle. *Intimate* even.

“Fuck. They're banging!” My eyes popped open with that sudden and illuminating realization . . . and I found myself staring into the golden eyes of someone dressed in black. They were crouched at the other edge of the tub, a short dagger in hand.

There was no time to think.

I lunged forward, letter opener in my right hand as I grabbed the intruder with my left hand and dragged him into the water. Three short sharp stabs with the letter opener into the side of his neck and he went limp, face down, the water bubbling as his last breath escaped him.

I scrambled away, snatching up my fork as I exited the pinkish water, causing it to slosh across the stone floor. I put my back to the fireplace. Adrenaline jamming through my veins, I stared around the room, waiting for another would-be-assassin.

That was an actual assassin. Someone had tried to *kill* me. Maybe I shouldn't be shocked after recent events, but somehow a direct murder attempt by a stranger felt different than engaging in a battle or duel. Different, even, than my almost execution.

The door to the room opened, and the human servant slipped in. “My lady, I have a spread of—” Her eyes landed on me, then skirted to the tub where my visitor bobbed face down. “Oh.”

“Go get Faolan,” I rasped.

But there was no need. He stepped in right behind her.

He took in the scene in with a quick look, pausing longer on my very naked body than the *actual* body in the bath, then touched the servant on the shoulder. “Fetch General Stryk.”

I didn’t move from my position in front of the fire, though the urge to cover up was definitely there. Nudity wasn’t something I was much fussed about, but with Faolan . . . those heart wounds were still seeping despite my desire to seal them.

I crossed my arms.

“Is that a fork?” he asked, slowly stripping out of his shirt.

My mouth dried, and my traitorous anger found other places to be. Because I was naked, and he was walking toward me as he peeled off his clothes. Was I breathing faster? Of course I was. But that was fear. The aftereffects of adrenaline.

And, dammit, a bit of lust too.

He stopped at arm’s reach and held out his shirt. “You’re going to want to put this on until new clothes arrive.”

I didn’t like how my hand shook as I took his shirt and yanked it over my head. It caught on the tines of Prongs of Death, but I refused to drop my one protection. “Yes, it’s a fork. I dropped the letter opener in the tub.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You killed him with a letter opener.”

“Look, it was all I had,” I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest again. His shirt barely reached the top of my thighs. I was covered—but if anything, the scant garment made the tension worse.

A clattering of weapons and armor announced the arrival of the general, who had closely shorn gray hair and burgundy eyes that nicely matched the décor in here. He strode into the room, circling the tub. With a flick of his hand, his magic, also burgundy, curled around his arm and shot forward to lift the assassin out.

The water in the tub froze as he used its heat to power his Unseelie magic. With another flick of his hand, he rolled the assassin over and yanked off the face covering.

“Seelie *scum*,” he growled, then glanced at me. Hard lines and a scar on either side of his face marked him as a warrior. “You killed him?”

“With a letter opener,” Faolan said, and was there a hint of pride in his voice? Which, what the hell? *He* hadn’t taught me how to fight. That honor went to Bres, who’d walked me to my execution.

The general's eyes gleamed. "A letter opener." He returned to the body and inspected the neck. "Excellent blows. Your secondary weapon?"

I swallowed hard. *Prongs of Death*. "A fork."

He froze, and then his shoulders began to shake. "A fucking fork? Goddess be damned if she makes me like you, Seelie mutt."

Okay? I wasn't sure what to make of this man.

He surveyed me again. "So. You'll kill the Seelie who come for you?"

A slow nod was all I could manage. "Survival is my goal."

He grinned, and the gesture softened the hard lines etched in his face. "Excellent."

Maybe I could like him too. He reminded me of Bres, although hopefully he wouldn't try walking me to my death too. He turned to the two guards at the door who'd come with him. They wore the black leather uniform with the red crescent moon embroidered over their hearts. "Every castle guard on duty or off will report to the barracks for ten lashes over the next four hours."

They saluted him while my jaw dropped. "Is that necessary?"

General Stryk shot me a look. "This"—he pointed to the assassin's limp body—"is unacceptable. While I don't give Balor's left nut if *you* die, this assassin could have just as easily come for our queen. The men are sloppy." His eyes swept over Faolan. "Twenty lashes for you, grandson of Lugh."

Faolan delivered a sharp salute. "Yes, sir."

The general smiled again, and I no longer thought we'd get on. That decision was brutal and just what I'd have expected of the Unseelie.

"Right now," he said pleasantly. "Seeing as your shirt is already off."

Faolan's jaw tightened, but he nodded and placed his hands on the stone wall beside the fireplace. Behind us, the serving girl squeaked and darted from the room, slamming the door after her.

I positioned myself between Lan and the general, clutching my fork. "He wasn't even in here. And the queen—"

"Do not defend him, Seelie. His job was to watch over you and keep you safe. Instead, he let an assassin *into your room*." General Stryk flicked a hand at me, his magic wrapping me up like a snake—gently, I'd give him that. He set me on the bed, my knees beneath me, and I found myself facing Lan's bare, tensed back.

I struggled against the magic holding me but couldn't budge it.

The general uncurled a long leather lash from his side. The glints in it told me everything I needed to know. Like the ropes that had bound me recently,

iron filament was woven through the material.

My magic curled upward on pure instinct, but it hovered uselessly, waiting for directions I had no idea how to give.

The general swung, and the first lash landed across Lan's bare back. He didn't even flinch.

"Stop it," I snapped, injecting power into my words. The general ignored me, and fury seeped through my very bones.

"Don't," Lan gritted out. "Just don't, Orphan."

Another lash, and another, until the skin on his back relented and splayed open, blood running freely from the wounds.

I didn't care that he'd hurt my heart, this was . . . this was *worse*. Because I knew it wasn't just, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. My magic surged again, dark indigo swirls clustering around me, whispering, urging me to put them to use, and I fought to push them against the general's burgundy hold.

He didn't so much as look at me. Instead, adjusting his stance, he took a breath after ten lashes before raising his arm again.

My magic swirled and bumped against the earthy red of the general's magic. Bumped, and then . . . *forced* its way inside it. I gasped and blinked at the burgundy surrounding my indigo magic.

Finally, the general paused and glanced over at me. "What are you doing?"

I didn't know, but was I going to tell him that? Nope. Operating on instinct still, I shoved my magic into his, hoping it would maybe pop it like a balloon. Truthfully, I had no idea what it would do. Maybe it would give him *more* power.

My magic curled away from his burgundy and disappeared.

Great.

That . . . wasn't useful in the slightest, goddess be damned indeed.

The lashes resumed, and as they fell, I couldn't stop the tear that escaped. I counted them in my head, my tears *and* the lashes. One for one.

"Take her to the suite next to Queen Elisavana's," the general said in that same pleasant tone. "You will stay with this one—" he jabbed a finger my way as he let the magic holding me captive disperse. "You're to be at her side every hour of the night and day until further notice, or I will be *sure* to teach you exactly where you stand in our court."

Faolan turned and saluted the general, though there was some stiffness to

the movement. "Yes, sir."

I lay staring at the ceiling of the chambers next to the Unseelie queen's royal abode. As if proximity to her wasn't uncomfortable enough, the guy I was angry at but also felt acutely protective of lay next to me.

Twenty lashes sustained, yet he was supposed to remain alert. Yeah, no skin-numbing poultice or willow bark tea for Faolan, but at least I'd convinced him to rest on his stomach on the bed instead of maintaining a grimacing vigil by the door.

A mistake, in hindsight.

My body felt alight with awareness. Tension. I didn't know if rolling away from him or closing the distance was the solution. I inhaled through my nose, ramrod straight, arms and legs locked in one line.

"Go to sleep," Faolan muttered.

"Can't," I muttered.

The bed dipped, and I stiffened. Had he just moved closer? Or farther away? My heart hammered.

His voice held the edge of agony but was otherwise low. "And why's that, Your Majesty?"

"One, stop calling me that. Two—" I grabbed for a lie, "—because the practices here are barbaric."

"In your very biased Seelie opinion."

I rolled to face him, though I couldn't make out anything other than his silhouette in the dark. "How is that not *your* opinion? They treat you like an outsider."

He was quiet.

Lan was the grandson of a Seelie hero. The high-status Seelie hated him for it, but to have no escape from it even here . . . “What was it like to be sorted to this court?”

He exhaled. “We both know the Seelie have a tendency to think themselves above everyone. And those who get treated as inferior love nothing more than to see the high and mighty fall.” He rubbed a hand over his head.

Seelie did carry that vice of pride, there was no doubt. But . . . “You never thought yourself above anyone.”

“Perhaps not. But I’m the grandson of Lugh, haven’t you heard?” he said, and I noted the bitter undercurrent. “They expect much of me, and I cannot live up to my grandfather’s legacy.”

I doubted anyone could.

I wriggled to get comfortable—I’d needed another solid hour in that bath to fully soak away my various aches and pains. I tucked my hands under my head. “I wouldn’t have thought it got to you. You never seem bothered by anything.”

A beat passed. “Being here . . . the good and the bad are balanced for the most part.” He sighed, shifting again.

I tensed, a bolt of electricity shooting through me as his knee brushed my thigh. Not breathing, I slid my leg back an inch. “Oh?” I asked breathlessly. *Dammit, Kallik. Get it together.*

“I no longer need to live a lie.” His voice had deepened. That wasn’t my imagination.

“What was the lie?” I murmured, frowning at the throatiness of my voice.

My leg was touching his again. And this time, it remained.

Something within me relaxed as if the heat from the bath was soaking into my weary muscles and bruised joints again. We leaned closer at the same time, and as his darkness extended toward me, I felt my magic accept the invitation to engage in the forbidden dance.

His voice held a languid quality that reflected the warmth suffusing my body. “The lie was pretending I didn’t know my magic was Unseelie. Death followed me and hiding it had become difficult.”

He’d known prior to the sorting? “When did you figure it out?”

“My mother hid it for years, covering the effects of my magic use. I discovered the truth at sixteen.”

That was when he’d stopped visiting me as much. “She tried to protect

you.”

My magic began to wind around his, and as if disliking the gradual, tentative unfurling, his magic lunged forward to ensnare it.

He scoffed. “Protect me? No.”

It took me a second to understand that the anger and betrayal pushing at my mind and heart weren’t my own. I gasped as a hidden door opened between us, and I stepped into a foreign memory.

The person in front of me beamed as she returned to her family on the west side of the river, a sorted Seelie.

It was one of the rare occasions that Unseelie and Seelie met in the same space. A wide bridge traversed the dividing river, and the darker court watched from the east side, only stirring from their chilling silence when one of their own was confirmed Unseelie.

Their queen stepped back as King Aleksandr faced me, his expression as foreboding and grave as always. “Grandson of Lugh. Step forward.”

This was it.

Even knowing what would happen, I’d attached myself to the back of the long line of sixteen-year-old fae waiting to be sorted into a court. As if doing that could stop the inevitable. As though it might hide the truth about my magic.

I hated it.

The idea of draining life to fuel my fae abilities had filled me with repulsion since the day I snuck out of the castle, used magic to climb a difficult tree, and watched a nest of baby birds die to pay the price.

How could my lineage have forsaken me? I was meant to be Seelie.

At the same time, I knew it wasn’t my fault, as such. It wasn’t even my parents’ fault—though I’d blamed them in those first years after discovering the truth. But it did mean there was something wrong with me.

It meant I was unworthy.

I glanced to the left and found my parents and relations as cold and staunch as ever at the centermost and closest table. My father had married into the line, though a person wouldn’t know it from the stick he liked to keep lodged up his ass. My mother was Lugh’s daughter, and my bitter gaze roamed over the heirloom of his that she carried in a sheath at her back—the fiery spear of Lugh.

It would never be mine.

The coming moments would ensure that.

Her clear, blue gaze met mine for a brief moment before she turned her attention to the king.

I stood and approached the king and the hunched woman beside him.

The Oracle.

She wore a hood so deep it was impossible to see her features, though there was a running dare between the other fae my age for someone to pull back her cloak so we could take a look. The skin of her hand was weathered and carried the brown spots of age. Otherwise, I only caught a glimpse of a limp strand of gray hair before I dropped to my knees and bowed my head.

“The grandson of Lugh does not look at the ground,” the Oracle said.

The king glanced at her, then back at me.

I tilted my chin and stared at her offered hand. Shifting to look past her, I took in the hostile crowd of Unseelie. Brutal. Unrefined. Callous. Cold. I’d heard the stories about them, same as all the Seelie did. And their ice queen did nothing to assuage their dark reputation.

I wasn’t one of them, and yet I was.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I focused on ‘good’ thoughts—my love of nature. The sound of laughing children. The soft chirping of birds at dawn.

Her long, beautiful hair.

Maybe. Just maybe. I was wrong.

Because I wanted to protect those things. I didn’t want to destroy them. If someone helped me, perhaps I could stop that from happening.

Opening my eyes, I took the Oracle’s hand, eyes widening at the strength of her grip.

She flipped my hand, and I noticed the wicked-looking dagger in her other hand. She sliced a shallow cut on my forearm and pressed the tip in until my blood trickled down the blade. Not releasing my hand, she studied the blood. The dagger entered her hood, and I wrinkled my nose, assuming she was tasting it.

The Oracle lowered the blade, and I looked to where her eyes might be—if she even had eyes—but was only met with pitch black.

The king was close, but I couldn’t help the single word that crossed my lips, barely intelligible. “Please.”

She dropped my hand and clicked her fingers. I’d seen it happen to the others, but it was like being punched in the stomach without warning. I doubled over as my dark magic poured out for all to see.

It always elicited murmurs—such dark magic wasn’t usual for a Seelie,

but the assumption had always been that it was a very dark blue—a cool-toned Seelie magic.

No.

The Oracle's dagger had disappeared as she wove my magic, stretched it thin and directed it to the light, so all could see the shameful truth.

A ruby hue one sliver lighter than ink, like the blood of a foul creature.

She stretched it as thin as a membrane, holding it aloft as the murmurs of awe turned to gasps of shock. To cruel laughter. To hissed whispers.

I didn't look at my mother.

Because she sure as hell wouldn't look back. Wouldn't stand beside me. I knew that as fact, seeing as she'd told me as much last week.

I was on my own. My family had a reputation to uphold. Seelie fae believed in her—in the power of Lugh.

And they wouldn't ever believe in me.

With a lazy wave, the Oracle banished my magic at last. But the damage was done, and I could only berate myself for feeling a split second of hope.

King Aleksandr's face had hardened, but he stepped back and Queen Elisavana took his place beside the Oracle as the old, hunched woman boomed the word that would lock the shackles around my wrists and ankles.

"Unseelie."

I was shoved so hard from Lan's memory that I windmilled my arms, certain I'd fall off of the bed, even though my body hadn't moved. I still lay next to him, touching.

My panting breaths were a sore reminder of my half-human status, but I couldn't help but give in to the unnecessary instinct as I stared at the silent man who lay next to me.

"Lan," I croaked. *Goddess.* What a horrible memory.

He opened his mouth, but a choked grunt was all that left him. Magic rammed into me, and I cried out as his ruby darkness battered at my mind, coating my indigo, searing my blood.

And I reached for him.

Taking his face in my hands, I pressed against any part of him available to me. A tiny voice in my head whispered that this was forbidden, but it was drowned out by the sheer *power* of whatever pulled me into Faolan.

We'd been raised with the knowledge that if a Seelie and Unseelie gave in to passion, one of them would die. The toll of their dueling magics would demand that the weaker wouldn't survive. I may not know if that was what

had caused my violent reaction after touching Lan in the past or whether someone was actually possessing me.

But my verdict was the same.

I wanted to be consumed.

To close my eyes and embrace whatever this was.

This—

His mouth crushed against mine, and I shoved back with a force that would leave us both bruised. It wasn't enough.

Not nearly.

There was something untapped between us, a deeper connection and strength, and I was so close to finding it. I just had to meld to him a little harder.

A booming knock sounded, and although Lan didn't pull away at first, he did jolt and then groan in pain from his wounds.

And I didn't care. I couldn't care. I had to get closer.

More.

The knock came again. Shouts along with it.

"This—" Lan said with difficulty. With an angry growl, he tore away and rolled to sitting.

Fury the likes of which I'd only felt once before filled me to the brink.

With a glance my way, Lan stood and walked stiffly to the door, already reaching for his dagger.

Red blanketed my mind, and I was in a crouch before processing that I'd moved. Like the assassin, I moved, sliding off the bed into the shadows. *Kill.*

Someone had interrupted the magic between us, and they had to die.

My thoughts clamored as I drew the only weapon available to me. The man I'd just kissed was talking to another, taking clothing from the person. I couldn't kill the one I'd kissed, but I *would* annihilate the creature who'd stopped that kiss. I'd tear the person limb from limb. I'd feast on their bones and spit them out for scavengers.

Holding the fork high, I snuck forward on silent feet.

Closer.

Closer.

I smiled and reached forward to wrench the door back. To attack.

But Lan shut it and turned with the clothing in his arms, stepping back as he encountered me. "Kallik?" he said warily, blocking the doorway.

"Move from the exit, male fae," I ordered, power ringing in my voice.

His gaze searched mine. “I don’t speak that language.”

I cursed long and hard.

“Who am I talking with?” he asked quietly. “If you need Kallik alive, then I suggest you step out and return at another time. We’re under attack.”

The red smothering my every thought and feeling wavered. “Attack?”

He shook his head. “I don’t understand your language. But we don’t have time for this. You must leave if you value Kallik’s life.”

I snarled and whirled from him, but the red was already receding. Ebbing. Shrinking.

Until it disappeared completely.

Gasping, I clutched my chest and fell to my knees. The stone floor was firm underhand, under *my* hands. Goddess of the above and below, a moment before, they hadn’t been mine at all. They—

“Lan, what was that?” My voice shook.

He circled me and reached down to help me stand.

“Don’t touch me,” I cried out, throwing myself away from him and toppling backward onto my butt. I scuttled away. Bad things happened when we touched. Not just that we lost ourselves. Something had possessed me. “What was it?”

Faolan regarded me, his jaw clenched tight. “I’m not sure, but I think we’ve met it before.”

“When I killed all that fae,” I whispered what we were both thinking. “Something’s wrong with me.” Oddly, I didn’t hesitate to voice the immediate fear rising like ice through my body. Not after witnessing Lan’s memory.

“No, Orphan,” he said firmly. “No. But this isn’t the time for us to figure it out. I wasn’t lying, we are under attack.”

I lifted my chin, thinking about how he’d done the same while waiting for the Oracle to deliver his sentence all those years ago.

He was the one who delivered mine. “The Seelie are here. You’ve run out of time. We need to leave Unimak.”

“**N**o rest for the wicked,” I growled, catching the pile of clothes Faolan threw at me.

I had his shirt on, but nothing I could fight in. I quickly pulled on the leather pants, loose shirt and, over that, a vest made from boiled leather. Boots were next. Thank the goddess they fit well and weren’t brand new.

Over all *that* went a thick woolen cloak made of the same deep burgundy that seemed to be everywhere in this cursed castle. Lan quickly wrapped his upper body with a linen cloth, then pulled on a shirt and a vest and cloak in a similar style to mine.

He held out his hand to me as he went to the door, and while part of me wanted to hang on to him, I shook my head. “No. Whatever it was that took me over did it when I was lost to the magic between us. It can’t happen again, Lan. I could have killed someone else.”

His jaw tensed, and he lowered his hand. “Stay close then.”

I stepped up so that I was right behind him, close enough that if I leaned forward my body would press tightly against his from chest to hip. It reminded me of a training exercise Bres had made us do a few times: mimicking another’s movements as closely as you could get without touching them. It helped when learning to read a person’s fighting style. Watching an opponent was often the only option available but *feeling* the way a person’s energy shifted was the gold standard.

“You ever play Rabbit?” I murmured. Yeah, don’t ask me why it was called that—it made no sense.

He looked over his shoulder, eyes flashing with a twinkle that I hadn't realized, until right then, that I desperately wanted to see.

The lights in the castle flickered and went out.

"That's our signal." He took off, and I was right behind him, focusing entirely on his body and reading his movement.

The corners and twists of the castle were lost to me, but I didn't care. I wasn't coming back here ever again.

Down three sets of stairs, we stopped at a thick wooden door blackened by some long-ago fire. Faolan paused before pushing through into a small room.

"This is the way out?" I whispered.

"Not quite yet," he answered softly, and went down to one knee.

I stared into the darkness of the room, only seeing her outline a split second before her magic flared to life.

Queen Elisavana stood before me, dressed head to toe in solid black leather that clung to every curve of her body. Two swords crossed over her back, secure in a chest sheath, and her shield lay overtop of them. Her hair was pulled into a tight braid that gave her already sharply angled face a harsher look than ever.

Not someone to piss off.

"Your Majesty." I found myself going to a knee. "I'm sorry you're under attack because of me."

"Phah," she spat. "I was getting bored anyway, and Adair does not have the spine to truly go to war. Nor does Whatshisbucket."

I swallowed hard. "Josef?"

"Whatshisbucket suits him better, don't you think?" she asked, and my eyes shot to hers.

Was that a joke? Didn't know she had it in her.

Her lips twitched. "I wanted to see you off before you go. I believe you are about to depart on a journey that will change you in every way you could imagine. And perhaps I wish . . . well, never mind that. You need weapons." And just like that she unbuckled her chest sheath and passed it to me along with her two swords.

Lan sucked in a sharp breath but said nothing.

My mouth bobbed. *No way.* "Your own weapons, Your Majesty?"

The queen did smile then. "I have more weapons than I need, Kallik. Take them. Use them without remorse. For if you must draw your blade, then

you ought to do so without question. Without any thoughts but survival and protecting those by your side.”

I shrugged into the chest sheath, tightening the leather in places and fastening the copper buckles.

She thrust the shield at me next. “And this. Let it shield you from your foes.”

Shields normally did that job, but I figured it wouldn’t be polite to point it out, so I just took the gift in in stunned silence.

“Get her back to the mainland, captain,” Queen Elisavana ordered. “Then let her lead. Kill any who would stop her from her goals.”

Okay, so that was a little intense.

“With pleasure,” he murmured in a gravelly tone, like just before our magic had touched, and my knees went *slightly* weak. Just slightly. Nothing I couldn’t handle.

To distract myself from the heat pooling in my lower regions, I shifted the shield in my grip and moved it around to my back. Would the harness hold it somehow? How had the queen secured it? My eyebrows shot up as the shield just stuck there over the swords. I still had enough room to draw them from the sheaths, though. *Whoa*. I’d heard about shields like this. This right here was heavy magic that I could never create on my own.

The queen swept by us. “I am going to go have a nice chat with Adair. Is there any message you’d like to pass on, Kallik?”

I blinked. Why was she being so damn courteous? But I wasn’t totally bereft of sense, so I nodded. “Tell her that her hair is a disaster, and I’ve always thought she uses too much human makeup. And her nose is crooked. To the left.”

She let out a low laugh. “Lovely. So you know her weakness well.”

I bowed as the queen left the room laughing. Laughing as her castle was attacked on my behalf.

“Come on.” Lan was up and moving to the end of the small room where he pressed against some of the stonework. The grinding of gears tore through the air and a wash of cool air swept toward me, tugging at my long hair.

Faolan slipped out first, disappearing as he dropped from view. I ducked my head through the exit. The fall was just over ten feet.

Oh, well. Nothing for it.

I jumped.

Landing lightly, the shield almost weightless on my back, I sprinted after

him down the mountain range, heading northeast, judging by the stars.

I couldn't help but note the stark differences between the court forests again. Except . . . the Unseelie flora wasn't nearly as bad as I would have thought, and a closer look beneath the moonlight revealed an array of rich hues. The colors were deeper, richer, and in unexpected places flashes of silver, gold and copper caught the dim light.

It struck me that there was as much beauty here as in the Seelie world, or in my mother's human world.

Frowning, I let my thoughts wander as we ran. The movement of my body, the push of my blood through my veins, and the steady beat of my heart was almost a form of meditation, allowing me to see things through a different lens. My emotions bled away, and all that remained were the pieces of the puzzle I needed to understand more clearly.

And fast.

All of which would have been well and good if I hadn't been rudely interrupted.

Three shadows were closing in on us.

I had both swords out before I'd even taken a breath.

The shadows shimmered and shifted, their voices blending like a strange midnight choir.

"She holds the queen's blades."

"Let us pass, shadow guardians," Faolan said firmly. "We have been given passage by the queen herself."

The three shadows released a low rumbling sound. *"The woman is not one of ours. We cannot let her pass."*

Behind us came the thunderous boom of an explosion that rocked the ground beneath our feet.

I wobbled but kept both blades raised. "No time for this. Sorry, guys."

I swept the blades forward and around in a circular motion, one right after the other, slashing through the first shadow figure and then the second with ease.

They shattered apart, screeching like a pair of pigs gone to slaughter. The third shadow figure fled.

I put the two swords away and caught Faolan staring hard at me. "What, you disagree? We have some time I don't know about?"

He shook his head, and we fell into a rapid run again.

I cursed and muttered under my breath as we hopped fallen logs, ducked

under low-hanging branches covered in a thick moss named old man's beard, and splashed through thick puddles of murky water.

By the time we reached the beach that led out into the ocean, I was *done* done. I'd been exhausted earlier, and now it was all I could do to keep my feet under me and not sway on the spot.

I'd take the Seelie dungeon at this point if it meant getting some sleep.

"Our pickup is here, we just have to wait." Lan had his back to me as I folded to the ground, knees sinking into the cold sand.

I blinked, but my eyelids didn't open once they'd closed. And that was it. I crumpled to the side, exhaustion overcoming me in a way I'd never experienced.

The person picking us up could either let me sleep or kill me quickly because there wasn't a single chance in hell I was going to do so much as open my eyelids for the foreseeable future.

Warmth suffused me as sleep drained from my body. I fought to keep my eyes closed and my ears blissfully ignorant while keeping whatever amount of blankets were wrapped around me from moving a single inch. A gust of icy cold air ruffling my hair told me we were no longer on Unimak, and I had no desire to stand in the cold when I had this cocoon of blankets to burrow into.

Voices cut through the air, feminine and light. “They need to keep us steady to the north. We don’t want to angle east yet. Too many small islands to work around.” The words were in Tlingit.

I didn’t recognize the voice even if I understood the words. For just a moment, I thought maybe I had died and was with my mother again. But exhaustion wasn’t going to kill me, and it wasn’t my mother’s voice.

Clutching the blankets to me, I slowly sat up, a few aches and pains making themselves known. Still, I felt surprisingly okay given my many near misses with death.

The rocking underneath me made sense as I got my first look at where I was—on an old fishing boat bobbing in what I assumed was the Bering Sea. I stood and made my way to the railing, ears picking up the splashing of water against the hull and the creaking of timber. The water was dark and swirled in strange ways, as if squid ink had been poured into it. Even the foam cresting on top of the splashing waves was dark.

The woman who’d just spoken leaned over the side next to me, reaching for the waves as if to touch them.

“The spirits are pissed,” she said—still in Tlingit—from my right side.

I grimaced and answered her in kind. “I know.”

“But do you understand why, Little Spark?” She tilted her head to look at me, and I truly looked back.

She carried the coloring of my mother’s people, only this woman was taller, slimmer . . . she could have been my sister except her eyes were blue. That, and her body shimmered in and out of focus.

Lately, spirits had a habit of speaking Tlingit to me in various ways—on the radio, *through* other fae, and now . . . “You’re not alive?”

She shook her head. “I am not. But . . . you need more help than any one spirit can give you.” Her smile was wide. “And it seems I am to help you.”

“Who are you though?” I asked. “You look . . .” I didn’t want to say she looked like me in case she took it as an insult, but she smiled knowingly.

“Because we are very much related, though I’ve been dead for fifty years,” she answered. “Maybe longer. The time here is strange.”

Her image flickered as people stirred on the deck, sleeping forms that I hadn’t noticed earlier.

“You can help me?” I asked in a whisper. “I have to find Underhill.” And prove that I hadn’t killed my father.

It wasn’t a long list, but it was a fucking impossible one. Oh well. I’d solve the Underhill issue, then deal with the whole suspected murderess thing later. A girl had to start somewhere.

The woman nodded. “I can help guide and teach you, Little Spark, and maybe you can do what I could not.”

My frown deepening, I clutched at the railing edge. “What do you mean?”

Standing shoulder to shoulder with me, she gazed out at the water swirling in the sea, cresting to waves where there shouldn’t have been any.

“Because you are not the first to look for the true Underhill. You were born for a reason. For a purpose.” She faced me and lifted a hand as if about to touch my hair. “It is the same reason I was born, but I died before I could reopen Underhill—and so my spirit is tormented, stuck traveling back and forth across these waves until I can find a way to fulfill my failed destiny.”

Lugh’s left nut and Balor’s right, was she serious? “You . . . did you break Fake Underhill too?”

Was there a club for people like me?

Her laughter whispered across the air. “No, but I was born a mutt, like you. Cast out. And then given a reason to hunt for Underhill. And like you, I

faced foes I could not see, foes that wanted to stop me from reopening the hill at all costs." Her image faded. "I will be with you, Little Spark. *You are not alone.*"

I gazed at where she'd stood just a split second before.

The shuffle of bodies on deck continued, and hearing footsteps behind me, I turned, expecting to find Faolan.

"Drake?" I'd just taken in the cuts across his face, the black eye, and the deep purple of fatigue under both eyes before he swept me into a tight, one-armed hug.

"I thought we'd be too late to help you," he murmured. "I'm sorry I was an ass about Yarrow, Alli. Truly."

I'd saved him from the asshole who'd cost him his arm. It had dealt a blow to his pride, something not a lot of guys would be willing to admit. But Drake was uncomplicated and, after Cinth, the most open person I knew.

I hugged him back, stiff at first, but his pine, snow, and leather scent hit me, and it found myself burrowing my face against his neck. He smelled good and safe, and this was the first 'normal' touch I'd had since everything went belly up, being that there was no crazy damn magic bouncing between us.

"You okay?" Drake asked low, pulling back so he could look at me.

I stared up at him and nodded, adding a slow smile for good measure. "Yeah, I'm good. Happy to see you."

I could feel the weight of a heavy gaze on my body. Faolan was somewhere close by, watching me. Because it was his job, his oath to the queen. *That* was why he stayed close, and I couldn't forget his loyalty was really to the Unseelie ruler.

Lan could kiss me one moment and betray me the next. Betray me *again*. Even with how I felt for him, I had to remember that.

"Orphan," Lan called from behind.

Despite my new resolve, my chest tightened at the familiar sound of his voice. I just needed a second to get it together or Faolan would see heartbreak all over my face. Because the truth was, yes, I was pissed at Lan for betraying me. I was pissed he could do it again. But I was such a confused mess over the violent fallouts whenever we touched.

I swallowed. "Hey, Drake? Do you know where Cinth is?"

She was the gal to talk to about all this bullshit.

Drake's face blanked.

My heart hammered. “Cinth is on this vessel, right?” If not, I swore to Lugh that I’d leap overboard and swim back to Unimak.

Lan spoke to my back. “There wasn’t time to get her to the meeting point. The vessel arrived minutes after you passed out. She’s safe though. I made sure to check with Rubezahl so you didn’t create any issues.”

I gritted my teeth at his blasé tone. My heartache subsided, irritation taking the place of sadness. Anger. I needed more of it. Being angry at him was a hell of a lot easier than figuring out that confused mess. I turned. “Did you now?”

He raised a brow, unfazed by my short reply. “Yes. If you’re done talking, Orphan, we should figure out our next step.” Lan’s voice was as chilly as the wind.

As much as I didn’t want to be in his company yet, we really did need to figure out the next step.

I popped up on tiptoes and kissed Drake’s cheek. “I’ve got to go, but it really is nice to see you.”

Drake leaned in. “Go have your talk. But just so you know, my room is the first door to the right at the bottom of the stairs . . . if you want to resume our chat.”

I arched a brow. “Is that so?”

Leaving Drake, I followed Lan around the corner of the pilot house. His hand latched around my forearm as he pulled me out of sight.

“Don’t touch me,” I gasped, yanking from his grip as panic struck.

He crowded me, and I backed against the wall.

I glared up at him. “I’m serious. Don’t. You know what happens.”

Lan rested his hands against the wall behind me, caging me in. “Did that feel nice, Orphan?”

My brain stuttered and restarted. “What?”

“Kissing the outcast.”

I gaped up at him. “You mean kissing him on the cheek?”

Faolan glared at me.

Seriously? Anger rose hard and fast within me. “Yeah, Lan. Kissing Drake was nice. Really nice.”

“Would you describe our kisses as ‘nice’?”

Nice? No. They were . . . realm-shattering. And that was the whole point. “I don’t lose my mind when I’m with Drake.”

Lan’s dark gaze began to shimmer with a gem-like hue. “I see. He’s . . . safe.”

I flushed. “What he is doesn’t matter. It was only a kiss on the cheek. It’s also none of your business. You stabbed me in the back. Madness or possession aside, why the hell would I ever kiss *you* again?”

He dragged in a breath, leaning closer until our noses almost touched. “No idea, Orphan. None at all.”

His eyes were so dark and hard. Was the boy who’d so badly wanted to train the Unseelie out of his magic to please his parents in there still? My

stomach flipped as the sorting memory and his recent whipping soared to the surface, but I clenched my fists against feeling sorry for him. He'd hurt me. And that aside, we couldn't touch without me turning into a murderess.

I turned my face, fixing my gaze on the tumultuous sea.

Lan pushed off and suddenly I could breathe again.

He walked to the railing. "The queen's orders were clear. I was to get you to safety, and then you were to lead the way. Rubezahl's offer to send a vessel to collect you didn't involve divulging the destination, so I can't tell you where we'll dock. But that doesn't matter if you know where you need to go."

I'd already gathered from Drake's presence that this was an outcast ship. "You were in contact with Ruby?"

"I was in contact with Cinth, who was in contact with Rubezahl," he said, facing me again.

If Ruby had sent this vessel, then I could assume we'd either dock at the outcast sanctuary or end up there eventually. The giant had taken major steps to keep members of the Unseelie and Seelie courts from discovering the location of the sanctuary. And he'd made it crystal clear that he'd kill Faolan before ever allowing him to enter the safe haven.

More importantly, I had other places that I needed to be. "I need to get somewhere."

"The door?" Lan asked.

I startled and jerked to look at him. "What?"

"I don't blame you for not remembering. You were wounded and sedated at the time. You were telling everyone about a door."

The details were hazy, but I could recall mumbling about it after they'd imprisoned me, before I was passed along to the Seelie. How much did I want to tell Lan though? He'd given me some information about Underhill's entrance a while back—courtesy of the queen—but I still didn't know *why* the queen was helping me, and that gave me pause. Even if she'd given me her swords and her super-cool shield.

Faolan's allegiance was to the queen.

Mine? Well . . . I didn't have the space to contemplate that. To the outcasts, I guessed. But I couldn't truly align with them until I sorted my shit out.

"There's a door I need to get to, yes," I replied shortly, studying the dark white caps of the churning water again. "It's back where I was the night of

the spring equinox.”

“Then the next question is where exactly this vessel will dock, so we can make our way there,” Faolan said. “Any ideas?”

I could find out. But the answer might not be one I could share. “Leave it with me. I’ll see what I can find out.”

“This will go much easier if we work together, Orphan,” he said, jaw ticking.

“I agree,” I said, smiling without humor. The problem being it wasn’t just him I’d be working with. Although the queen had helped me, I wasn’t sure that trusting her was smart. “Stay here.”

Smirking at his angry muttering, I rounded the pilot house and studied those on deck. A few wild fae sat at the far end, clutching their bows and arrows and darting mistrustful glances at the rest of the crew. The land kelpie who’d helped Lan and me escape the Seelie court was next to them, legs curled underneath it and all three sets of wings curved around as it slept.

Walking across the deck, I nodded and murmured greetings to various people I recognized from our journey through the Triangle toward the sanctuary. Although there hadn’t been much time, I’d helped train them.

“Boss Kallik,” a lanky blond saluted me.

They’d latched onto that stupid name like bloody barnacles. “Yoland, is there any way to contact Rubezahl from this ship?”

Yoland nodded. “He has an avatar onboard. A puffin.”

Better than I’d hoped for. “Thank you.”

“Happy to help, Boss Kallik.”

I forced a smile and scanned for Ruby’s avatar. After a quick search around various wooden crates and coiled ropes, I found it keeping vigil from atop the wound-up anchor cable. Or at least I thought it was him.

“Rubezahl?” I asked.

The puffin glanced up and the giant’s mild voice poured from its short, curved orange beak. “Kallik of No House, or should I say Kallik of House Royal, I am greatly relieved to see you alive and well.”

I sat cross-legged beside the avatar. “Thanks. It’s good to still be alive and well. Wasn’t sure that would be the case for a while there.”

“Hyacinth told me all. I’m glad we could get to you in time.”

I sighed. “Thank you, Ruby. I know it wasn’t the most politically smart move since you already had the courts breathing down your neck.”

The puffin clacked its beak. “The right thing to do is the right thing to

do.”

I agreed. Which was why fixing Underhill came before clearing my name. I couldn't let madness seep any deeper into our world, not when I was so damn close to finding a way to stop it. “How are those at the sanctuary doing?”

The puffin shook its head. “Not well. My time is devoted to keeping their minds stable and well. It is why I could not come to collect you myself.”

I pursed my lips. “Do you think the closing of the fae realm is affecting those in the Triangle more so than others?”

A ruffle of feathers and the bird adjusted its stance. “No, young one. I believe the courts are making concerted efforts to contain their mad subjects and keep them from public view.”

Wouldn't put it past Adair. Though I couldn't imagine Elisavana doing the same—but Unseelie were half mad anyway from what I could see. “I need to fix Underhill, Ruby.”

“We do,” the puffin said.

“No,” I said in a firmer voice. “I do.”

Could puffins frown? It was an odd sight. “Something happened. Tell me all.”

“As you know, we went after Yarrow. I assume you heard about the human vessel?”

Yarrow had set alight barrels and barrels of Glimmer aboard a cruise ship and killed countless human men, women, and children in the doing. A massacre committed for the simple motive of framing the strays and covering his incompetent tracks from the king.

“I did,” he said gravely. “A lucky thing that my flock made it to the sanctuary not long afterward. The lives lost from the cruise ship explosion sealed our fate—and his, from what I hear.”

The sounds of the glittering gray creature feasting on Yarrow's dying body rose in my mind. “It did.”

“Something Drake may struggle with.”

“He seemed happy enough to see me,” I said softly.

“You do make him happy. His past haunts him more than most, but he is a good man. An excellent man. And once his trust is earned, he will go to the very end for you.”

Was Ruby giving me relationship advice? If he'd been physically present, I could have judged his meaning based on his expression, but no such luck.

“I’ll try my best.”

“Now—” the puffin shifted and settled again, “—you made contact with Underhill.”

I took a breath. “Yes. On the full moon of the spring equinox. A path was revealed to me. I followed it to a door etched onto a tree. But the Unseelie set hounds on me, and I was prevented from reaching the door.” My hands curled to fists. “Underhill wanted me to open that door, I know it. The spirits were frustrated I couldn’t get to it. I need to get back there.”

Ruby didn’t answer immediately, and when he did, I could tell he’d chosen his words carefully. “Underhill must find you worthy.”

The sentiment echoed what the queen had said to me. “What does that mean?”

“Old lore of the fae realm, young one. It maintains that an entrance can be shown to a fae deemed worthy.”

My mouth dried. I’d known that already, but hearing the words from the puffin’s . . . uh, beak, gave me hope. “I don’t know why the first entrance closed, but for whatever reason, even though I shattered Fake Underhill, I was somehow chosen to open the new one.”

“Or perhaps you were chosen *because* you shattered the illusion,” he mused.

I considered that. “You think Underhill was angry at the fake?”

“You speak of Underhill like it is a person.”

A person? Not quite. But an entity, perhaps. Underhill was definitely female. “You don’t?”

“No, I certainly do. And, like a person, I believe the fae realm sometimes acts on her emotions. Due to her sheer power, those emotions are naturally volatile and unpredictable. A minor irritation may shift her realm from oasis to bone-dry desert in the blink of an eye. And true *anger* . . . imagine what that might inspire.”

The closing of Underhill? Is that what he meant? “I suppose that makes sense.”

The puffin regarded me, and I wondered if Rubezahl was sitting by a campfire, drinking one of his tea blends, as he spoke to me.

“We must get you to this door, Kallik of House Royal,” he said.

“I think I prefer Kallik of No House,” I mumbled.

Laughter boomed from the tiny bird, and I blinked at the incongruity.

“I might prefer that myself,” the giant answered. “But what we prefer

doesn't always change the truth. Tell me, young one, how are you?"

The sudden softness of his voice nearly drew tears to my eyes.

My father was dead. The one who'd always shunned me until what was nearly his last breath. I wished he hadn't changed his mind at the end. I wished he'd maintained his disgust and distance. Because now I was filled with what-ifs. That was the cruelest thing about all this—if he hadn't died, there would have been time to make new memories. To fix things.

Adair had probably hired an assassin to murder my dad when he'd named me heir to the Seelie throne. She'd never hid her loathing of me, and she had to be aware of my hatred for her. I guess ruling through Uncle Josef had seemed like the safer bet to Adair in the end. I still didn't think Uncle Josef possessed enough killer instinct to have knowingly gone along with such a plot. More likely that he'd been her pawn.

And my emotions were a jumbled mess when it came to Lan. Queen Elisavana. Underhill.

"I'm keeping it together for the time being," I said. "But a lot has happened. I'm not sure that I've processed most of it yet. It's not safe to get distracted right now. I just wish Cinth were here. But at the same time, if she's safe on Unimak, then I want her there because danger is following me around like a bad smell these days."

"Your friend is completely safe," Ruby said. "I have spoken with her recently. Would you like to know what she said?"

Did a bear shit in the woods? "What?"

"She's unhappy with the lies Queen Consort Adair is spreading. In Hyacinth's exact words, 'Bitch better back up fast with the shit she's talking about my girl.'"

I laughed. "That sounds exactly like her."

"Your friend, chef though she may be, has many contacts and many who know and love her. She has opted to remain on Unimak and *safely* spread word of the truth. On your behalf."

That rocked me to my core. "She has?" My voice was small.

"Yes, young one. And as for missing her, I'm certain that we can find a way around the physical distance between you. We are fae, after all."

I swallowed the tightness in my throat down. "Thanks, Ruby."

"You are very welcome. Now, I am sure you have guessed at the destination of this vessel."

"The sanctuary."

The puffin dipped its head. “Indeed. But you would prefer to find the door once again. Preferences do not always get a voice, but in this instance, I can help you.”

I had no idea where I’d ended up the night of the spring equinox, which was part of the problem. But if I retraced my steps, the spirits might help me get there. There weren’t any major waterways right by the new door to Underhill, so I’d have to do most of it on foot anyway. “The dock where Yarrow blew up the cruise ship. Can we get there?”

“We can. I will give the order to the captain.”

Relief flooded my chest. Sometimes, a person just needed some damn help once in a while. “I greatly appreciate it.”

The puffin stood and hopped a few times to reach the wooden deck. It glanced back at me. “The spirits you spoke of. Have you seen them since?”

I thought of the woman who’d appeared not long ago, but whereas my previous encounter with spirits hadn’t felt personal, *her* visit did. I wasn’t ready to share it. “Not since the spring equinox.”

Shouts went up as a siren blared. I shot to my feet, glancing around before I sprinted to where a group had gathered on deck.

I pushed between them. “What is it? What’s going on?”

A drenched Drake was pulled over the railing, where he collapsed into a panting, shivering heap on the deck.

Yoland was beside me. “I saw him, Boss Kallik. He was just standing at the railing, and suddenly his legs went over his head and he fell overboard. Never seen anything like it.”

My eyes narrowed.

I hadn’t seen anything like it either.

But I’d sure as hell *felt* it. Just like I’d seen traces of it. Only a quick search was needed to find that one of the wooden crates holding supplies was now rotten and crumbling—the fallout of recently used Unseelie magic.

Yoland rushed forward to help the crew members getting Drake to his feet, and I stormed to where Faolan leaned against the pilot house where I’d left him.

“That was stupid and dangerous!” I got ready to launch into the scolding of his damn life. But Lan pushed off the wall, stopping beside me, and his mouth dipped in close to my ear. “Guess he’ll be too busy warming up to meet with you until we dock. What a shame.”

My jaw dropped. The sheer arrogance of that statement blew my mind.

“You can’t control what I do.”

He smirked. “I just did.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. I’d finally felt that Lan was breaking down some of his walls in the last day. And with the lashing, I’d felt so . . . protective. Even with the craziness happening each time we touched, I hadn’t seriously been considering anything romantic with Drake. That was *before* Lan went and slammed up his walls again and acted like an asshole.

Now he’d just pissed me off.

Frustration thrummed through my veins like fire. “We’ll see about that.”

Drake's shivering from his unexpected dunk into the Bering Sea, which was basically liquid ice on pixie dust, had the wild fae at something of a loss.

I strode forward. "Strip him. Get the wet clothes off and put him into his bunk." I snapped the words to cut through the growing wind around us. A thundercloud growled well above our heads, mimicking my foul mood.

"Yes, Boss Kallik!" Yoland snapped, and the others helped to get Drake down to his birthday suit in a matter of seconds before hustling him off deck.

I glanced at Lan. "You are an idiot." To the others I shouted, "Get some hot water going. Make a good strong coffee and load it with sugar. Bring it to me in Drake's cabin."

I turned my back on Lan, heading toward the stairs leading into the cabins. He grabbed my arm, not touching skin on skin, but my magic flared anyway. I jerked away, fear coursing through me. Losing myself to our combined magic was a bad idea under any circumstances, but it would be a goddamn disaster if it happened on a boat in the middle of an ice flow.

"What don't you get about *not touching me*?" I growled.

"Where do you think you're going? *You're* not going to warm him up."

Ice chilled my expression. "What did you just say?"

Lan's jaw ticked. "Send one of the others to help him."

The urge to jab my fingers into his chest was so strong I had to clench my hands into fists at my sides. "Let's get one thing crystal fucking clear. You don't get a say in what I do or who I do it with. If I want to warm up one hundred men, then I'll damn well do it."

Instead of matching me for fury, Faolan smiled. “That’s fine, Orphan. Of course, my oath to the queen will mean I’ll need to be in the room too. To ensure your safety. I hope that doesn’t kill the mood.”

Sure he did.

I pointed a finger at his face, drawing as close to him as I dared. “*Try it.* My swords need a bit of blood on them.”

He winked.

Winked.

A sliver of composure remained between me and attacking Lan, but I clung to it, reining my anger in. Drake really did need my help right now. Not like anyone else seemed to know what to do. And it would bring me gross satisfaction to usurp Lan’s grand plan to keep Drake bedridden until we docked.

“Nothing to say, Orphan?” he mocked me.

My emotions toward this bastard gave me whiplash. Not long ago, I’d wanted to attack the general lashing him. Now *I’d* quite like to shove Lan overboard. I glared. “The boat is going to change direction. We’ll dock in a few hours.” And I was going to spend *all* of that time with Drake. *Without* Lan in the cabin.

“Where?”

“Where Yarrow blew up the cruise ship. I’ll backtrack from there.” I turned from him again.

His growl followed me. “Where are you going, Kallik?”

Ha. He was pissed off. Good. I glanced back. “You do know what the best way to warm up someone hypothermic is, don’t you?”

His frown said he had no idea, and I gave him a slow smile. “Skin-to-skin body warmth.”

I didn’t bother to wait for his reaction. Didn’t care. No, that wasn’t true, I *couldn’t* care. Caring made my heart far too heavy. And that realization frustrated me just as much as his high-handedness in pushing Drake overboard and trying to dictate what I could do.

I just had so many other things to focus on—huge things. I had to focus on my goal and forget everything else.

My throat tightened as I hurried down the stairs and pushed my way into Drake’s very tiny room.

He was wrapped in blankets, his form far too still.

“Warming up?” I asked, shucking off my heavy cloak and resting it on

top of him. The bed was damn tiny, but that didn't matter. We were about to get up close and personal.

"N-no." His green eyes watched me as I kept on pulling off layers of clothes until I was down to my undergarments, which really weren't much.

"Lucky I'm here to help then." Pulling the covers back, I climbed into the bed with him, gasping as my body touched his. There was no pull of power back and forth, but I might as well be hugging a damn iceberg.

"You'll get co—ooo—llld," he chattered.

"Oh, please. I'll have you hot and bothered in no time." I snuggled in close to his back, wrapping my arms around his upper body. We fit together well, and it wasn't long before his stillness became a bone-shaking rattle as the hypothermia began to slowly reverse. That was the thing. If a person got too cold, they stopped shaking . . . that was when the body started giving up. And while we were fae and could survive a lot, I couldn't have Drake under the weather when we were going into unknown territory.

I couldn't pretend simple practicality was the only reason for me being here. Yes, I needed him strong and whole. The rest . . . Drake's freezing feet might have cooled the worst of my anger toward Lan, but frustration still burned molten within me. Lan and I couldn't be together for so many reasons. Most of the time, I wasn't sure I even wanted to be with him. On the other hand, Drake was right here. A man who could make me laugh. A *good* man, like Ruby had said. We could touch—even if it was to cure his hypothermia. If I'd tried this with Lan, I'd be trying to murder some innocent fae by now. Perhaps the concept of touch was simple and seemed small, but a life without touching the man you loved? That sounded like a cold and empty existence to me.

The door creaked open and Yoland put his head in, then immediately blushed and yanked it back out.

Of course, the shaking in the bed would look like something else.

I laughed. "Yoland, it's not that. Bring the coffee, please."

He popped his head back in, still blushing. "Sorry, it looked—"

I waved him to silence. "It's okay, perfectly reasonable. I mean, if the cold water hadn't totally iced things into small packages."

"Hey!" Drake protested.

Yoland snorted, then crossed over. Together, we managed to get some of the piping hot coffee into Drake. Our patient slurped it down without much whimpering about it being too hot.

When the cup was empty, those green eyes went to mine and he arched a brow. “For the record, my package is fine, but I agree this is probably not the time I’d want you checking things out.”

I rolled my eyes as the guys laughed.

Yoland collected the empty cup, speaking over his shoulder. “I’ll be back with more coffee in ten minutes.”

Drake wrapped his still-cool arms around me, tugging me to his chest. “You know, if I’d known this was the way to get you into my bed, I would have jumped in myself.”

I smiled. “If you’d jumped in yourself, I would have let Yoland do the body-to-body heat.”

His gaze ranged over my face. “You know, you’re like a dream. You just showed up on my doorstep and into my life. I didn’t think . . . I didn’t think a woman like you was a possibility.”

I frowned, letting one hand drift over his back while the other settled in his damp hair. “What do you mean, a woman like me?”

He held up his arm with the missing hand. “Women aren’t exactly fond of the whole stump routine. The fae know it means I’m disgraced as well as disfigured, and even human women . . . I’ve found they want a man who can be everything to them. Usually possessing two hands is on the list.”

“You fight well, and I’ve seen you chop wood,” I pointed out. And really, I could do those things myself.

He crooked a grin and pulled me closer, draping a leg over my hips so I could feel that he wasn’t *at all* suffering from the cold any longer. “That’s what I mean, you don’t see the broken parts of me. You just see . . . me.”

Drake leaned in and kissed me, softly at first, and I held back a little, suddenly feeling . . . unfaithful? No, that wasn’t fair to me or him—or even Lan. I didn’t belong to *anyone*. As hard as the situation with Lan was, I couldn’t hold onto dreams of him that had no basis in reality. We couldn’t touch.

I had to consider my future happiness too.

Drake slid his hand into the thick mess of my hair, tangling his fingers into it, pinning my mouth to his. Yup, a girl could get used to this.

He was a good kisser. I wondered what he felt when he kissed me?

Did he think this much too?

When I kissed Lan, I wasn’t able to think at all.

Damn it! Even here I couldn’t get the bastard out of my head.

Over my dead body.

Breathing slowly, I angled my mouth for a deeper kiss, trying to find that spark that I wanted—needed. Drake growled, and the sound went down my spine like a zinging bolt of electricity.

He rolled over me, twisting so we managed to stay on the tiny bed. His hips pressed into mine as he kissed his way down my neck to my collarbone. I stared up at the ceiling. Liking it, but . . .

“Stop,” I whispered.

Damn it all.

I couldn't get Lan out of my head.

Drake immediately backed off, his eyes wide and his body obviously ready for action. “Did I hurt you?”

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, but I shook my head and beckoned him to lie back with me. “No. No. I'm just—” How the hell did I explain this to him? That I wasn't ready because I was trying to break up with a guy I'd never dated, never even had sex with, could barely touch, but who had somehow taken a piece of my heart.

“Lots is happening right now,” I said lamely.

Drake pulled me close, tucking me under his one arm and holding me tight. “Don't worry about it. There'll be time later.” He kissed me on the side of my head and rubbed my back like he didn't have a raging boner and a major case of blue balls.

My cheeks burned with heat, and I was glad he couldn't see my face.

“You're a good man. One of the best I've met,” I said softly, the lull of the boat pulling me under a dozing spell.

“I doubt that.” He chuckled, breath brushing against the strands of my hair. “But I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

Yoland returned with another cup of coffee, and Drake drank it himself this time while I dressed.

We lay there talking for the next hour—about training, about life before all this craziness, and about nothing at all. Like we were on a date.

It was . . . nice. Open. Honest.

So different from my interactions with Lan. So easy. No chaos. No possession. No betrayal.

“I can feel you frowning against my chest,” Drake said. “You want to talk about anything in particular?”

A sigh escaped me. “Maybe? I don't know. It's . . . it's weird.”

Was I really going to discuss Lan with Drake?

“It’s about Faolan, isn’t it?” he asked. “I see how he watches you and, when you don’t even realize it, how you look at him.”

I tipped my head to see his face. “I don’t—”

He smiled. “He’s the guy every girl wants, Alli. The bad boy. But because I was once that guy, I know he’ll never stick around. He’ll find a way to fuck it up, and I’ll still be here when he’s gone. Because I’m not that guy anymore.”

I closed my eyes and tried not to let the tears fall. “Things are complicated there. There’s history. We hung around together as children. He’s changed though. His . . . loyalties to the Unseelie court and him *being* Unseelie. Well, you know there’s no future there. He doesn’t think much of me anyway.” I didn’t even care whether that was true or not. I needed to believe that Lan thought of me as a mutt or something terrible. Because being with him made *me* something terrible. I wasn’t lying when I said we had no future.

“It will be his loss when you finally let go of him,” Drake said, pressing a kiss against the side of my head. “His loss. When you’re ready, I’ll hold you tightly, and I won’t ever let you go. Until then, I’m a patient man.”

I turned to him, his soft words doing what no enforced quarters could have done.

So, of course, that was when it all went to shit.

The boat rocked to the port side, throwing us to the floor, the sound of shouting above deck spiking my heart rate. I was up on my feet, yanking on my clothes, cloak, and strapping on my weapons, in less than a minute. Drake was right behind me as we sprinted to the top deck, the boat careening hard to starboard and throwing us both off balance.

“What’s going on?” I hollered into the gale-force winds that swept across the ocean and brought spray after spray of salty water shooting across the deck. Fear pounded in my chest at the sight of so much angry water, but I shook it off.

The wild fae clung to the boat, eyes wide as they stared out into the raging ocean. How had I not felt this before now?

I used the railing to stay upright as I pulled myself to the stern and stared in the direction they were looking.

That . . . was not possible.

A wave towered above us, silent as the grave, pushing us along ahead of

it. But not for long. Hundreds of feet high, the dark water and darker shapes within it promised a cold and watery death for us all. Unless we did something about it.

My chest tightened, and my breath wheezed. *Focus, Alli.*

We had a minute at best to get our asses in gear. But if someone had a connection to water specifically, they weren't raising their hand to deal with this.

Mother goddess, we were in trouble.

The storm thundered, a spark of lightning arcing across the sky and driving straight into the wave. I stared as the wave . . . pulled away from the lightning.

As if it had been hurt? As if it was avoiding the lightning?

The figure of the woman from before wavered into being next to me, her hair unruffled by the whipping winds. "You have something that can stop the wave, Little Spark. You just have to be brave enough. Braver than me."

Little Spark. Kallik. Lightning strike. I stared at her. "What do you mean?"

She tipped her head toward Faolan.

"It's not natural," Lan yelled over the raging water, speaking out loud what I'd just seen with my own eyes.

I gazed at him, suddenly knowing what she meant: the magic between us could stop that wave.

Or at least it would give us a chance.

Whoever was gunning for me, for us, and controlling that wave wouldn't stop on their own, and to achieve something like this, they had to be seriously powerful.

I stumbled and slid across the deck, and Faolan reached for me. I grabbed him and yanked him toward me, bringing his face to mine and pressing our lips together.

He stumbled and moved to pull away, but our magic swirled and danced around one another. There was no control over it. No way to direct it.

But damn it, I had to try.

Tendrils of indigo and the deepest ruby hue flared to life, and I couldn't fight the call of the magic as it rose up between us, hotter and wilder than ever before.

Instead, fatal mistake though it may prove, I embraced every bit of it.

I groaned at the feel of his mouth on mine, captive to the feel of his hands

on my body, so different than it had been with Drake. Like a live wire versus a warm hearth.

A hard gust hit the boat and tipped us, but Lan and I barely noticed. My legs wrapped around his hips, and he clamped me against his body as we fell.

The fall went on long enough that I realized we were no longer *on* the boat.

Water crashed over our heads, pushing us down under the ocean's surface. It should have stolen our breath, but the magic . . . the magic held us in a cocoon. There was no need to breathe, no need to fear.

We couldn't stop.

Why would we ever stop?

Magic spilled up and out, and the water around us stilled.

A voice that was not my own echoed in my head, power like no other smashing against the inside of my skull, making me want to claw at my mind to be free of it.

You are safe now. Come to me.

A whimper bubbled from me as a shift occurred. The undeniable, magnetic power was taking control. It was going to burn me alive.

I tried to push away from Lan, but he held on tight, as if his life depended on it. Which it probably did.

He wasn't feeling the magnitude of the magic in the same way—he couldn't be, or he wouldn't be fighting me like this.

I screamed at the searing in my chest.

My feet found a rocky, sandy surface, and I pushed off against it, fighting to the surface as I shoved against Lan and our combined magic.

Kicking at him.

His hold finally slid free, and we broke the surface of the water, gasping, the human side of me all too glad to take a breath.

Except the second I did, cold slammed into me and I choked with the deadly intensity of it. Lan appeared next to me, and his horrified gaze met mine.

We had to get out of the water.

Except . . . "The others," I shouted over the tumult, unsure if he could hear.

Diving under the surface again went against *every single instinct* beating against the inside of my ribs. But I did it.

The icy temperature stabbed at my skull, squeezing at it like a tube of

toothpaste in a toddler's fist. I peered through the water, spinning to look around for other passengers.

Nothing.

Black inky *nothing*.

Either my fae eyes couldn't match the thick darkness down here or Lan and I were the only ones thrown from the vessel.

Even if there was someone down here, *my* time was running out.

"See anyone?" I gasped at Lan as he also reappeared above water.

I was unsure he'd heard until he shook his head.

The shore wasn't far, and we swam hard, Lan staying back with me, though he was by far the stronger swimmer.

My legs wanted to give way when they encountered solid ground, but I forced them to work, stumbling up the beach. I stripped my clothes with difficulty between the furious jerking of my frozen body.

There had to be a tendril of heat somewhere. Anywhere. We needed a fire. Behind me I could hear Faolan doing the same, the slap of wet clothing hitting the rocky beach.

He made a relieved sound, and I echoed it as he used the energy he'd found and directed his dark-ruby magic into a piece of driftwood. I staggered around to collect as much dry material as I could, and between the two of us, we had a blaze going in a matter of minutes.

I folded before the fire next to him, almost naked and shaking furiously. Goddess, what had just happened?

Lan finally spoke through chattering teeth. "What the fuck was that, Orphan?"

I blinked, my eyelashes nearly frozen solid in the wind. "I think . . . I think that was Underhill."

“**W**hat do you mean, ‘I think that was Underhill’?” Faolan demanded in a chattering voice, curled up and as close to the fire as possible.

That wave was magical—*that* much I knew with certainty. And before everything got out of hand, it had been hurtling the vessel closer to our destination. In other words, toward the door I’d seen etched onto the tree.

“Underhill w-wants me at the d-door. Now.” Though the words came out with jerky cadence because of the force of my shivering, they rang with certainty.

Hadn’t Ruby said he believed the fae realm was mercurial and acted out of emotion? And that her actions weren’t proportional due to her sheer power?

The wave had helped her cause before it hindered it.

Though, was that even true?

I glanced around. “Where are we?”

Lan shook violently but sighed afterwards. “We were a day from the docking town. We had to navigate around a large land mass to get there. I’m guessing we’re on that land mass now.”

“Like a peninsula?” I asked, my suspicions gaining traction.

“That’s what the captain made it sound like.”

I took a shuddering breath and hugged myself tighter, daring to draw closer to the glorious flames. “Then I really think Underhill tossed us off the boat on purpose. If I’m right, then we’re closer to the door *here* than if the boat had docked where the cruise ship blew up.”

Lan peered out to see. “I can’t see the boat.”

A slow scan of the visible horizon—which wasn’t much in the dark—yielded the same result. I checked the shoreline for gasping bodies, too, but we were the sole occupants of the beach. “I couldn’t see anyone underwater. Do you think they’re okay?”

“Me either. We have no way of knowing now. We can’t enter that water again. It’s a death trap.” Faolan spoke the words with disturbing calm.

But he was right.

The other crew members were fae, too, and they hadn’t been distracted at the time by . . .

“Lan,” I said, frowning.

“Mmm?”

“Do you think whatever’s interfering in our magic is a being trying to keep Underhill closed?” In every encounter until now, the connection of Lan’s tendrils with mine had only enticed and pleased until we’d been interrupted. Only *then* had the connection turned furious and deadly. This time it had physically hurt me while we were still together, enough to override the good.

Whatever was going on . . . yeah, it was getting stronger.

Lan’s dark eyes were void of the swirling quality, and I knew he had to be as exhausted as me after our impromptu dip in freezing waters. “What makes you think that?”

Should I tell him about the spirit woman? I hesitated.

“Kallik, I realize that you no longer trust me. Or maybe you never did—”

Words tumbled from my lips. “I would say that you were one of the only people I ever trusted, actually. For a time.”

And then he’d stopped visiting.

Started ignoring me.

Now, I understood he’d had his own shit going on with the sorting. In part.

But that didn’t excuse betraying me to the queen. Even with his oath, I couldn’t excuse it.

Him doing that had fucking *hurt*.

“Then I’m sorrier than you know for breaking it,” he said shortly, glancing away.

He was? “I realize you had things going on back then.”

Lan looked back at me. “When? Are we talking about the queen’s

orders?”

Uh . . . I shook my head.

His dark gaze roamed my face. “You mean before . . . When I left for the Unseelie court?”

I lifted a shoulder. “I guess so.”

Lan stared at me, opening and closing his mouth once. I willed him to say whatever words were building in his mind, to explain what had driven him to leave so suddenly.

But the words didn’t come.

He leaned back. “It seems like we’ll have to continue on foot from here.” Standing, he crossed to his clothes, and blinking into my magical vision, I watched him draw red energy from the fire in a slow stream to dry his garments. The puddles of water closest to him turned a distinct putrid green in response.

Right. The door. “I’m really not sure if my theory is correct. We could end up going in the complete wrong direction.”

“Your instincts are sound.”

A wrinkle formed between my brows. “Are you sick? I’m not used to you agreeing with me.”

That earned me a slanted grin. “Can you blame a guy? You’re something to behold when you’re angry.”

Sweet-talking Faolan. I gaped, then quickly busied myself with my clothes, waiting for him to finish drying his things first so I didn’t extinguish our fire. As I drew from the flames and my clothes began to steam, I surreptitiously watched the way Lan studied the pools of putrid water, which were now clearing to crystal-clear liquid from my Seelie magic.

His jaw tightened, and he shifted his attention to the stars as I finished up and got dressed again. Warmth had replaced the cold, but the last thing I wanted was to leave the heat of our fire.

“Last time I ran southwest from the docking town,” I said quietly, coming to stand next to him. “So we’ll run northeast, I suppose.”

“Lead the way, Your Majesty.” He stepped aside and gestured for me to go ahead of him.

Not for the first time since seeing his memory of being sorted by the Oracle, my heart twisted at just how many walls Lan had up. At all times. He hid behind his sharp tongue and hard gaze, and his even harder words.

Was reminding himself of who my father was by calling me ‘Your

Majesty' his way of slamming those barriers up again? My instincts suggested that was exactly what he was doing. And if Lan was right about my instincts being sound, then presumably they were right about *him*. So, the real question was, should I go to the effort of breaking those barriers down? We couldn't touch. We were from opposite courts. He had an oath to the queen that couldn't be broken. An oath that could hurt me time and again. And if breaking down his walls was possible . . . what then? There were so many *other* barriers to us being together that didn't even originate from Faolan.

All I knew? My heart was damn heavy these days.

I shifted my attention to the trees and reached over my shoulder to touch the hilt of a sword. I still had the queen's gifted weapons strapped to my back, but I mourned the loss of the shield, which could be at the bottom of the sea by now for all I knew.

"Let's go." I set out at a jog, forcing my protesting legs and arms to pump. Stealing a look up at the stars, I set my course and then let myself fall into a rhythm that I increased gradually as my body heated and muscles limbered.

With an ear on Lan's movements to make sure he was keeping up, I increased my speed, and soon we were hurtling through the forest where I'd done my best to save the humans on the cruise ship, fought Yarrow, and then killed those fae.

Was I getting it completely wrong? Honestly, it felt like I was grasping at straws with all this: spirits, glittering paths, full moons and equinoxes. Where the hell was I even running to right now?

Leaping over a small stream, I whispered, "I need help."

A trickle of something akin to electricity coursed over my arms, tripped off my fingers, and then there she was, the woman from the boat.

I watched her eagerly, part of me oddly soothed when she offered a warm smile.

Maybe her smile was one I shouldn't trust, though. After all, if my growing theories about someone interfering in my and Lan's magic had some basis in reality, then I was the pawn in a battle between Underhill and some other powerful being. The *spirit* had been the one to imply I should touch Lan and counter the wave's power. And look where that got us.

At the same time . . . it was almost like I knew her. Maybe because she'd gone through the same plight I was currently in? I wasn't sure.

All that aside, she was officially my best bet, unless I wanted to separate

this whole area into quadrants and work at this systematically over the course of several *years*.

“Which way?” I mouthed at her.

She pointed to the ground.

Slowing slightly, I peered around. This definitely wasn’t the right place. I glanced up at her in confusion, burningly aware of Lan’s proximity. I shrugged and pulled a face in a silent mime that hopefully got my point across.

She pointed to the ground again, but as her mouth opened, she blanched and whipped to look behind me.

I heard them at the same time. “We have company,” I hissed over my shoulder, dashing for the nearest tree.

An arrow whistled by my head and Lan sucked in a sharp breath.

Dread filled me as I turned, expecting the worst.

“Did it hit you?” he demanded, searching me frantically.

I sagged, yanking him behind a tree—careful to only touch his cloak. “I thought it got you.”

Releasing him, I peered around the tree.

“Where did they go?” he murmured.

The arrow had come from directly ahead. “I heard multiple footsteps, so there’s more than just one of them.”

A rustle sounded overhead. I glanced up, and a shout of alarm lodged in my throat as a wild fae dropped down on Lan.

“They’re in the trees!” I lunged forward to grip the fae’s shoulders, but Lan twisted and shoved the man to the forest floor.

One look at his crazed eyes told me everything I needed to know. “They’re mad—”

A weight collided into my back. I let momentum carry me forward, turning it into a roll as I sprang to my feet.

This one was a woman—the first wild fae woman I’d ever seen. And there wasn’t a single speck of sanity in her gaze.

“Two more in the trees. Keep an ear out for them.” Lan grunted, bringing the hilt of his sword down against the male’s temple with a heavy crack.

I drew one of my gifted swords, spinning to the left as a whistle sounded from above. *Fuck*. An arrow embedded in the soil where I’d just stood. Drawing green energy from the surrounding trees, I urged their branches to form a lattice overhead, pushing out a torrent of indigo. Furious crackles and

a showering of leaves told me the trees had done just that.

“Thank you,” I whispered, dancing back as the woman swiped at me. She’d left herself open, so I stepped behind her and flipped my sword, holding the hilt tight as I delivered a bruising punch to her jaw.

She crumpled, eyes rolling back in her head.

More footsteps spun Lan and me to the northeast again, and my heart hammered.

A wall of wild—and completely *mad*—fae bore down on us. A village or entire community of them, a semblance of an army.

“Yeah, I’m not feeling so great about those numbers,” I said, sheathing the blade.

Lan slid his sword away too. “Run now and live later?”

Sounded fucking good to me.

I took the lead, dodging between trees in a bid to render their arrows useless. They thudded into the trees behind us, and I hated that Lan was at the back, closer to the danger.

What a time to lose my new shield.

I pulled blue energy from the rocks underfoot to aid in my flight, and soon—as had happened in the past—my feet were barely touching the ground.

The female spirit ran beside me, waving to get my attention. “*You need him.*”

Huh?

I glanced back.

Oh, shit. Where was Lan? Fear spiked in my chest as I slammed to a halt and doubled back, racing back the way I’d come.

I found him just reaching the top of the last rise. “You’re okay?”

“Just trying to keep up,” he said dryly. “They abandoned the chase a while back.”

“I thought you were with me.” I grimaced.

“I’m not sure anything living could have kept up with you,” he said with a grunt.

He might not be wrong on that count. I glanced around for the spirit, but she’d disappeared again. “Why did they stop?”

Lan perched on a rock. “No idea. I looked back, and they’d just stopped. All of them.”

I blew out a breath. “I’d completely forgotten that there might be mad fae

about. There is no way Ruby was able to call them all to his troop.” There was more of a reason to find that door than ever.

And if my spirit helper was right, then Lan had to be with me. As backup, perhaps, being the protector he’d promised the queen he’d be. Which meant my spirit friend knew we were headed into danger. That wasn’t surprising, really—we had to get past a small army of wild fae somehow. My worry was that the danger was worse again on the other side of the army.

“What direction did they leave in? We’ll have to circle around them,” I said.

“They dispersed in all directions.”

Drat.

“Picking through them will be hard work,” Lan continued. “We need rest, or we’ll get sloppy. I’ll take the first watch.”

Yeah, and he was almost swaying on the spot. When *did* he last sleep? He had all those lashes to recover from. “I’m feeling awake after sleeping on the boat. I’ll go first.”

He shot me a look, but the fatigue on his face was so clear he looked about ready to buckle. “If you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll wake you in a couple of hours.”

I walked a circle around our resting site for the night after Faolan scraped leaves and twigs into a large pile as a barrier against the ground, then pulled his cloak tightly around himself to rest. We were clear in all directions from what I could see, both with my eyes and with my magic.

Finding a rock that faced the direction we’d last seen the wild fae, I slowed my breathing and tuned into the noises of the forest.

A red crossbill flitted down in front my face, and I almost fell backward off the rock, catching myself in time to hear the bird speak.

“Kallik,” Ruby’s relieved voice bubbled from the bird’s beak. “You are safe.”

My heart thumping hard enough to escape my damn chest, I said, “Faolan and I are safe.” Though he hadn’t asked about my Unseelie protector, and really, I wouldn’t expect him to care. “What of the others on the boat? Did they make it?”

The bird ruffled its feathers and bobbed its head. “All are accounted for. They will soon reach their destination, but Drake thought it best to dock before reaching the town—considering what happened there not long ago.”

Drake was okay—relief flowed through me, warming me.

And it was smart of him to avoid another run-in with the town that Yarrow had stirred up. I hadn't paid any attention to the human news lately, but I doubted they were very happy with us, simply because they hadn't been happy with us *before* our kind blew up a cruise ship.

"We're trying to reach the door," I whispered to him. "But there are mad fae in the forest. We were attacked by them not long ago, and they're hanging out between us and the entrance. Well, if we're in the right position."

"I flew southeast to find you," he told me.

We were headed in the right direction. Good to know. "We plan to continue on soon. In a few hours at the most, I hope."

The bird nodded sagely. "Best not to linger overlong in one place. What direction will you take? I will send those on the vessel to aid you through the forest."

I wasn't sure it made sense for us to have company out here. One, they wouldn't be able to keep up. And two, the more noise we made, the better our chances of being spotted. Plus, something deterred me from having an audience when I made it back to the entrance. "No. Thank you, but no. It's best that Lan and I continue on alone. If we're careful, there's no reason we can't avoid company. Please give word to Drake and the captain that we'll meet them there as soon as we're able."

"Humans and the courts alike are after our people, young one," Ruby said gravely. "I will ask that the crew remain docked for another day. If your mission extends beyond that, I must get them to the sanctuary."

True. "Yes, I wasn't thinking. Of course it's unsafe for them too."

"You know where the sanctuary is, I believe."

I nodded.

"Then you know what to do if you find yourself unable to get to the boat on time." His words were loaded, and I knew exactly why.

The man sleeping behind me wouldn't be welcome in the sanctuary. "Understood."

The crossbill tilted its head. "I have something for you when you arrive. Something I believe will bring you happiness."

I arched a brow. "Ogre brew?"

Rubezahl belted out a deep, rich laugh. "That also brings a sore head the next day. No, this gift I think you'll like more. Until then, be safe and move with caution. You are more necessary to what lies ahead than you know."

I stared after the crossbill as it took flight into the dark night.

What the hell did *that* mean?

I was already in this far more than I wanted to be. I peered northeast to the place I was, at this point, *desperate* to reach. The answer was there, I knew it. And an undead army and black-fire inferno couldn't keep me from it.

I let Faolan sleep for four hours, watching over him while I mused about what might lie ahead. The fire burned low, and I fed it twigs, the smoke curling up as the wet wood fought to catch. Within the smoke, I could almost see images, like when Cinth and I were young and gazed at the clouds, dissecting them for shapes that weren't quite there until we imagined them into being.

I waved my hand through the smoke, dissipating it, feeling a wave of longing for Cinth. I wished she were here for me to lean on. And maybe cook for me. My belly grumbled loudly.

I was damn well starving.

Looking around, I considered what might be available for food in the forest. There was no movement, no hares or deer, and we couldn't eat a whole deer in one go anyway. I wouldn't waste a death like that.

The spring equinox had passed, but that hardly meant we were in growing season here in Alaska.

Maybe I could hurry things up?

Looking through the lens of my magic, I swept the area, not for enemies but for any sign of seeds or plants buried in the still-frozen ground.

There, not far from our fire, I sensed the pulsing life of a huckleberry plant. "Bingo," I whispered.

Kneeling beside the fire and cupping my hands around the frozen earth, I fed a trickle of my indigo magic into the seed itself. Drawing from the fire and the other plants around us, I kept feeding energy into the plant until it burst from its seed pocket and through the now soft and warm ground.

“Come on, little plant,” I whispered, urging it upward with my magic more and more until there was a small tree covered with bright pink blossoms. This was no huckleberry bush, but I wasn’t about to stop.

Sweat slid down my cheek from the effort—growing things wasn’t my forte, but it would be worth it in the end if we had something to eat. The blossoms drooped, petals fell, and fruit appeared—small and pea-sized at first—but I continued directing energy into it until the globes were deep gold and the size of both my fists put together.

I let the magic fade and blew out a heavy sigh.

This was indeed no huckleberry bush, even though that was what the seeds had started as in the beginning. I ran my fingers over the velvety outer skin of the fruit closest to me and plucked it off. Bringing it to my nose, I drew in a breath, and the smell about knocked me to my knees. Heady whispers of summer breezes, spiced rum, and home cooking, all wrapped up in this one fruit. *How?*

Maybe I didn’t care, not right then.

I bit into it, and a rush of flavors and juice coated my tongue. But more than that, energy shot through me as if I’d just downed ten cups of espresso, without the bitter taste.

I dared to put my foot to Lan’s leg, shoving him a little but pulling back before a connection could spark. “Wake up, you’re going to want in on this.”

Because already the bush was shrinking, falling under the deathly spell of the cold. I pulled the remaining fruit off—there were only seven—and handed one to a groggy Lan.

He took a bite, and his eyes popped open wide. “What. Is. This?”

“I might not be able to cook, but I can grow fruit apparently.” I laughed, feeling lighter than I had since this whole debacle had started.

“You grew this?” he said around a mouthful. “This is . . . I don’t even know what this is.”

“Started as a huckleberry bush.” I finished the last bit of my fruit, and my belly was happy. More than that, my body felt like I could go on for days, fresh as a chain of daisies.

“You got a bag? We should take these with us,” I said.

Lan took them, and our fingers brushed against one another. Our magic flared to life, and I stumbled back, tripping over the fire to get away from him. Coals got kicked across the forest floor, and I rolled to get off them before they burned through my cloak and leather garments.

Faolan's reaction hadn't been much better, and I stared across the clearing at him in bafflement.

"Fuck," he muttered, shaking his head.

"Actually, I believe that's quite possibly the worst thing we could do." I made myself smile, even though a tiny part of me was breaking over the fact that we really couldn't touch without chaos ensuing. Maybe I couldn't have fully trusted him again after the whole subterfuge with his oath to the queen—I had no idea—but to have the choice of being together taken from us felt so . . . cruel and final. A simple touch caused anarchy, never mind the two of us getting naked and rolling around together.

That thought hit my head like a hammer blow, and in an instant, I could all too easily see Lan naked again, warming himself by the fire. My mind altered the scene just a *little*—we were helping each other get warm. *Oh, yeah.*

"Orphan, are you okay? You sound like you can't breathe," he said, concern heavy in his voice.

I swallowed hard and kept my head down. "Yup. Just give me a second." Mighty Lugh, I needed to get some.

Pictures of naked Lan were *not* helping, and I tried to think about other things. Like the wild fae. Underhill. The fact that we had a long way to go.

The fact that I'd be a goner if the Seelie court got hold of me.

Yup, that did it.

"Come on." I stood and dusted off my pants, not looking him in the face. Because I had the feeling that he'd take one look in my bedroom eyes and know how badly he still affected me. It was imperative that Lan believed me impartial, then he could be strong for both of us. If he cracked, then I surely would.

Leading the way, both of us refreshed and full of whatever the hell that fruit had been, we continued northeast. I didn't know how far away we were from the door, and we could have the wild fae to contend with again.

A crack of branches ahead, and I knew that we'd come upon them.

Seriously? I mean, nice of them to let us sleep and all, but *seriously?*

"Do we just kill them?" Lan asked, surprising me. Not that he'd want to kill them, necessarily, but that he'd defer to me.

"It isn't their fault the madness took them." My own brush with possession and the fallout of it was fresh in my mind. Though fairly certain that my recurring lapses in sanity were of a different nature than the madness

gripping other fae, the experiences had given me a new empathy toward those suffering from the closure of Underhill. “If they were in their right minds, this wouldn’t be happening.”

The thing was, the fae coming at us now weren’t showing weapons or even aggression. They were sniffing the air like animals finding . . . food.

Oh, shit.

“I think we’re on the menu,” I said in horror.

I took off, pushing Lan ahead of me. “Just go. Go!”

He didn’t argue as we bolted from the area the wild fae were holding. We tried another route.

Tried.

The next several hours consisted of several repetitions of the same scenario: the two of us making a foray into the area we *wanted* to go, only to be driven out with arrows and weapons shot our way. We weren’t getting anywhere soon.

Hours ticked by, and my frustration grew. “Damn it all!” I snapped after our seventh attempt to get past the wild fae. “There’s something more going on here.”

This wasn’t at all like the madness I’d encountered prior. Just before my first meeting with Ruby, the group of giants attacked me simply because they saw me. The same with Ivan attacking that other stray. There’d been no rhyme nor reason to their actions.

That pattern was null and void right now. They were herding us, or protecting something, but there was definite unity to their movements.

“I agree,” Lan grunted.

I crouched, sucking in gulps of air I really didn’t need. “I don’t think this is Underhill. Maybe whoever is messing with us is doing the same to these wild fae.”

He pressed his lips together. “Or Underhill is getting impatient and angry.”

Shit. I hadn’t considered that. My tone was grim. “How the hell are we going to get through them?”

“Ready to kill them?” Faolan drawled, dark eyes amused.

Fucking *amused*.

I glared at him. “No. There has to be a way to distract them. We just haven’t found it.”

“Unless they like fruit, we’ve got nothing,” he said, and then our eyes

locked. He pulled one of the golden, magic-made fruits out of his bag. “You think?”

“We could try it with one, see if it works. If it does . . . we could just use them like grenades, tossing them out whenever they get close.” Standing there, the smell of the fruit enticed me as it spread through the air. Yeah, maybe this would work.

Lan nodded. “Once we’re at the doorway, what then?”

“Then we go through,” I said.

“Just like that?” He frowned. “You think it will be that easy?”

I shrugged. “No idea.” I mean, I hoped it would be that easy, but I truly had no idea how to open a doorway that had been closed for longer than anyone was willing to confess. Given what the spirit had told me, this situation had been unfolding for decades, maybe longer.

We each carried two fruits as we started our jog into what I’d now dubbed ‘the forbidden territory.’

Just like before, the wild fae came at us, brandishing weapons but not doing much more than that. Until they saw the fruit we carried. There were four of them, three men and the woman from earlier.

They started their creepy air sniffing all over again.

“Toss it over there.” I pointed off our path, and Lan tossed one of his fruit grenades overhand through the tree branches. I flinched, thinking that the beautiful fruit would end up bruised or split open, but nope, it landed on a pile of moss like a perfect offering.

The wild fae sprinted after the golden gift, and I took off running deeper into the territory than we’d managed until that point.

This was going to work!

We ran for maybe ten minutes before the next group of six found us. Hollering and screaming, they pulled their bowstrings taut before I held up one of the fruits. “You want this?” I swayed it back and forth, their heads following it like dogs slobbering for a treat.

If this was what they wanted, then I wasn’t questioning it.

I lobbed the fruit to the left.

Once more they followed the arc of the golden pod, the smell filling the air and demanding their attention, and once more Lan and I took the opportunity handed to us.

“If I’d known you could grow fruit like this,” Lan said as we hopped a log together, “I’m sure my queen would have taken you in years ago. You

could have been a gardener and avoided all this mess.”

I laughed. “Can you just see it? Me a gardener?” And I’d have to open a black-market business anyway—there was no way this fruit didn’t contain some kind of drug I’d accidentally created.

He laughed with me, and a lightness flowed between us that was . . . nice.

One more group of wild fae and the same result when we tossed the fruit. Which was all well and good, but my eyes were now on the surrounding ground and trees. I could almost see the silvery path that I’d followed to the doorway and a fresh sense of urgency unleashed within me, thrumming through my blood, making me pick up speed. “This is the way.”

“Orphan,” Lan called. “Not so fast.”

“That’s what she said,” I retorted, and listened to him stumble behind me.

My grin widened.

Underhill was close.

My journey was almost done. The weight would come off my shoulders. And maybe . . . *maybe* the turbulent magic would ease between Faolan and me? I mean, there was a good reason our opposite courts were barred from romantic relationships, so it was hard to know what about our touch was *normal* for an Unseelie and Seelie to experience, and what was *abnormal* because of Underhill or this person possessing me. But in those few moments of laughing and tossing fruit to the wild fae as if we were in one of those human-made zoos . . . I had hope.

I looked away from Lan, snickering, one fruit still clutched in my hand as I turned to face the path.

There it was, just ahead of me, etched into the same tree as before.

The doorway to Underhill.

The actual doorway.

I slid to a stop and found my mouth suddenly bone dry.

Lan slowed beside me, his heat and the smell of him wrapping around me. “I’ve got your back, Orphan. Go open the door.”

He could see it too. That had to be a good sign.

Part of me just couldn’t believe we’d really made it.

Taking a breath, I walked forward, my feet not faltering until I reached the doorway. Bending, I placed the golden fruit at the foot of the door, an offering to Underhill.

I was willing to do anything at this point.

I took a look through my magical lens. Hmm, there wasn’t any energy

flowing off the doorway, no magic tingling or electrical currents.

Maybe I had to touch it to start things?

I reached out and hovered my hands over the wood, all while considering everything I'd been told about the person who would reopen Underhill.

It had to be someone worthy, Ruby had said.

Am I?

I was the king's daughter, but I was a mutt. I was House Royal on one side and human on the other. Humans couldn't enter Underhill without massive repercussions. Basically, Underhill ate them. I hadn't had any issues entering the fae homeland in the past, but then again, had I ever *really* entered Underhill?

No, it had just been the fake.

Could I even get in when the fae realm wasn't broken?

"Orphan, the wild fae are coming," Lan said softly. "Open the door."

Open the door—like it was just that easy. "Maybe you should try."

I dared a look at him. With my magical vision still snapped into place, I could see the beautiful tangle of Lan's deep ruby threads, but they didn't mask his expression. He stared at me like I'd sprouted a second head.

"What?" he blurted.

"Ruby said the person who reopens the door to Underhill must be worthy. I'm a mutt, Lan, I know it. You know it. Underhill knows it. At least you're the grandson of Lugh. What if—"

"And I ended up in the Unseelie court. Just open the damn door, woman," he growled as the first wild fae reached him.

I rolled the fruit his way—sorry, Underhill—and he scooped it up, then threw it as far as he could back into the forest. It wouldn't buy us much time.

Okay, Kallik.

I knelt at the door, my knees sinking into the spring-softened ground. Behind me, the wild fae snarled over the fruit, but then . . .

Quiet reigned.

Lan sucked in a sharp breath. "The fruit . . . it stopped their madness."

Despite myself, I twisted around in time to see the wild fae approaching, their hands lifted in supplication.

"We . . . we don't know what happened. We were asked to watch for you, to help you," the man in the lead said, his voice soft, his bushy dark-blond beard wiggling when he spoke.

My eyes went to his hands.

Hand.

He was missing his right hand. Like Drake. What in the ever-loving—
Lan let out a sigh. “The *door*, Orphan.”

I nodded. The wild fae may appear sane for the time being, but who knew how long that would last. Focusing through my magical lens again, I turned back to the doorway. Worthy. I had to be worthy.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I reached out again and put my hand on the wooden door, bracing for . . . something.

A whoosh? A magical light display? Burning pain?

What I wasn't ready for was nothing. Or maybe that was exactly what I was waiting for. Nothing.

Because I wasn't worthy.

I blinked and ran my hand over the door, the wood solid and smooth under my palms. “There isn't a doorknob. No way to open it.”

Lan stayed where he was, eyeing the wild fae no doubt. “Try the queen's sword, maybe?”

The Unseelie queen *had* seemed to know far more than she'd let on when I last saw her, and the swords she'd gifted me could carry a greater purpose. Worth a shot. I was fresh out of ideas.

May as well try to pry open the door to Underhill. Maybe I wasn't worthy, but surely the queen of the Unseelie would be considered as such. Maybe the door would think I was her.

Pulling a sword from its sheath, I felt the eyes of the fae heavy on me. Others crept close, but I had to agree with Lan's assessment. The difference was in their eyes. I could see their stability. Unless I was mistaken, the fruit had somehow brought them back from the brink of madness.

The fruit I *grew*.

Something I could think about later.

Putting the tip of the queen's sword to what I hoped was the edge of the door, I pressed it into the wood, driving the weapon deep. The sharp blade cut easily into the wood, and my chest tightened with hope.

A thrumming echoed through the ground, and the tree *started up*, like the rumble of a big truck drawing closer and closer.

There was no chance to dodge the explosion. A magical impact made of every color, of every element, threw me backward, slamming me into the group of wild fae.

Stunned, ears ringing and body shaken, I sat and gaped at the doorway.

Or where the doorway should have been.

No.

Dread pinned me to the spot.

The door was gone. The tree had a gaping hole in it, the rest charred remains.

Apparently, I'd destroyed the entrance to Underhill once again.

Well that was like building up to a sneeze and not actually sneezing.

Okay, a whole heap worse than that.

I stared at the burned remains of the tree. “I don’t understand. She showed me the path. Or let her spirits show me the path. I don’t know. I just . . . she’s been talking to me all this time, Lan. I—”

I turned my open-mouthed expression on Lan as he moved to stand in front of me, blocking my view of the destroyed entrance.

“Why didn’t she let me through?” I whispered, more to myself than him. Though I already knew the answer.

I was lacking something Underhill required.

Worth.

She’d showed me the door, but I’d screwed it up somehow.

Faolan’s expression was grave. “What did you feel?”

Uh. Rejection. “Maybe you were meant to do it.” Didn’t my spirit guide tell me that I needed him? I’d been blinded by my ambition to restore my reputation and name and catapult myself to glory. In other words, I’d acted like Yarrow would have.

Fuck.

I clenched my jaw, trying to ignore the wild fae gaping at the annihilated tree and then at me. “The entrance is destroyed.”

“So we find another one,” Lan said.

Oh, yeah. Totally. I’d just pull one out of my ass. “No point. I’d probably just destroy that too.”

He sighed and I caught the twitching of his fingers that suggested he wanted to either haul me away or strangle me.

The wild fae began to murmur, and I growled, stalking from the clearing and off into the trees. I didn't want a damn audience for my every failure. So far, I'd achieved the exact opposite of what I'd set out to do.

Out of sight of the fae who'd been attacking us an hour ago, I rested back against a tree trunk and slid to the ground.

Unworthy.

In what regard? My moral caliber? My knowledge? My mutt status?

Faolan sat against the tree opposite. "We need to figure this out."

No kidding.

"So you need to fill me in on everything you've held back until this point," he finished.

I lifted my head and eyed his wry expression. "That's a long story. Sure you've got time?"

"I can shift a few things around in my schedule. I'll manage."

Should I tell him about the spirits? Pretty sure I half-shouted something about them in his face a moment ago. And I really did need to figure this out. I'd get 'worthier' if that's what it took. Lugh knew, I wanted to feel that way too.

"You know what happened with the Oracle," I started. "I haven't told you about the contact I've had from Underhill though."

His eyes widened before he schooled his expression. "Visits. Sure. Go ahead."

I relaxed slightly, though the feathering pulse in his throat told me Lan was muting his true reaction. "At first it was weird messages through the radio in my . . ." I shot a glance at him. "My mother's language. Then a mad fae gave me a message. On the spring equinox, I was shown a—"

"Path," he said for me. "And that led you to the door."

I took a breath. "Yeah. You know how that ended. When we were on the outcasts' boat, a woman appeared to me. She said that she'd once been given the same task—to restore Underhill—and failed. Underhill sent her to guide me, I think."

Lan peered around. "Can't you just ask her, then?"

I shook my head. "I don't think she can tell me everything. I don't know why—maybe the thing that possesses me when we touch is limiting her reach?"

He shifted closer. “What has she told you so far?”

“I asked her where Underhill was. She pointed at the ground.”

A wrinkle formed between his dark brows. “Where?”

“Back where the wild fae first attacked us.”

“You think there’s an entrance back there?”

“No fucking idea. Seriously. I didn’t see any door. But we were also under attack, so there was no time to really look.” I groaned and thumped my head into my hands, forcing my fingers through my hair—possibly to tear it out. I was undecided.

“That’s our best bet then . . . unless there’s more,” Lan prompted.

I muttered to the ground, “I should have known this would happen. Ruby warned me.”

Lan stilled, his body tensing up. “He did?”

“Yeah. Maybe he knew Underhill would reject me.” I stared at the leaf litter and rich soil underfoot.

“What exactly has he told you about Underhill?” Lan asked.

I looked up at him again. “He’s aware that the courts have been covering up the demise of the fae realm. When I first arrived, he said that he believed most answers tended to lie in . . . ” I straightened. “ . . . in understanding our magic.”

Was that it?

I couldn’t get in because I didn’t understand my magic? I mean, there was so much I hadn’t understood about my fae magic. Like its ability to shatter illusions, whatever the hell happened each time Faolan and I touched, and the way I’d grown crazy-powerful fruit that could *cure madness*.

Ruby didn’t just talk for the sake of it. He was right far more often than he was wrong—maybe even all the time.

An iota of relief swam through me. “My magic’s the problem. It has to be.”

“Because Rubezahl said so?” Lan asked in cool tones.

Hmm. “Not just because of that. It makes sense.” And it was something I could work on. With help.

Luckily, the protector of the outcasts had volunteered to do just that. “Ruby offered to help me understand my magic a while back. He knew what I’d have to learn.”

I had to get to Ruby.

Lan arched a brow. “I’m sure he did.”

Okay, that was definitely a jab. “Have you got an issue with him?”

“If he knew you were going to fail, then why not just tell you?” His gaze darkened. “Why hint at the dangers without laying them out? Why not send someone with you to help?”

“Because he’s fumbling through this like everyone else?” I replied, a bite to my voice. “Just because he has some answers, doesn’t mean that he has them all. The only person who probably has them all is the . . .”

Lan smiled. “The Oracle.”

I hugged my knees to my chest. “The Oracle no one can find between her public appearances.”

“Have you tried?”

I snapped, “I’d have more luck searching for another entrance to Underhill.”

“How do you know? She may not be in the Triangle, I grant you, but she could be in one of the other territories. Maybe it’s just a matter of putting the word out or venturing through more of Alaska. We could fly out of the Triangle, maybe head further north.”

Yeah, because humans made it so easy for us to fly. Even using our own aircraft, the number of our flights allowed in and out of a human airport operated per a strict quota and tight regulations. If a fae wanted to travel on *their* aircraft? That involved a mountain of paperwork, a giant yellow ‘F’ stuck to the front of our clothing, sitting at the very back of the plane in a cordoned-off area, *and* entering the craft through a separate door. You think they’d learn from their own history, but nope. “I’m sick of chasing a breeze. It sure as hell didn’t work this time.” I sat cross-legged and held his gaze. “Lan, I need to understand my magic better. Once I do, I can return here by the summer solstice and hopefully find another entrance to the fae realm. But that doesn’t give me much time. I can’t waste weeks on a wild kelpie chase for the Oracle.”

Shaking my head, I got to my feet and brushed leaves off my butt.

Lan joined me, crowding in close. “Are you certain this is the right course?”

I glared at him. “If you’ve got a better idea, then you’re welcome to share. I’m all ears.”

He opened his mouth.

“One that isn’t biased by whatever issue you’ve got with Ruby. Because that’s *your* issue, not mine.”

Faolan's mouth closed, and he pressed his lips together.

I waited for him to protest further, but whatever thoughts were running through his head, he wasn't sharing them just yet.

He stepped back. "You're going to the outcast meeting point to consult Rubezahl then." Statement, not a question.

I nodded. It was the only path forward that I could see.

"Then we best get going," he said, consulting the sky.

My stomach plummeted to the ground. *Oh . . .*

"Lan, Ruby may have a problem with you being there."

In fact, I knew he *definitely* did.

"I'm well aware, Orphan. My guess is that he'd rather kill me than grant me entrance."

"You're not far off," I said uneasily. "So you'll need to . . . wait here. We can meet in a month or two, closer to the summer solstice."

"Not happening."

I rolled my eyes. "Happening, Lan. He's not going to let an Unseelie spy into the sanctuary. No way."

Lan's jaw tightened, and he drew closer than he'd dared to since the last time we accidentally touched. "Let me make this crystal fucking clear, Kallik. I *can't* let you leave without me."

Oh, right. "Your oath to the queen." There were real consequences to breaking pledges to fae royalty. Unless something or someone physically stopped him, Lan had to fulfill his orders.

Dammit. This made things far trickier. I'd already come to the realization that I couldn't kill Faolan. And he'd already proven that he was able to find me pretty much everywhere.

I blew out a breath. "Let's just—"

"Get down," he hissed, herding me against the tree.

Obedying without question, I tilted my head and caught the faint rumble of running footsteps.

"Looks like the wild fae have gone mad again. The fruit must have worn off," Lan said.

"Or we have new visitors," I replied.

I blinked into my magical vision and peered through the trees. *Reds, yellows, greens, blues, pinks, indigos.* A mixture of fae. Grinning, I left the safety of the tree and Lan. "Outcasts."

Running past Lan and the wild fae, who still seemed to be in a state of

shock, I almost collided with Drake.

“Kallik!” he said, relief showering his features.

I was drawn into a tight one-armed hug.

“You’re all right,” he murmured into my hair.

“And you too. How did you know we were here? I told Ruby not to send you.”

He released me, and I took in the other crew members. Had anyone stayed with the boat? “Rubezahl told us to dock for a day and night, and that if you didn’t arrive, we were to continue on, but then we heard the explosion.”

What explosion?

Drake glanced over my shoulder, and I tracked his baffled gaze to the tree. *Ah, that explosion.*

“You heard it from the town?” I asked, falling into step with him back into the clearing.

“Did we ever,” Yoland said, joining us.

“You got here awfully quick.” Lan moved to stand beside me. “How?”

The air seemed to cool as Drake and Yoland regarded him.

“We go to great lengths for our own,” Drake gritted out, obviously not considering Lan as part of that number.

Faolan was right. They did get here quick even by fae standards. But that didn’t bother me. Perhaps I was considered one of the strays by now, yet they’d made their stance on loyalty clear from the get-go. I had to earn their trust, and I could assume that whatever method they’d used to get here so fast was filed away under ‘Keep Secret from Newbies’.

Fine by me.

Ignoring Lan, Drake shot me a grave look. “Yoland here was keeping watch on the activity in the docking town, in case the humans caught sight of us and decided to attack. When the explosion happened, a group of them entered the forest with weapons. We decided a change of plan was necessary.”

I turned to scan the forest behind me.

“They’re an hour or so behind us,” Drake said. “But they’re coming, and we should make scarce before they get here.” His gaze wandered to the tree again.

I caught his curious look and pulled a face. “I’ll explain another time. In the meantime, we found wild fae in these parts. They need to reach the

sanctuary too.”

It was a clear order, and Drake dipped his head while Yoland went for a full salute. They barked a few commands to the crew, and the wild fae who’d traveled with us from Unimak approached those who’d eaten my happy-drug fruit.

Just one more thing.

Striding back through the forest, I searched for him. “Lan?” I called softly.

Nothing. I strode to the clearing, but there was no sign of him there either. I dragged a hand over my face. The *fucker* had pulled a disappearing act on me. Again.

“Bastard,” I shouted, startling a wild fae woman close by. I didn’t care. Faolan was watching me right this second.

And he planned to follow me all the way to the sanctuary.

And I had no damn way to find him or stop him.

“Uh . . . you all right, Alli?” Drake said in a low voice.

Me? All right?

No.

Ruby had ordered me to kill Lan to ensure he never made it anywhere near the sanctuary. My guts twisted at the very thought because I couldn’t kill Lan. No way, no how. Yet Ruby had made it clear the order was to be fulfilled.

I sighed. “Let’s get everyone back to Rubezahl.”

If my magic somehow held the answer to this fucked-up situation, then I wouldn’t rest until I discovered it.

“Just one thing,” Drake said, grimacing.

I stilled, really not sure I could take one more thing today. “Yeah?”

“I thought you should know . . . Ruby was very clear that we shouldn’t allow Lugh’s grandson to follow us. If he attempts to do so, he’ll be killed on sight.” Drake rubbed the back of his head. “He’s not welcome in the sanctuary. His ties to the Unseelie queen and all.”

I nodded, studying the clearing once more for any sign of him. “Thank you for telling me. Ruby had already made that very clear to me.”

Leaving Drake’s side, I strode to the front of the crew and wild fae. “Let’s go, everyone. Quiet and fast and alert. There’s a hostile company close by.”

Breaking into a fast walk, I led the way, still attuned for any sounds that could alert me to Lan’s presence.

“I really hope you heard that, you bloody moron,” I muttered under my breath. “They’ll kill you. Stay away from me.”

The faintest whisper of a breeze swept across my cheek, and though it had to be coincidence, I felt my eyes close for a brief second in the hope that he’d heard.

There was one place Lan couldn’t follow me and live because there was one place that contained a giant who was powerful enough to see him.

And I was headed straight for it.

I kept the group moving for the next few hours, headed north and angling slightly west. I'd managed to convince Drake that we should continue on foot instead of returning to the boat to take the most efficient route to the sanctuary. Call me a coward, but I didn't trust the water right now. If I was to be in danger, which seemed more than likely these days, then I wanted to be in danger on solid, *dry* land.

Perhaps Faolan had motivated me too. He was—if nothing else—a fae of his word. And his oath to his queen put him in a tight spot.

I had no doubt the invisible bastard was close.

"Where did you get the sword?" Drake asked as we navigated another thick bunch of saplings.

I touched the handle of the remaining sword given to me by the Unseelie queen. Two swords and a shield and this was all I had left.

"A friend," I said. I glanced to see the lines tighten around his eyes. Jealousy? "Not Lan, a female friend." The truth probably wouldn't go down well with an outcast.

His expression eased, and I shook my head.

"Sorry, I just . . . he has two hands." He gave me a wry twist of a smile. "He's got one up on me already."

A few chuckles rumbled around us.

"Ha ha," I retorted. "And look, it's . . . it's complicated, like you said, but I'll let you know when I figure it out." He'd surely seen me and Lan kiss on the boat before we were swept overboard, so the glib reply fell easily from my lips.

“I know. I’m still happy to wait, believe me.” He moved closer, lowering his voice. “But do I have a chance, gorgeous? Any at all?”

Wow, that was bold. Which was also sort of a turn-on. And if I was being honest . . . “Yes.” He reached for me, and I held up a finger. “But—”

“But?”

“*But* there are things that I have to deal with first. The fact that I’m pretty much in exile, and both courts would have my head if they could.” I grimaced. “Not what I would call a life conducive to any kind of healthy relationship.” Not to mention Underhill and my spirit visitors. *Ugh*.

Drake winked. “Still waiting. I got it. Just promise me we’ll revisit this subject every so often, okay? I don’t want to miss my chance.”

I couldn’t help the curve of my lips. He was just so carefree and so lacking in walls of any kind. “Deal.” Assuming I was alive, and assuming he’d still want me when he knew the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help me, goddess.

As night fell, we picked a copse of hemlock trees for our camp, and the branches bent inward after a few whispers from me, followed by a thank you. My indigo magic blended with the deep green of the branches as I wove them into a covering. Not perfect, but it would help hide us from prying eyes.

One of the wild fae did the same with the brush around the base of the tree, weaving it between the trunks to make what was almost a small hut.

“A small fire only,” I said as we crawled inside. “We don’t need to push our luck.” So far we’d seen neither hide nor hair of the humans. I wanted to believe that was good, that maybe the rumors of mysterious human disappearances in the Triangle had scared them off pursuing us, but I had a funny feeling about their absence. Maybe life of late had turned me into a suspicious bitch. Either way, I wasn’t letting down my guard.

Two of the wild fae slipped off into the semi-darkness. There were too few hours of daylight this far north for us to only travel during the day, and we’d trudged through the darkness for several miles. The humans hunting us would be less inclined to do so.

I hoped.

The fire warmed the small space, and I got a chance to take a better look at the wild fae who’d suffered from the madness on our first encounter. The one to Yoland’s left looked to be about twenty years my senior, with gray streaking his long beard and deep lines carved around his darting eyes.

“How are you feeling?” I asked as I sat and crossed my legs.

His head jerked up. “Strange. I feel strange. Markin is the name. You be Kallik, of course. I be Markin. Markin.”

Right. We’d established his name was Markin. I didn’t laugh though. Wild fae could be a little . . . unpolished around the edges.

I stared at him, and my skin prickled as he mumbled something else I couldn’t hear, then shook his head.

“Can you tell me a little more about how you’re feeling?” I prompted, my heart beating faster.

“Like something be trying to get in me head.” His voice thickened with a sudden Irish accent.

Possession or madness? “Markin. Listen to me. Do you feel violent? Like you want to lash out for no reason? Or are you being told to do something you don’t really want to do?”

Call me a conspiracy idiot, but I *knew* Underhill wasn’t solely to blame for the things happening to me and others of late. I had to figure this out.

“Not the madness. S-something else. Something that whispers in words I don’t be understanding.” His eyes shot to me, widening. “They want to talk to *you*.”

They better not be the damn spirit people who’d shafted me after I did as they’d damn well asked.

My throat tightened, and I slowly stood. “I’ll be outside. Drake, stick close to Markin.”

His gaze lingered on me, but he nodded once.

I pushed my way through the thickly woven brush walls of our hut and stepped out into the black of the night, drawing a deep breath into my lungs.

Maybe I’d gotten it all wrong.

Maybe Underhill didn’t want me after all, maybe the spirits had led me to the door of their own volition.

Maybe . . .

Sighing, I tuned in to the call of the nightbirds and smiled at the breath of wind that seemed to push at my back like a friend might do in jest. I let my senses lead me through the calming darkness of the forest.

But when the sounds cut off and my eyes snagged on a bare whisper of movement up ahead, I slowly pulled my sword. This day apparently wasn’t done.

The movement was a shimmer of glittering gray magic, similar to that of the monster that had eaten Yarrow. It shifted between two trees, and I started

stalking it at a distance.

Given I'd only seen this kind of magic once before, a matter of days ago, it seemed too coincidental not to mean something.

I paused and slowed my breathing, listening for any signs of company as I called up my magic. Presumably Faolan was close by—hunkered down and watching from afar or plain ol' following my every footstep.

I wasn't focused on him now.

Deep indigo flared bright against the black of the night, and I peered through it. The glittering gray mass wasn't the same creature that ate Yarrow—it was even bigger, closing in on the size of some of the smaller giants. It lumbered toward me, its steps almost as heavy as a land kelpie's. Its arms hung loosely at its sides, knuckles brushing its knees, and its face was a strange mixture of wolf, human, and something that I couldn't identify. Long hair covered much of its features.

I kept my blade between us, not threatening but not giving ground either. "Old one." I made the sign of finger to thumb, palm facing it. "What need have you of me?" Yeah, super formal but the creature felt . . . old.

A waft of death rolled toward me, the rank smell making my guts turn over in a most unpleasant way. I bit back the gag reflex that tightened around my throat.

The creature opened its mouth and released a low rumbling growl before speaking in Tlingit. "*Follow me.*"

With that, it turned its back and led the way into the forest, away from the others, away from the sanctuary.

Dangerous, sure. But maybe this creature could help me understand the events swirling around me. These spirits definitely knew more than they were letting on, and I'd take any scraps they tossed me at this point.

The beast led me through the forest, and the trees thinned. Soon, we stood in front of a mostly frozen lake. The plane of ice reflected the moon's light and lit the world up with an ethereal glow.

"You can't be serious," I muttered.

"*Follow me if you wish to find Underhill,*" the creature said in flawless Tlingit. Where the hell was my spirit guide now? The one who looked like me? I could use a thumbs up or thumbs down to help me with this decision.

The creature started across the lake. The ice cracked and groaned, flexing under its heavy weight, and with each footstep the massive beast took I held my breath, expecting the beast to plummet straight through and find an icy

grave.

But the ice held.

Which was a positive sign for my future longevity. I took a tentative step out. “This is madness.” I was following an unknown creature into certain danger, and no one knew where I’d gone, except for maybe Faolan. *Madness*. Cinth would have my hide for this if she ever found out.

Only one thing made me take the second step.

I wanted to find Underhill. I wanted this done.

Putting my sword away, I shuffled along the surface, praying to any deity that would listen that I didn’t fall through. Sweat slid in rivulets down my face and spine despite the cold as I fought the panic that threatened to halt my feet. If this ice cracked, I’d be in the water and trapped under a layer of ice.

I’d drown.

My feet halted ten feet out from the shore. “I can’t do this.”

The creature paused and lifted a giant mitt, pointing across the lake. “*You must, Little Spark.*”

Little Spark. Why did the spirits keep calling me that? And fuck me, something else shimmered across the lake, sparkling and catching the light even more than the snow and the frozen surface of the water.

“It can’t be,” I whispered.

A doorway.

To Underhill?

“*You must open the door before the summer solstice,*” the creature said and then it rippled as if . . . as if it were waking up. It blinked, grunted, and stared hard at me, a low growl dripping from its mouth.

Mother. Fucker.

I had a sinking suspicion that whatever had just been controlling this guy was now gone. I held up the sign for peace again, but the creature’s snarl suggested it didn’t give a shit about me and my nice hand gestures.

To sprint for the shore closest to me? Or to sprint double the distance, *past* the big-ass monster, to reach the door?

My crippling water phobia urged me to take the easy escape, but when the creature took a step toward me, I bolted to the left, opting for the door. I expected to easily outrun such a big critter.

Its footsteps slammed into the ice behind me as I dodged around it, and the lake surface buckled. Oh, shit!

The section I was on cracked like a damn iceberg, coming loose. My arms

windmilled as the once-solid ground became far more like a balance board of death.

“Stop it,” I yelled. “You’ll kill us both!”

“Better that way,” it growled, and I stared hard at it, shocked.

“Moody bastard,” I yelped and leaped off the loose ice onto what I hoped was firmer footing.

Yeah, not so much.

I screamed as the ice slid sideways and my lower body sunk into the water, the loose section pinning me against the larger slab. My legs burned and quickly numbed as I kicked to free myself and get up and onto the ice float again.

Behind me, the creature kept coming, his footsteps slower now that I was trapped. I tried to get out over and over, only to have the ice slip and slide out of my grasp, forcing me back into the water.

“I’m sorry I ever doubted your efforts, Rose!” I hollered, thinking of how badly I’d thought of that character. She could have made room for Jack on that door. She could have tried harder. Except as the ice fought to trap me, I felt her predicament all the way to my quickly freezing bones.

Fuck Jack. It was every woman for herself in these conditions.

The heavy footsteps stopped, and I peered up at the creature standing there as if he didn’t weigh six hundred pounds or better, right on the edge of the ice.

“Die,” he growled and lifted his foot, placing it on top of my head to shove me down under the water. The intense cold closed around my chest, and panic made its clutch feel even tighter as I kicked to get free again.

The creature pulled his foot back, and the ice closed overhead.

No.

No, *no!*

Frantic, ignoring the shock and pain of the cold weighing down my body, I fought to find a gap. Could I breathe under water? Yes, for a while. But panic made that really fucking hard!

Bubbles streamed from my mouth and a current in the water dragged me downward. I looked to my feet. Not a current then.

A hand.

It was her. My spirit guide was tugging me down.

Breathe. Her single unspoken word reverberated through my mind. *The cold will fade. Breathe, Little Spark.*

I did as she said and forced myself to relax—to let the water’s oxygen flow through me.

She tugged me along until I collected myself enough to swim after her, my muscles clenching against the cold. Fighting it.

My legs were so heavy.

Had she controlled the creature for a few minutes and then lost the ability to do so? That monster had wanted me to die.

Why? Why was any of this happening?

She led me across the lake to the far shoreline and up and out of the water where the ice was thin. I stumbled and fell to my knees, losing thoughts as rapidly as my churning mind created them. My mind was numb, along with the rest of my body.

“Why? The doorway. Gone,” I panted.

I wasn’t even referring to the first. Or the second. I meant the one I’d spotted across this stupid lake that had almost gotten me killed.

The shining door was gone as if it had never existed.

“I needed to get you away from the others,” my spirit guide said softly. Her magic curled around her—indigo, just like mine—and she started a fire. “They distract you from your goal. From your purpose.”

“It was bait?” I snarled. “A fucking light show?”

She faded, the fire crackling away in the silence after. *Of course* she faded. Stupid spirit.

I stripped my clothes with stiff fingers that struggled to get buttons and leather ties undone. There was no sign of the massive creature who’d tried to kill me.

“This naked-cold shit is getting old,” I whispered, sitting next to the fire, shaking and freezing my ass off.

“Naked again?”

I yelped, clutching my chest as Lan appeared and sat beside me.

“Seems to be just my luck,” I said sourly. “Or yours, seeing as you’re the one who keeps finding me like this.”

His lips twitched. “My luck indeed.”

I stirred and grimaced at a pinch in my lower back. Reaching behind, I located the offending stone and pried it free, tossing it away.

“Throwing rocks at me in your sleep. Should I read into that?”

Lan’s voice wrapped around me.

I groaned. “What’s the time?”

“Late afternoon.”

What? My eyes popped open. Rolling flat, I glanced at the sky through the thick covering of trees. Judging from the position of the sun, he was right. “I slept how long?”

“A long time, Orphan. Far longer than me. You had some catching up to do.”

Had I ever. And even though the forest floor was hardly comfortable, I could roll over and go right back to sleep. “Did you sleep at all?”

He grinned wryly. “Hard to when there’s a snoring symphony in your ear.”

I didn’t snore . . . Did I?

“Yes, Kallik. I slept.” Lan passed me a waterskin, and I sipped at the teeth-chilling water from the lake we’d slept beside. The spirit guide’s fire was now molten embers emitting the odd spluttering flame.

“We gonna speak about your disappearing act?” I demanded, handing his waterskin back.

He lifted a shoulder. “Anything you don’t understand about it?”

“Just the part where you didn’t warn me or give me any way to contact you. In my book, that displays asshole tendencies.”

“Perhaps if you get on my good side, Orphan, I’ll illuminate you one day.”

Yep. I called it. Asshole.

Lan eyed me. “Might I inquire why you were soaking wet again last night? Not the time or place for a swim.”

My brows rose. “You didn’t see my fight with the fae sasquatch?”

He stilled.

Apparently not. “My spirit guide wanted me away from the others. They’re not welcome to my Underhill party. Then I had a run-in with a big fella who didn’t seem to like me.”

Though he’d been more than helpful in the beginning while he was possessed by Underhill—assuming his ability to speak Tlingit meant she’d been in control.

“Why does the spirit want you away from the others?” he asked, gaze narrowing.

It was my turn to shrug. “Unsure.”

Truth be told, she’d lost a bit of my trust after the stunt last night. She’d swarmed in to fix her mistake and save me from drowning, but the whole thing suggested a lack of dependability. If there really had been a door to Underhill out here, then yeah, maybe I’d be inclined to listen to her. As it was? I *really* didn’t like being played.

A caribou stalked into the clearing, and Lan straightened, shooting me a look.

“Hey, Ruby,” I stated calmly.

Hilarious if it wasn’t him though . . .

The caribou dipped its massive head. “Kallik of House Royal, greetings.” The antlered animal regarded Lan. “And you, grandson of Lugh.”

“A pleasure,” Faolan replied.

That . . . was sarcastic. Although, to be fair, Ruby *did* want him dead. “What’s up?” I asked the giant.

The caribou neared the fire. “I need you at the sanctuary, Kallik. But it strikes me that I have been unrealistic in my expectations for you.” The animal’s large eyes swept to Lan and back. “I also find that perhaps my closeness to the outcasts and our treatment by the courts of late has perhaps generated an unfair prejudice toward the subjects of both courts. We were all Seelie and Unseelie once.”

“What were you?” The question popped from my lips.

The caribou stamped a foot. "Unseelie, young one."

Ha. Would've picked Seelie.

Ruby spoke again. "Here is my compromise. If the grandson of Lugh allows me to place a charm on him upon exiting the sanctuary, one that will make him forget the location and events that happened therein, then I shall permit him entry alongside you."

Revelations were well and good, but I had a feeling this sudden change of heart had been prompted by something. What the hell was going on at the sanctuary?

"You would allow me inside the sanctuary?" Lan said, a frown between his brows.

"With that stipulation, yes. My quarrel is not with other fae, and I have nothing to hide from Queen Elisavana. Furthermore, your lineage speaks for itself."

Lan snorted. "Then you haven't met my mother."

I studied his posture, noting the disappearance of the stiffness that had arrived with Ruby. He seemed taken aback. Faolan hadn't expected Ruby to budge an inch, if my guess was right.

The caribou chuffed in some semblance of Ruby's laughter. "I refer to Lugh himself. Sometimes, greatness skips a generation. As it has with your mother."

Faolan blinked several times.

"The charm," I said to the caribou. "It won't harm him or remove any memories *except* for those from his time in the sanctuary?"

"No, young one. I swear on the goddess that he shall come to no harm and lose nothing we have not discussed. It will be necessary to drop him at a location away from the sanctuary, of course."

"Any issues with that?" I asked Faolan.

There was a strange light in Lan's dark eyes as he regarded the avatar. "No issues with that. I thank you for allowing me entry in any form. For what it's worth, I know what it's like to lose a home. And I know how difficult it is to let others in afterward."

I tried not to stare at him as the words echoed in my heart.

Everyone at the orphanage had felt something similar along the line, but *Lan* had experienced the same thing in a different way. His parents had disowned him and refused him a true home. In the back of his mind, part of Faolan must always fear losing his Unseelie home. No wonder he kept

everyone—including me—at a distance.

I stood. “We’ll start out straightaway.”

The spirit guide may not agree, but I still felt the answer to all this resided in my magic. “Ruby, I know things are insane right now, but if it’s not too much trouble, I’d really like some more magic lessons when I get back.”

The caribou dipped its head again. “It would be my honor. Head northeast from here. Drake and the others will reach the gates by tomorrow evening, but I will ask him to remain at the entrance to meet you.”

I checked my weapons, nodding. “Got it.”

Faolan poured water on the fire, and then strode to the lake to refill his waterskin.

When he was too far away to hear, I lowered my voice. “What’s really the matter, Ruby?”

“King Aleksandr’s death momentarily set the courts against each other, but Elisavana has unfortunately talked sense into Queen Consort Adair and King Josef. They ready themselves for a battle against *us*, and your expertise is much needed.”

“That can’t be all,” I pressed.

The caribou glanced Lan’s way. “The madness is spreading. Soon it will be beyond what I can control. Drake reported what happened to the last Underhill entrance. I feel we must explore your magic without delay.”

I blew out a breath. It was really nice to hear someone I respected back up my decision. “I feel the same. And look, I may be able to help with the madness. I grew fruit that seemed to help some wild fae we came across. I don’t know if I can do it again, but maybe you can help me? At least then we’ll have a cure other than your harp to rely upon.”

“Another cure, you say. This is an exciting prospect, and one I am eager to explore. I confess myself run ragged from the effort of keeping my people grounded in reality.”

I studied the caribou, trying to imagine the giant on the other side. He had to be half out of his mind with worry right now, but if anyone could figure out how to replicate the magic, it would be Ruby. “We’ll figure this out.”

The caribou dipped its head. “I thank you, young one. You give me hope. I will see you soon.”

If the spirit guide let me. But I was determined not to be led astray by more glittery gray creatures and maybe real, maybe fake pathways. So far, following the spirit guides hadn’t done anything to help the situation. I could

request help from them once I had more answers, once I felt ready.

But I was so not following another fae sasquatch over an icy lake.

Lan and I set off at a run, and while I was sluggish to start, my body and mind were far clearer for having gotten some much-needed sleep. I just needed another week or two of good nights, and I'd be happy as someone on ogre brew.

We kept up a rapid pace, stopping only for water. Daylight soon disappeared, but I pushed on through the increasing darkness, Faolan fast in my wake.

We took turns keeping watch as the other snatched a couple of hours sleep, and then it was back to running again.

Northeast.

To the sanctuary.

We left the alpine forest behind, our surroundings morphing to barren arctic tundra, dotted with green, wiry shrubs that crunched underfoot. Mountains rose up around us as we continued, their slopes a slew of loose stones and some of their tips still covered in snow.

This place—wherever we were—seemed almost entirely untouched. I couldn't see any roads or trails. The wildlife was rampant, and a feeling of awe spread through my chest at the prehistoric and untainted feel of it.

I'd lost myself deep in the rhythm of the run by the time the sun started to sink again, and when I spotted Drake's waving form, I was almost disappointed he was so close.

My legs complained as I made them slow and stop. Faolan did the same beside me.

Drake whistled. "You two made good time. We just arrived yesterday. Ruby said it might be tomorrow morning before you showed." His gaze settled on me, but I was too tired to offer more than a wan smile.

"We ran hard."

"You ran," Lan grumbled. "I ran hard to keep up."

He did look kind of exhausted. My stomach grumbled, and Drake grinned. "Come on, let's get you both inside."

I walked next to him. "What is this place? I've never seen anything like it."

Drake scrunched his face. "I think the humans call it Gates of the Arctic. It's a national park. Only way in is to fly or hike. Which makes it perfect for us." He glanced back at Faolan but said nothing.

Was he aware of the deal Ruby had made with Lan? I'd assume so, but it was clear Drake didn't like it, and I'd take one guess why.

We followed him toward the base of the nearest mountain.

"The others made it inside okay?" I asked to cover the mounting tension. "The wild fae too?"

Drake nodded. "They were relieved to be with other outcasts, I think. I hate to think of those left out there, mad and alone."

Tell me about it.

He halted suddenly, and I almost banged into him. Was this it? I peered around him but saw nothing other than a patch of tundra the same as the rest I could see for miles in each direction.

Drake whispered words under his breath. I tried to pick them apart, but they flowed into each other in a way that sounded distinctly like old lore charm work. Drake accompanied the chant with rapid finger movements on his one hand, and I quickly gave up on trying to interpret the blur.

Lan sucked in a breath behind me, and I jerked my head up.

"Goddess of the above and below," I whispered.

Huge gates stood before us, too high for me to see the top and wide enough for a one-hundred-strong front line to march through in unison. Winged fae circled high above, screeching warnings.

With a belly-deep groan, a door began to pull inward.

I managed to close my mouth by the time the gap was large enough to slip through. I gaped at the giants circling the huge mechanisms controlling the gate.

Laughing and shouting blasted me as my disbelieving eyes took in the crowded cobbled streets.

Drake snorted. "It's something else, isn't it?"

"Something else," I murmured back. I'd expected a refuge dotted with tents and food queues. This was a *city*. A working and running and established city. "How big is this place?"

"The sanctuary gets bigger as needed. There are some powerful fae among the outcasts, and they created this place long ago. There are always some of us here, coming and going, but this is the first time we've all gathered. It's nice to be part of a larger group of fae again, if I'm honest. We should have convened here long ago."

I listened to the wistfulness in his voice. "I know Ruby's expecting me, but food probably needs to come first."

He winked, and I heard Lan's low growl.

"The way your stomach is carrying on, I wouldn't dare take you anywhere else first," Drake joked.

I smirked. "Wise man."

A bunch of carrots flew in front of my face, and I whirled toward a commotion at a stall to my right. Two females were attacking each other, and it didn't take long to realize this was no fight over the last beet. They were trying to *kill* each other.

Two armed guards—one of whom I recognized from my training group—were on them in a flash, pulling them apart and blowing a dust into their faces that made both women go limp.

The crowd murmured sadly as the women were carted away.

"They went mad?" I croaked.

Drake's mouth pulled down. "It's happening more and more often."

"What will happen to them?" Lan asked.

The one-armed fae bent and picked up a carrot. Dusting it off, he handed it to me. "If that will tide you over until a real meal, then I'd be happy to show you. Ruby will be there anyway." He met my gaze, and I saw in his eyes the same sadness that had gripped the previously happy outcasts surrounding us. "I'm warning you," he said softly. "It's not a pretty sight."

At this point, I wouldn't expect any different.

Drake led us through the city without stopping again, through the busiest intersections. He seemed to be in a rush. Not acting like himself.

I tried to shake off the unsettled feeling growing within me, but the deeper we went into the city, passing throngs of people and at least as many storefronts as there were fae at the Seelie court, I finally had to stop him with a hand on his shoulder. “Drake, is everything okay? You’re acting . . . strangely.”

He glanced at me, surprise popping his green eyes wide. “Am I walking too fast? Sorry, I’ve been waiting for you both to arrive. My eagerness to get to food and a bath is showing.” He looked away before I could ask another question. “Come on, this way.”

Lan was right behind me, and as Drake stepped out again, leading us toward what looked a replica of the Unseelie castle, Lan breathed out two little words that chilled me. “Watch yourself.”

He didn’t have to warn me, though I appreciated the effort. I could almost feel the uncertainty vibrating under my feet and in the air around us, and I found myself looking at the world through my magical lens. With more than a bit of trepidation, I sent my indigo magic out in swirls, touching the buildings and the people.

But they remained as they looked to me now, solid.

“What are you doing?” Lan asked softly as Drake was lost ahead of us for a moment.

“My magic can dispel illusions. I . . . I feel like something is wrong. Like

what we're looking at is a set on a human movie or something." Not that I didn't want the sanctuary to be whatever I was seeing. The idea of a place of safety after being cast out was a wonderful thing.

Maybe the spirit's warning not to come here was playing in the back of my mind. Or maybe this was an emotional flashback to coming home to the Seelie court and facing execution the next day. I rubbed at my wrists surreptitiously, the ache gone but the memory still branded on my mind. Iron was bad that way, it stuck with you long after the physical injury healed.

I jerked as Lan brushed a single finger along the healing scars and pushed his magic against them. The flowers in the stand to our right wilted as the heat from his magic soothed the deep ache . . . and did nothing else.

I shot him a wide-eyed look. "Why didn't I just go crazy?"

He gave me a wry smile. "Maybe we outgrew it?"

I doubted that was the case. "You don't think . . . the fruit?"

Lan shook his head. "That was days ago."

My pulse quickened. "But maybe it cured us."

He appeared doubtful, and I had to admit my theory would be too good to be true. It didn't stop me from hoping that the fruit could change everything.

"We shouldn't test it here, just in case," I forced myself to say.

Faolan lowered his head close to mine. "Agreed. But, Orphan, we *will* test it soon."

I fought to keep my hands to myself. Knowing my luck, I'd bump into him and we'd end up stripping and getting busy in the middle of the crowded street.

I could only imagine.

Mmm, yeah. I could imagine him naked and me enjoying it all too much. I struggled to breathe through the cascade of memories: Lan peeling off his shirt back at the castle. Me naked.

I ran into Drake's back and bounced off, grunting, but he caught me around the waist and dragged me against his side. I held myself stiff in his arms, unable to relax with my instincts screaming while simultaneously unable to believe he'd ever do something to harm me.

"I've decided that carrot ain't gonna cut it," he announced.

I searched his wide-eyed expression. ". . . Okay."

"We need food." He nodded twice. "How about we stop and grab some grub before seeing Ruby? I know just the place. Not as good as Cinth's cooking, but as close as you'll get out here."

He had to go and mention Cinth.

Even with my fingers itching to retrieve my remaining sword, hearing my friend's name sent a wave of homesickness rocketing through me. She was the one who'd planned my rescue, and I hadn't seen her since.

Drake took in my expression. "Ruby said he had something for you from her. She's okay, and she's been keeping in touch." He hugged me tighter, and there was a muttered curse behind me.

I ignored Lan but didn't return Drake's hug. Pushing him away didn't feel right either. "Thank you," I eventually settled upon. "I appreciate it."

Time may reveal why Drake was acting so weird. Until then, I'd keep my cards close to my chest.

He winked again and led us through the swinging wooden half doors of a saloon. The dimly lit interior looked like the drinking area of an old Alaskan gold miners' hotel, with small wooden tables and several card games going on at once. A long mirror hung behind the bar, and the bottles of booze lined up in front of it reflected the room as the bartender worked his magic.

That wasn't what caught my eye, though.

Straight across from us stood a few women. Women were a rarity amongst the outcast. With the low fertility rates of the fae race, the courts hardly ever exiled females who could reproduce and help to grow our population. But that also wasn't what caught my eye today. The three women were obviously looking for paying customers. Anger flared in my gut when I saw the defeat in their faces. "Does Ruby allow this sort of thing in the sanctuary?"

Drake shrugged. "Everyone is doing their best to survive, Kallik. However they can." Then he took off into the back, leaving me with my thoughts and a big heaping pile of anger.

Their *best*? The expressions on the women's faces told me this was anything *but* their best. I could see they desperately wanted to be elsewhere. Sex was a gift, to be given to those you chose. Not to be . . . abused.

Drake returned with two trays of steaming stew, bread, and a plate of sweet bread. He passed one to me and the other to Faolan. "I ate earlier."

My eyes narrowed. He'd just told me he was eager to get to food and a bath. Then again, just before, he'd said that he needed to eat.

Something was going on.

"I'd rather see Ruby now." My words came out hard and cold as ice.

"Soon, I promise," he said. "You should eat while the food is hot. *Both* of

you.”

Was that so?

I wasn't eating shit until I figured this out.

Drake led the way to a back room. As I passed the three women, I worked the strap of my hip pouch free and slipped each of them one of my gold coins from Unimak. At the rate things were going, I'd be dead in a few weeks, so what need did I have for them anyway?

“Thank you, my lady,” the youngest and smallest of the three whispered. I could see the human blood in her vibrancy, her physicality, and also in her weak magic.

“Why do you do this?” I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

“Because . . .” She looked over her shoulder at a large man behind her. “That's my father.”

Barrel-chested, and with a gut hanging over his belt, he smoked a thick cigar that made me think he might have issues with the size of his dick. His dark auburn hair was slicked back from his forehead, and he watched me closely with pale gray eyes. “You got a problem? Or you want a job, mutt?”

Beside me, Lan stiffened, and his hand went to his sword.

I held up a hand and truly looked at the three women—girls, really. They all had a similar look, a little fae and a lot of human.

And their father was whoring them out.

“Niche market,” he growled and stepped toward me. “You want in or not? If not, you can bugger off and stop looking at the goods.”

My mouth dried.

Motherfucker.

My magic curled around me. Tables and chairs scraped across the wooden floor as people cleared the path between me and the piece of shit opposite.

“Not now,” Drake said softly, trying to draw me away. “His magic is strong. He was outcast for criminal acts.”

“Listen to your boyfriend, little girl.” The big man chuckled. “I ain't playing if we fight. Look at her. She thinks she could take me on?”

The room laughed with him, but it wasn't easy laughter.

The tension ramped up, and I released a slow breath, glancing away. I didn't know this place—I didn't know these people. There was a smarter time to make a move.

His ringing laughter followed me as I let Drake lead Lan and me to the

back room. “Why did you bring us here of all places?” I threw the question at him and accompanied it with a sharp glare. “You had to know I wouldn’t be okay with that. Those are his daughters, and the youngest looks barely sixteen!”

Yep, I was shouting.

Drake flinched. “Sorry. It’s the best food around, and you seemed really hungry. Oh, and I’m hungry.” He blanched, suddenly seeming to realize he’d only grabbed two trays and had just said he’d already eaten.

Yep.

So much for keeping my cards close to my chest.

I slammed a fist on the table. “Stop the shit, Drake. What the hell is going on?”

He lowered his gaze, then cursed. “Okay, I’m a really bad liar. He really shouldn’t have given me this job.”

“What job?” I snarled.

“Ruby mentioned bringing you here before you visited him. Actually, he was adamant about it. But I was telling the truth about the quality of the food! It is the best around.”

I didn’t care if the food here was better than *Cinth’s* cooking.

Why did Ruby want me to come here specifically?

Drake opened his mouth, and I glared him to silence.

Asshole.

I sat at the table to ponder over that tidbit. The only reason Ruby would send me here unprepared would be to test my loyalty, unless his position made him helpless to step in somehow. If the former, then I could assume the test involved cleaning up this damn mess. If the latter, then he wanted me to clean up this damn mess too. He likely—and rightly—had assumed that seeing other mutts forced into sexual servitude would enrage me like very little else could.

Whatever the reason, I was *more* than happy to rise to the occasion.

Decision made, I dug into the food without another word, though my anger made it hard to get the meal down. The sweet bread was like ash in my mouth, and even the cream-laden stew didn’t slide down my throat. I ate like it was a mission, filling my belly, and then stood once the job was done.

Churning rage driving me, I strode back toward the main part of the building before Drake could get to his feet. “Kallik, don’t!”

“I wouldn’t tell her what to do,” Lan said. I glanced back as he took

another bite of sweet bread, not moving from his seat.

Wise man.

“Aren’t you going to stop her?” Drake snapped.

“It isn’t her I’m worried about. That fat lug has it coming.” Lan put both elbows on the table. “Go get him, Orphan. I got your back if you need it.”

I didn’t need his encouragement, but I did appreciate that he knew I could take care of the situation on my own.

Out in the main room, the girls were still there, as was their bastard of a father.

“Jaros, she came back for you!” one of the drunk men shouted.

The big man turned, saw me, and his eyebrows shot up as his magic flared around him. “The hard way, huh? A challenge then. Magic first, weapons next . . . if you have it in you when I’m done with your body.”

Glittering gray magic swirled around him so fast that I took half a step back. Shit. *Gray* magic? I’d never seen a living fae with power that color. The hue was normally associated with creatures of death, like bigfoot, and creatures of the beyond, like the spirits who liked to pop up and visit me.

This magic was unusual to the extreme, and the way Jaros had just released the glittering gray tendrils didn’t bode well for what he could with it.

Proceed with caution.

“She’s afraid, look at her,” he bellowed. “She’s going to be a fun one to break, boys. Get in line, and get your bids in. I plan to enjoy this and make some money while I’m at it. Haven’t had a real fight in years.”

No one moved.

My magic curled up as his gray glitter shit slammed into me. I was thrown back, but only by a half step.

“That’s all you got?” I snorted, and then froze as the sensation of his magic crawled over me, seeping into my skin.

Lust, pure and simple, shot through me, and I bent forward, hands on my thighs as I released a low moan, followed by panting that I couldn’t control. My fingers tugged at my own clothes.

Lust, yes, but no pleasure accompanied it, just a *need* generated by his magic.

I would have been horrified if I weren’t so worried about what he could do to me while I was under his influence. With effort, I called up my indigo magic, praying to any goddess who could hear me that my magic didn’t only break illusions.

I hit the floor flat on my back, and my indigo magic slid *into* the gray glittering mass surrounding me.

The indigo started to fade, just as it had within the dark expanse of the Unseelie guard's magic the other day. *No!* I shouted the word to myself, pleading with my magic. *Don't fade.*

The color flared again, and sweat beaded along Jaros's stupid face.

There was something there in the tangle of the threads. My magic could stop him—I *knew* it could.

If I could just figure out how.

Ignorant to the surrounding shouts and roars, I rolled around on the floor, writhing and tearing my clothes off. My eyes closed, and my mind focused fully on drawing forth my magic as Jaros commanded my body with his power.

Indigo filled my vision as power breathed through me like a cool breeze and surrounded the gray mist . . . dissolving it.

Slowly pulling it apart, piece by piece until there was nothing left.

I rolled onto my knees and stood, clothes half hanging off me as I stared at Jaros. His cigar dangled from his mouth. "Not possible."

I pulled my sword. "First round to me. Weapons, you slimy fucker."

Maybe I usually shied away from taking a fae life, but with him, I'd make an exception.

He tried to run but only managed a half turn before I threw my sword, end over end. It drove straight through his back as he tried to climb the stairs to the second level. His three daughters screamed as he fell backward, tumbling down, dead before he hit the ground.

My fury was far from abated, but the remainder burned in a new direction.

I'd been fucking set up.

"Well done, young one," Ruby's voice echoed through the room. A stag entered the room, its antlers tangled with moss and vines as if the beast had been busy when Ruby took over its body. "The rest of you, leave."

The building emptied rapidly, most fae running to obey Ruby, though Lan and Drake remained and the three daughters disappeared up a set of stairs in the far corner.

Just the giant I'd wanted to see.

My jaw ticked, and the hurt in my heart almost spilled into my eyes. Almost. "Why did you set me up?"

The stag lowered his head. “My apology for the subterfuge. Jaros has been a problem for some time, and I have wanted to deal with him myself, but I saw an opportunity—”

Lan pushed past me. “That guy was going to let his magic do the job before giving her a swift slice to the throat. He could have killed her! You let her go into that fight blind.”

If my magic hadn’t dissolved his, then Jaros could have raped me. Or done anything he wanted while I was incapacitated. It was complete chance that I’d managed to convince my magic to help me.

“I had faith in Kallik,” Ruby said. “It was an opportunity for us to see what her magic would do if she believed herself to be in danger. I was ready to step in if the situation got out of hand.” He paused. “As a result, her power flared in a way that we have not yet seen.”

There it was—confirmation that this whole mess had been a test.

The stag bowed low to me. “I see it in your eyes, young one. I have upset you. That was not my intention. But it was crucial for me to test a theory I had about your fae abilities. That is the only reason I asked Drake to mislead you. Please, come to the castle, and we will discuss what this means for your magic moving forward.” The stag blinked once, spun, and raced out the open doors.

My entire body shook as I stood in the middle of the room, Jaros’s body cooling and stiffening at the bottom of the stairs.

I walked over and removed my last gifted sword from his back, only vaguely noting the squelch of flesh before I wiped the blade off and sheathed it.

Drake moved to touch my hand, and I yanked it away.

“You didn’t think to warn me?” I asked in a low voice.

“He said you needed to go in blind so you could react with your magic.” Drake tried again to touch me, and I stepped back.

Not happening.

Turning, I caught Lan’s eye and nodded, and we strode out of the saloon, side by side.

“He believes in you, Alli,” Drake called after me.

Ruby might believe in me, but after that . . . I had some serious fucking questions for the protector of the outcasts.

I stormed through the castle gates, scowling at the outcast guards and daring them to stop me. Unsurprisingly, they didn't. Which may have had something to do with the way my clothes hung from me in tatters and my fingers were clutched around the hilt on my sword.

Lan strode beside me as I entered the open double entranceway.

"Rubezahl is expecting you."

I turned my glare on the person speaking, but quickly lost it upon seeing the white-haired mystica fae, whom I hadn't come across since the first time she showed me to Ruby's quarters.

She dipped her head slightly. "Kallik of House Royal. Please follow me."

Her gaze slid to Lan, and she arched a brow. "Rubezahl expected that you would not consent to be parted from her. The grandson of Lugh is also welcome to follow."

How did she get here? She hadn't traveled with the rest of us when we left for the sanctuary. Remembering her ability to read minds, I thought, *How did you get here?*

She lifted a shoulder. "I took a different pathway."

Cryptic.

The corner of her mouth tilted upward, but as we rounded the corner and entered a large hallway, her arm hit the stone wall. I took in her wince.

You're injured, I commented.

Her breath caught as she shot me a wide-eyed look, but she didn't answer my question, only clutched at her arm just above the elbow. She pushed open a door, then stood back to let us enter.

I only glimpsed her floor-length white hair as she quietly shut the door and retreated.

“Thank you for coming,” Ruby said behind me.

The chamber was high-ceilinged. It had to be with the twenty-foot giant sitting calmly beside the crackling fire, sipping at his tea like he hadn’t just dropped me into some bullshit test.

My hands curled to fists. “What the hell is going on?”

“I will explain.” He gestured to the bench seat in front of the fire. This place was almost a copy and paste of his rooms back in the Triangle. “Please. Sit.” The giant’s powder-blue eyes flitted to Faolan, then back to me.

I took a seat and waited.

Ruby sighed. “I am sorry to have shaken your trust in me, young one. Hopefully, you will soon understand that I had a good reason for my actions. We have discussed instinctual magic before, do you recall?”

I unlocked my jaw enough to say, “You believe each fae has ability that is instinctual just to them.”

“Correct. We know that you, for instance, have the magical ability to—without conscious effort—dispel an illusion. Since we confirmed that, I have thought deeply on just *why* that is so. To me, understanding that is integral to understanding how we can restore Underhill.”

I narrowed my gaze. “And what did all that deep thinking tell you?”

“Nothing. Though it did remind me of something I witnessed as a young boy at the death of my mother. A creature of death feasted upon her dying magic and body.”

I sucked in a breath.

Rubezahl caught my reaction. “You have seen such a creature.”

Yes. With Yarrow. With the spirit guide. “I have. But what does that have to do with me?”

The giant smiled. “Fear not, young one. I am not comparing you to the creature itself. More to the way it devoured the magic of my dying mother.”

He said it casually—as if we were discussing the weather—but his mother could have died centuries ago.

Lan hadn’t moved from the door, where he stood at ease. “You’re saying her magic *ate* Jaros’s?”

Ruby pressed his lips together. “I am saying that Kallik’s magic devours or dissolves other power she subconsciously deems untruthful, dangerous, or corrupt. The illusion of Underhill created by the courts was a lie and a

danger. Jaros's magic was wielded with the intent to remove a person's will and control. Which is both dangerous and corrupt. Instinctually, I believe in times of high emotion, her magic erodes and, to borrow your description, eats the magic of her foe."

I licked my lips. "One time my magic slipped inside another's."

"Slipped inside," Ruby murmured.

Lifting a shoulder, I said, "That's how I think of it. But the first time I saw it happen, my magic faded before it dissolved my foe's magic." I recalled how the Unseelie general had bound my power after I tried to intervene with his barbaric punishment regime. Then again, I also knew he wasn't going to kill Faolan, despite my horror at the beating. Maybe that was why my magic had dissipated? "That may answer some questions, but I'm still unclear about how this will help with the restoration of Underhill."

"Perhaps we can figure that out together," the giant answered, then gestured to the kettle now whistling over the fire. "Tea?"

I nodded. "Please. Is it something new you've worked on?"

"Alas, in the rare moments I have now, I find myself eager to sleep or sit quietly. Creation is beyond me. Tea, grandson of Lugh?"

Lan shook his head. "I'm fine."

"What's happening here? How bad is the madness?" I asked under my breath.

Ruby sighed, and though his beard was gray and long and his joints knobbly with age, this was the first time I'd actually thought him old. "We discovered that the madness spreads easily, particularly when those who are already mad invoke violence against others. I am afraid that we have resorted to containing the mad in cells, rather like animals, to keep the threat from growing out of hand."

"Is your harp helping any?" I accepted the tea from him and took a sip, welcoming the huckleberry and truffle blend he'd given me once before.

"What harp?" Lan asked.

I looked around. Usually the instrument—around half my size—was attached to Ruby's hips at all times if he wasn't playing.

"My instrument does help to relieve their insanity," the giant said to me. "I am afraid those who are deep in the thralls of madness no longer return completely. Your fruit, though. Do you believe it is a cure?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "The wild fae who ate it, they came to the sanctuary with us and didn't sink into madness again on the journey here. We

could watch them to see how long the effects of the fruit last. But if it's not a cure, then it definitely provides relief."

"We shall make replicating your fruit a priority then, young one. Tell me more of the door. Did you open it then? I would expect, if so, that you would no longer be in this realm."

My heart sank. "I got to the door, Ruby. Tried to open it. Did everything I could think of, but the entrance exploded."

The giant frowned. "Did she speak to you?"

"No. Just obliterated one of my swords and exploded the damn door."

"Who else was with you?"

"Lan. Some wild fae."

Ruby's frown deepened. "Was it the presence of others that she objected to or—" He met my gaze.

"Or my worth."

Lan made an angry noise, and the giant smiled again.

"You and I both know that Kallik is worthy, grandson of Lugh. My fear, and I'm certain it echoes Kallik's if I am correctly interpreting her request to continue our lessons, is that she might not yet be *magically* worthy."

I released a breath. "I think so. It's the only explanation I can fathom."

"Is Underhill still trying to contact you?" Ruby enquired.

Well, I was no longer sure if the spirits were from my mother's people, trying to protect me *from* Underhill, or from Underhill herself. More and more, it seemed like Underhill didn't want me to find her entrance at all but *kill* me. "Yes," I said, forgoing the rest. "The spirits appear sporadically."

"And they have not revealed anything more?"

I grimaced. "No. I'm not sure what's holding them back. Maybe someone is sabotaging them, or it could be that they're bound by different rules." I took another sip of tea and felt the warmth seep through me. Finally, for the first time since leaving Unimak, I felt some semblance of relaxation. "The last message I got from them was that I had to be alone. With Lan. Apart from Drake and the others."

The giant surveyed me over his huge cup that he nevertheless gripped in a dainty hold. "And yet you came here. Why?"

"I trust my own instincts most of all," I settled on.

"As you should." He set his cup down. "More?"

"Please."

Rubezahl topped me up, saying, "Now, Kallik of House Royal, humor

me. Why do *you* believe that your magic's ability to eat others' magic is important?"

Lan started to circle the room slowly, his eyes landing on me lightly before flitting away to keep inspecting the space.

I tipped my head back. "I don't know. If I could figure out how to control it . . ."

"Controlling magic often means going against our instincts," the giant said. "That may be impossible for you to achieve here seeing as your magic has *only* reacted this way on an instinctual basis."

Yeah, that figured. "I have nothing. You?"

"I find myself contemplating one of the first rules we teach our young about magic. *Magic* does not just disappear. In short—"

Lan cut in. "If you're eating magic, where does it go?"

I gulped back the second cup of tea and set the mug down. "Good question. I have no clue."

Ruby rested back in his seat. "No clue?"

I racked my brain, but it was as barren as the tundra outside the sanctuary. "Nope. Nothing."

Disappointment flickered over the giant's face, and I was sorry for it. Now that I understood his reasons for throwing me in the deep end with Jaros, I felt mostly satisfied with his explanation. I really didn't want to add to his workload, because despite what the protector of the outcasts always said, he pretty much *was* the leader of the strays.

"Another test," I said aloud. "You can get your best magic tracers to watch me. Maybe they can tell us where the magic goes?"

The giant blinked. "A sound idea."

Lan cut in again. "Is it wise to let her magical ability become general knowledge?"

I faced him. Back at the frozen lake, Lan had rethought his stance on the giant enough to come here, but it was clear he hadn't forgiven him for the training exercise with Jaros.

Which reminded me. "Hey, Ruby? What do you know about what happens when a Seelie and Unseelie's magics meet?"

The giant's thick brows rose. "That is common knowledge, young one. If both fae open themselves completely to the other, then their opposing magics will do battle, draining the other until only the strongest is left alive."

The reason why Faolan and I could never truly be, even if that touch

earlier had been harmless. I nodded. “I know that part. But have you ever seen it happen? Something is going on with my magic and Faolan’s, and I’m unsure whether it’s the normal result of touch between an Unseelie and Seelie or whether it’s something more. The fallout wasn’t as strong at first. We touched, and he gained one of my memories. Then it happened again, and our magic tangled. When we were separated after, I . . . killed the interfering fae. It was as if some external force had taken control of me. Initially, I believed it was the madness, but my anger and volatility completely dissipated . . . But the same thing happened the *next* time someone pulled us apart too. And on the ship, when Underhill sent a wave to speed us along, and a spirit told me that if Lan and I touched, we could battle the power of that wave. Except when we *did*, something . . . well, I’m not certain, but it felt like something or *someone* possessed me. A spirit or a being working against Underhill, I don’t know, but it felt like both of us would die if the hold wasn’t broken. Like carnage would erupt. I guess I’m asking whether what I’m feeling really is possession or whether it’s just because we’re from opposite courts.”

The giant’s expression had turned graver by the second as I spoke. He was silent for a long while. I skirted a peek at Lan but found him in serious contemplation too.

Ruby gave me an earnest look. “This happens every time you touch?”

Yes. The word nearly escaped before I recalled what had happened earlier. “Not every time. When we arrived here, Lan touched my wrist, and nothing happened. Do you think it’s gone?”

“Or just retracted. It might be biding its time also,” he mused. “Maybe you exhausted the person’s power. Or perhaps they retreat in the presence of others.”

My chest tightened. “You think someone *is* taking me over then?”

“It does sound like possession. A long time ago, I witnessed a Seelie and Unseelie lock magic and the result was far different than your experience with Faolan. The Seelie simply weakened until he died. But with your ability, I cannot fathom *how* you’re being possessed. Not unless the person is extraordinarily powerful.”

Exactly what I was afraid of. *Fuck*. “I can’t get rid of the feeling that it’s all linked.”

“Your instincts are to be trusted,” Ruby murmured. “Let me ponder this situation more and see what I can come up with.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks. Hey, Drake mentioned that you had a message

or something from Cinth?”

“A message?” the giant said. “No, I’m afraid not.”

My smile faded. “Oh—”

“I have something much better than that.”

My heart skipped a beat. “She’s here?”

He chuckled. “I’m afraid not that good, but the answer will rest in your chamber. I will not ruin the surprise for you.”

Curiosity thrummed through me. At this point, my life could do with far *fewer* surprises, but at least this might be a happy one.

Ruby dipped his head. “I propose that the pair of you keep your distance as we figure this out. I assume your oath to the Unseelie queen requires proximity to Kallik?”

Lan jerked his head in a nod. “It does.”

My eyes narrowed. So when Lan went invisible a few days ago, he must have been within hearing distance for the majority of the time. I’d assumed as much, but this confirmed it. Sneaky bugger.

Ruby cocked his head, listening to sounds I couldn’t hear. “Then you will have a chamber adjoining hers. I must return to the contained fae now, young one. Please wait here until someone collects you and return here tomorrow morning. We have magic to discuss, of course, and there are other matters you must be brought up to speed on.”

It didn’t seem fair that I’d get to rest while Ruby worked around the clock, but I simply nodded, trusting in his wisdom. “Take care of yourself, please.”

His face softened. “Of that, you can be sure.”

As soon as Ruby left the large room, and the door was firmly shut behind him, Faolan approached me. “Orphan . . . something is off. You were raging mad when we came in here, ready to tear a strip of hide off that giant for the position he put you in and . . . you just buckled.”

My jaw dropped. “Buckled? You think I buckled? Pardon me for being able to have an intelligent, adult conversation with someone and understand other points of view.”

Yep, my voice might have raised a little. Lan’s eyes hardened. “I’m not saying that you did something wrong, Orphan, I’m saying—”

“What?” I snapped the single word. “There’s no spell here, Lan. There is nothing making me *buckle*.”

I turned away from him to see that the door was open a good inch, and my anger had a new outlet. “Who the fuck is there?”

A throat cleared, and Drake let himself in. I closed my eyes and blew out a slow breath as he lifted his hand in the air. “Sorry, I opened the door and heard you fighting. I didn’t want to interrupt . . .”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Lan said softly. “Rubezahl said he had adjoining rooms for Kallik and me.”

Drake’s jaw twitched, and he lowered his hand, clutching a notebook. “Yes. I’ll show you to them, they’re on the top floor of this place. Good view of the whole city.”

“Or a perfect place to keep a princess captive.” Faolan didn’t even lower his voice. I shot him a look, but I didn’t want to keep fighting with him in front of Drake.

I blinked and touched a finger to the side of my head as a wash of fatigue rolled through me. “Yeah, I could use some sleep.”

Drake was silent as he led Lan and me up through the castle, past many closed doors. A thump rattled a door to my right on the third floor, and my hand drifted to my sword. “What—”

“We ran out of room in the cells beneath the castle,” Drake said. “Some of the really mad ones are being kept in the more secure rooms in the castle and some are at a holding area, I’m told. What the Unseelie and Seelie courts aren’t telling you is that they’ve been shipping those who lose their minds to the Triangle for years. Ruby was able to help them in the beginning, but it’s gotten so much worse.”

My guts twisted at the thought of Cinth and her parents. If they hadn’t killed their house guests, if they’d been caught sooner, they probably would have been sent here. They might have had a chance.

The other prisoners still could, if . . . *if* Ruby and I could figure this puzzle out.

We were on the fifth floor of the massive place before Drake stopped climbing. He made an apologetic face. “Sorry, but Ruby thought you’d be happier where you couldn’t hear anyone freaking out.”

“This room?” Lan pointed at the door to our left and, at Drake’s nod, let himself in. He swept through the room, his dark magic spreading over everything. The room had at least ten vases filled with wildflowers and roses, long stems of spring daffodils and tulips in an array of brilliant colors.

The flowers in the vases wilted as Lan drew on them, and Drake’s face darkened.

“Your room is next door,” Drake said, and we all heard the dismissal.

Faolan turned to me, ignoring the other fae. “Call if you have need of anything, Orphan.”

Without another word, he let himself into the adjoining room and shut the door.

Drake cleared his throat. “I thought you’d like the flowers but—”

“They were beautiful,” I replied. “I’m not sure anyone has ever given me flowers before. Maybe Cinth.” My heart twanged. “Goddess, I miss her.”

Didn’t Ruby say there would be something in here from Cinth? My eyes swept the chamber.

Drake cleared his throat again. “I have something for you, I mean, it’s from Ruby, but he asked me to give it to you.” He held out the notebook

clutched in his hand. “It’s connected to a notebook in Cinth’s possession. You can write messages back and forth. They’ll disappear as soon as you read them, so you don’t even have to worry about anyone spying on you.”

My breath caught as I took the offered notebook, hope and excitement spinning through me. “Thank you, Drake. I mean, I know it’s from Ruby, but —”

He was looking at the floor. “I’m glad you killed him.”

For a second, I thought he meant Jaros. But no. Lugh’s prickly balls, we were going there, were we? “I didn’t kill Yarrow.”

Drake’s head shot up and his eyes were more than a little wild. “What?”

“To be totally fair, I didn’t kill him. The bigfoot ate him. Magic and all,” I said.

“The *kushtaka*,” Drake breathed out. “That’s what you mean?”

I froze and stared at him. “How do you know that word?”

He frowned right back. “*Kushtaka*? That’s what the locals called bigfoot.”

The thing was, *kushtaka* was a Tlingit word. Even if I’d never heard it before, I knew from the cadence of it. I swallowed hard. Everything was tied together with damn threads I couldn’t quite see or control.

I held the book to my chest and put a hand on the door. “Thank you, Drake, for the book.”

“Wait, please don’t send me away. I’m sorry about earlier. I swore an oath to Rubezahl the same way you did to the Seelie king and Lan did to his queen. When he gives an order, I don’t have a choice. And he told me I couldn’t say anything.”

I blew out a slow breath. “Okay. I believe you.”

What was interesting was that Ruby made the outcasts swear an oath to him at all . . . he was no king, and in the past he’d been adamant about helping the outcasts while not ruling them.

“Can we . . . can we start again?” Drake asked.

I blinked a few times before I realized he meant whatever sort-of relationship we had going on. That’s what I got for kissing him on a whim. Once. Twice? Okay, and *maybe* I’d flirted with him too. A lot. Carefree and uncomplicated Drake may be, but the guy was all over the place too. “Goodnight, Drake. Let’s talk in the morning over breakfast. I’m tired, and I’m going to write to Cinth before I go to bed.”

Pushing him out the door with one hand, I shut it with the other and

leaned my forehead on the wood panels. There was no sound of footsteps, which meant he hadn't left. I flicked the lock, and maybe I imagined it, but I thought I heard a heavy sigh before the soft pad of feet faded down the hall. I didn't want to hurt him, but I also didn't see much of a future for myself, never mind a future with a guy and an actual relationship. And even if I did, Lan was firmly lodged in my thoughts now, a solid barrier to entertaining any real romantic thoughts with another. Looked like my heart had chosen the tragic route despite my head trying to run interference.

Stepping away from the door, I took in the room. Without the bloom of all the flowers, the colors in here were sparse. Bare wood floor and unpainted walls, everything simple but well made. The small fireplace threw good heat, and I could see a small tub peeking out from behind a privacy curtain. Good enough for me.

Before any of that, though . . . I sat at the only table and looked over the notebook. Tanned leather. The cover looked old and well worn. Unwrapping the leather strap that held it closed, I flipped it open.

There were no words waiting for me, no Cinth on the pages. Digging around the room, I found myself a pen and scribbled a quick note.

Cinth. This is Alli. Are you okay?

I thought I'd have to wait hours, or maybe even a whole day, but as my words faded into the page, new lines began to appear. All in caps. Definitely her writing.

I flinched, hearing her shouting as though she stood beside me.

HOLY GODDESS! ALLI, ARE YOU OKAY?

Smiling, I scratched my response—*fine*. I frowned at the single word.

That's a lie. Cinth, I miss you, and nothing is going right here.

I wanted to pour out my heart out on the next few pages, rehashing everything that had happened since her rescue mission. The boat, the tidal wave, and Underhill exploding *again*, but I couldn't do that to her, not right then.

*How goes it on Unimak?
Please tell me you're using a glamor.*

As someone known to be my friend, she wouldn't be safe there without it. There was nothing for a moment, and then her words appeared slowly with what looked like a self-portrait. She'd sketched herself as a stick figure with giant boobs and then scribbled in jet black hair all over her head, sticking up in every direction.

You better not be worrying about me. I'm glamming it up! Not even Jackson recognizes me. Or my boobs. Which is . . . crazy. But the rumors are flying here. I'm working as a scullery maid in the castle, and between that and my contacts, I've been able to give Ruby lots of insider info.

Interesting. I stared hard at the book. Cinth was all alone over there, just like I was here. We were both in peril. Sometimes discussing peril was the last thing people in our positions wanted to do. I knew exactly what she'd want to know about.

Not the fighting.

Not the sanctuary.

Not my supposed purpose.

I wrote slowly and deliberately.

Lan is still with me. ~~We kissed.~~ No, not kissed, totally, totally made out, and our magic tangled in a terrible way. I wish . . . Cinth, I wish that it could be different. That we were from the same court. That our magic wasn't causing so much pain. Being with him will literally kill one of us, but I just can't shake my feelings for him.

I could just about hear her screaming on the other end.

But what a way to go!

I burst out laughing at her message, and my laugh turned into a strange hiccup that I wasn't sure I liked. Almost a sob. Goddess above and below, I missed my friend.

I must have been too loud because Faolan knocked on the adjoining door and poked his head in. “You okay?”

Turning my head away from him, I quickly wiped at my traitorous eyes. “Yeah, I’m fine.” *Fine*. There was that word again. “Just talking to Cinth.” I drew in a slow breath and counted to five before I released it, grappling for control of my emotions before I turned back to him.

His eyebrows shot up in obvious disbelief, and when I held the notebook up so he could see it, his eyebrows climbed further still. “I thought the queen was one of few who had one of those.”

“You’ve seen a book like this before?” I found myself shutting the cover a little, just in case he could see the last words. Just in case they decided stick around and humiliate me.

Lan stepped into the room, and with him came the smell of freshly washed man and some sort of . . . pine soap? *Yum*. It was a struggle not to close my eyes to savor the scent.

He walked over and tapped the cover. “Travelers’ journals. The queen used hers for correspondence with the other monarchies in Ireland, Russia, and the southern United States. They’re no longer made.”

I glanced down at the book, stroking the soft leather and taking careful note of where he stood—and just how close, what with Cinth’s last words rolling through my head. *What a way to go indeed*. “Why not? They’re super handy.”

“Because the person making them refused.” He stepped back, eyes lifting to mine. “The Oracle made these.”

I almost threw the book away right then and there. Not because I hated the Oracle, but I felt betrayed by her. Sure, I didn’t know her, but she’d let me take the rap for the Fake Underhill fiasco.

I stood up and found myself too close to Lan. Those mesmerizing flecks of color swirled in his midnight eyes.

“I should get cleaned up.” The words tumbled from my lips.

His lips quirked. “Yeah, you stink.”

I snorted and stepped around him, walking to the small tub, adjusting the faucets until the temperature felt right. “Always the charmer, aren’t you?”

“You could wait till I’m out of the room at least,” he growled as he strode away.

I laughed. “Running tub water has now become an indecent act? I’ll put it on my list of possible turn-ons for the boys.”

Faolan moved to the adjoining door. “I doubt it would do it for anyone but me.”

And then he was gone, leaving me with my jaw hanging open. Had he just admitted that I turned him on?

I stared into the running tub, and then, before I could think better of it, I followed Faolan to his room.

He glanced back as I entered, irritation on his face. “What now?” he asked.

“Did you just imply that I turned you on that easily?” Yup, I wasn’t beating around this huckleberry bush.

Not a chance.

His glower deepened. “Are you seriously *asking?*”

I threw my hands into the air. “This is a yes or no question, Lan. I know nothing can come of this thing between us. I know it. You know it. But damn it . . . don’t you know anything about women?”

His face smoothed into a perfect blank. “Enlighten me, Orphan.”

“No.” I left him standing there, alone, and returned to my room, slamming the door between us.

Two seconds later, he was back in my room, slamming the door *again*. “What do you want from me?”

I flicked off the tub water, steam curling from the surface. “I want to know whether it’s just the magic drawing us together. If our magics didn’t react the way they do, and if we were from the same court, would this—you and me . . .”

I couldn’t even say it.

I didn’t hear him move, but I felt him step closer until his body was mere inches from mine, maybe less. His chin hovered over my shoulder, his mouth next to my ear.

His breath was warm against my cheek, and we stood there for a long moment, the energy between us crackling and dancing as the urge to lean into him grew. Our magic swelled but didn’t quite touch, which left a smell of acrid ozone in the air.

“Lan? Tell me, please.” I whispered it, not able to do much more around the sudden tightness in my throat.

I was unable to move for fear of touching him.

He turned his face, closing the distance until there was nothing but a whisper between his skin and mine. “In an instant, Kallik.”

In the light of dawn, I dragged in a ragged breath. Though Faolan had returned to his chamber to sleep, his words hung in the air of my room.
In an instant, Kallik.

If we weren't in opposite courts and embroiled in this insanity, then we'd be together. Did that make me feel joyful or bitter to the extreme?

I was leaning toward the latter, which was the reason I'd tossed and turned all night instead of catching up on much-needed sleep.

I groaned. "Why me?"

A knock boomed at the door, and Lan burst through from the adjoining room, dagger drawn. He glanced at me and away, and I nearly groaned at the remembrance of my reaction—or *non*-reaction—last night.

He'd given me the reassurance that I'd asked for. And I'd been shocked into silence. After giving me a very generous opening to respond, he'd left.

Great one, Kallik. Real smooth.

The knock sounded again, and Lan crossed the room, yanking open the door.

"What?" he snapped.

"Rubezahl requests the presence of Kallik of House Royal."

I'd already thrown off the bed covers, so I quickly fastened on my chest sheath, sliding my weapon home. I strode to the doorway. "Has something happened?"

The wild fae didn't answer and, with a cursory glance at Lan, I followed the guy down the hall.

Faolan was fast behind me as we strode down the hall, and then the stairs,

and left the castle. Soft light washed the streets of the sanctuary, and only a few outcasts graced the market stalls at this time of day.

“What does Rubezahl want?” Lan called ahead to the wild fae.

The fae glanced back and shrugged. “I do not ask questions of Rubezahl. I merely obey his orders.”

Wild fae, huh? “He told you where to take us, clearly.”

“Yes.”

I waited. “And that is?”

The wild fae ducked down a smaller lane and, ignoring Lan’s growl, I continued after him until we stopped before a wall—ten feet high or thereabouts. It was made of split doors and tables and covered in wire.

More concerning were the screams, groans, and shouted profanities echoing from inside.

The wild fae whispered something to the guards at the gate, and a small door was cracked open to allow us entrance.

It was a stockyard, was my first thought. Hundreds of horse stalls, but the gates had been replaced by bars.

Horror swept through me the moment I realized what—*who*—was being kept in those stalls. *Fae*. Or some semblance of them. They’d definitely been fae once upon a time. Now . . .

Limp hair was plastered against graying skin.

Missing teeth. Bleeding gums. Empty eyes.

I took a half step back and bumped into Lan, chest rising and falling. “These are the mad fae.”

The wild fae cut me a look. “The maddest of them, yes.”

I watched a woman clad in rags shake at the bars. Smoke curled from her skin, but she didn’t scream. Instead, she seemed transfixed by the way the iron confines damaged and hurt her. My voice cracked. “Is there nothing more that can be done?”

“It’s like they’re transforming,” Lan whispered hoarsely, and it wasn’t hard to identify the same mixture of shock and pity and more than a healthy dose of horror in his tone.

“I apologize for the early wake-up call,” rumbled a ground-shakingly deep voice from within the fae coop. Rubezahl ducked out of the high-ceilinged stockyard and straightened, regarding us solemnly. “I know you must be tired.”

Me, tired? The giant appeared ready to drop. “Something has happened.”

He nodded, dragging a hand over his face. "I'm afraid the affected took a turn for the worse overnight. You see the gray tinge to their skin? That's new. And the music of my harp no longer reaches them."

My heart plummeted. "Nothing?"

He shook his head.

"Your harp," Lan said. "How exactly does it work?"

"Much as Lugh's legendary spear would work for you, if you carried it," the giant said wearily, not noticing Lan's flinch.

I stepped forward. "My fruit then. We've got to try it." Seeing these fae and doing nothing . . . it just wasn't in me. "I have to try again, Ruby. Now."

The giant dipped his head. "I had hoped you would be amenable to just that. Tell me, young one. What exactly did you do to yield the fruit?"

Casting my thoughts back, I frowned. "There was a huckleberry seed. I fed my magic into it. I'd only planned to grow some huckleberries to eat."

Rubezahl nodded. A gentle breeze swirled around the giant, and his eyes fluttered before he extended his hand, opening it.

Tiny on his massive palm sat a huckleberry seed.

The groans of the mad fae around us spurred me on, and I took the seed, setting it on the ground. "Okay." *This could solve everything.* Cupping my hands around the seed, I siphoned indigo magic into the pod. Unwilling to deter from what I'd done whatsoever, I drew fuel for my power from the fire of a torch set between two pens and a small green tendril from nearby moss. Sweat beaded on my brow as I shoved more and more at the seed.

The pod split, a plant bursting upward.

Yes!

I closed my eyes, focusing on pushing as much into the plant as possible. I envisioned the small tree covered with bright pink blossoms that had yielded the original fruit. Only when sweat poured down my face did I look at my creation.

"This is the fruit?" Rubezahl asked. "It looks like—"

"A huckleberry tree," I said flatly.

Lan sniffed the air. "Definitely not the fruit from before. Orphan, did you do anything different?"

I wracked my brain. "No. Everything was the same. Wild fae aren't chasing us, but other than that." I'd known replicating the fruit might not be easy. Hope sure was a bitch. I swallowed hard. All these fae. These suffering fae. I didn't want them to wait a single second more in such a state.

“We have yet to understand exactly what is happening with your magic and Underhill,” Ruby mused. “But perhaps that difference is important. You were able to create the fruit while in danger. Your magic is reactive to your emotion. You clearly feel the same upset as I do when looking at the fae here. I believe we should test your magic on them directly. Perhaps it is false hope, but we will not know unless we try.”

I licked my lips. “I don’t have the greatest . . . track record. These are people, Ruby. What if something goes wrong?”

Rubezahl’s gaze rested heavily on the woman who was still gripping the iron bars, watching her hands burn. “I may not have seen an ailment of this type before, but these fae are weakening. If we do nothing, they will not be long for this world.”

They were dead anyway, in other words. I took a deep breath. “Okay. What should I do? I’m no healer.” This felt different from growing a tree from a seed.

Ruby crooked his finger for me to follow him. We approached the woman in the first cell. When we drew within a few feet of her, she launched at the bars, baring her teeth, and my stomach churned as a tooth fell onto the hay covering the ground. The tooth was blackened and jagged on the edges. Rotten.

“Thus far, your magic has been instinctual,” Ruby reminded me.

Lan stepped closer to me and spoke under his breath. “Are you certain this is a good idea?”

“Nope, not one bit. Any other suggestions?”

He shot a quick look at Rubezahl, but didn’t speak again.

Focusing on the woman, I pulled brown energy from the dirt and fed its power to my magic before allowing wisps of indigo to extend toward the snarling female.

My magic brushed against her skin, and her eyes flooded with blood. Black tendrils snapped outward from her in a blast that drove me to my knees. My magic surged automatically in response to the threat, sucking energy from everything and anything around me to combat her attack.

Her screams rang in my ears, and I focused on her, panting hard as the black tendrils began to flicker and wane. A slight bright green hue emanated out of the black morass a mere second before she stumbled back from the bars and collapsed.

I staggered forward to see whether she was breathing, almost forgetting

her confines were made of iron.

“What was that?” Lan snapped, rounding on Ruby.

Thank Lugh, she was breathing. And—

“Her skin,” Ruby said in wonder. “It’s normal again.”

It was. The gray had seeped away. “Her magic changed at the end, too, did you see it? The bright green flowed through the black.”

The giant dipped his head in acknowledgment.

This woman had once been Seelie, judging by the color of her magic at the end. I studied the now-rotten hay in her cell. A small amount of ivy on the wall had exploded into profusion in response to my magic, now covering most of the building. Her magic should have done the same, but it had rotted the hay instead. “How did her magic demand an Unseelie toll?” I asked.

Ruby and Lan both followed my gaze.

The giant hummed. “Her magic was black before.”

I glanced at him. “Whatever is causing the madness is Unseelie.”

His brows arched slightly. “So it appears.”

“But Underhill is both Seelie and Unseelie,” Lan countered.

“Her power is,” Ruby replied. “But she has sealed herself away—or another has done so.”

I frowned. “But how is it possible for a fae’s magical essence to be altered?”

“There must always be balance,” he murmured. “Beyond that, your thoughts are as good as mine. We did learn something, however.”

Lan infused his voice with sarcasm. “That Kallik would need to almost kill herself to help each mad fae come back from the brink?”

Perhaps, but . . .

“It’s something though.” I rubbed my hands over my thighs, my palms tingling.

His expression turned incredulous. “You’re kidding, Orphan. How many mad fae are there? And are you magically stronger than all of them? Even if you are, how long will this ‘cure’ hold for? This woman could be gray again by tomorrow. You can’t do this.”

I lowered my voice. “Lan, they need help. *Look* at them.”

“And you can’t help them if you’re dead,” he replied, face unyielding. “I know Underhill has made you question your worth, but killing yourself isn’t the answer.”

I reared back as though slapped. Lan thought I was leaping at the chance

to prove myself?

Wait, was I?

He'd given me pause, and I took a moment to study the surrounding fae. There had to be hundreds in here—and more in the castle. All of the ones I could see were gray.

I closed my eyes briefly. Shit, he was right.

“Perhaps there is another way,” Ruby said.

My head snapped up. “What?”

He hesitated. “You mentioned feeling that when you touched the grandson of Lugh, your combined magic was amplified somehow.”

My eyes widened. “It does. I mean, it did—if it still works.”

Lan shook his head. “My magic is Unseelie.”

“And that matters why?” Ruby’s kind blue eyes softened.

Faolan didn’t answer.

The giant continued. “It only matters that Underhill has chosen Kallik, and that your magic seems to open hers to its full potential.”

I exchanged a quick look with Lan. “You really think that’s what’s happening?”

“The operative word being ‘think,’” Ruby answered, staring inside the stall as the woman began to stir. “I believe that you only allow yourself to access your full magic in his presence—specifically at his touch. A theory only, of course.”

That wasn’t how it felt. When our magic mingled, it felt like the combination pushed me to the brink of insanity, like the pain of holding so much power would make me burst.

“You want us to test this theory, I gather,” Lan said dryly.

Irritation flickered on Ruby’s face. “What I want is irrelevant. When you look at these fae, what is it that *you* want to do? Nothing?”

Lan’s dark focus landed on the stall next to the woman, where a man was picking at wounds on his blood-streaked face, digging into the flesh with a thick sucking sound. My stomach surged upward. I mean, I’d seen some shit in my twenty-four years, but this was next level.

“We have to try,” I urged him, stepping closer and nearly reaching out to take his hands. “If we don’t do anything, this will keep happening, to more and more fae. We have to figure out the answer.”

He darted a look over my shoulder, then lowered his voice. “I don’t want you to get hurt. Even the giant isn’t sure his theory is right. There could still

be someone using our connection. We're just going to grant them access again?"

"What if he's right though? If we don't try something, then we'll always be stuck like this." *Unsure if touching each other would be our death.* "The solution to this mess won't be painless. Plus, Rubezahl is here."

Lan sighed and said louder, "Do you have the power to separate us if needed?"

"I do." The giant sounded certain.

Striding into the middle of the two rows of stalls, I faced Faolan as he walked up to me, eyes never darker.

"Kallik," he whispered.

Steeling myself, I intertwined our fingers before I lost my nerve. We both stiffened.

But . . .

I blew out a breath. "Nothing." Just like yesterday.

"Nothing?" Ruby called over. "Try opening your magic."

I'd never thought of my magic that way before, as a door that could be closed. But I wanted this to work—I needed to do *something*—so I drew energy from the ground again and released my indigo in Lan's direction. His deep, ruby magic caressed mine, though in a different way than before. It reminded me of how my magic might dance with Cinth's, though perhaps a few slivers more intimate.

Okay, more than a few slivers. I held my breath, amazed that our magic was touching without any of the recent chaos erupting as a result.

We recalled our magics at the same time and stood staring at one another. That really just happened.

"Rubezahl," the same wild fae from earlier shouted, sprinting to reach us. "Mass outbreak in the square."

The giant cursed. "Wait here. There's something further I want to try."

I took a step in his direction. "We can help."

He was already ten paces away. "The outcasts cannot afford to lose you, too, Kallik of House Royal." The giant bounded over the gate in an act that his age belied and was gone.

Lan grabbed my arm. "He's right."

The ground stopped shaking.

"Now you choose to side with him," I snarled in frustration, pulling away to stride farther into the building.

“You took the explosion in the woods to mean that you’re expendable, but you’re not.”

I rounded on Lan. “You’re just full of wisdom today.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Always am, Orphan. You just chose today to notice.”

“What I noticed is that you counter everything Ruby says.”

“Where you’re involved, I’ll always ask questions,” he said. “To keep you safe.”

I blinked at his warm tone, and the anger drained from my body in a rush. My anger was directed at the wrong person. I gestured to the fae on either side of us. Some lay on their sides in a panting, snapping version of sleep. Others, their skin still mostly normal, watched us from the shadows, knees hugged to their chests. “This is hard to see.”

Lan nodded grimly. “I know, Orphan, but it was happening long before you got involved. You didn’t do it. You may be part of the solution, but you’re not part of the problem.”

I wrapped my arms around my torso. “What if I can’t do whatever is needed?”

I may have never uttered the words aloud if not for seeing this. Guess I had a wall or two of my own to break down.

Faolan approached. “The question has never once entered my mind.”

Was that one of his walls coming down too? Maybe I should try to keep this going. I tilted my chin up, searching his face. “You know . . . what you said last night?” I took a breath. “My answer would be the same. In an instant.”

He froze for a beat. “It would?”

My lips twitched at his surprise, but my humor faded. Because when all was said and done our declarations didn’t alter anything between us. Neither did the fact that we were temporarily able to touch. “Just for what it’s worth.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “For what it’s worth.”

Smiling, I stretched out and took his hand.

The air whooshed from my lungs this time, and pain seared my chest. Falling to my knees, I was only vaguely aware of Lan doing the same in front of me.

Because we were locked together, our magic clawing to get closer, to intertwine and to merge. Indigo and deep ruby black filled my vision, tightening around us both in a death grip.

It was no pleasure cruise this time, and it came with no pull to touch each other.

It only wanted to destroy us. To push us beyond what we were physically capable of.

Ruby's voice called to me. "Kallik, hold!"

But there was no holding this back. I screamed as the pain surged to excruciating heights. Black spotted my vision, I heard the distant boom of an explosion, and everything went dark.

My eyes were closed against the force of the explosion, and in the darkness I could hear the shouting of the fae around us. Fae who were mad. Fae who were wild. Seelie and Unseelie alike.

The only thing linking me to any semblance of sanity were the fingers locked around mine.

Pain coursed through my body, but I couldn't let go of Faolan.

Not ever.

Not again.

A voice whispered in my head in Tlingit, *Unclaimed daughter of the king, you will open my doorway. Of honey and ash, of feathers and bone, once more shall you find the pathway home. Come to me.*

Fuck, shit, damn, 'open my doorway', it *had* been Underhill possessing me this entire time.

"I'm trying," I screamed the two words into the darkness as another explosion ripped through the air, throwing Lan and me apart. I reached for him, might have even screamed his name, and then I hit something hard.

The air rushed from my lungs, and I rolled until my body came to a limp stop.

The darkness was gone, and I lay on my back in the middle of the pens, staring up at the sky that had definitely been wooden ceiling before Lan and I touched. What the hell had just happened?

Little bits of white fell from the sky. At first I thought it was ash, like the kind that had rained down on another occasion when Lan and I had touched our magic together, accompanied by all that honey. One of the white pieces

landed on my face, but it didn't fade. I picked it off and stared at the stuff, choking on a harsh inhale when I realized what it really was.

Bone.

Bits of bone were falling from the sky. Blinking, I rolled onto my belly with a groan and pushed to my hands and knees, holding my body still while the pain receded. I lifted my head as a brush of something soft whispered across my face, tangling in my hair.

I pulled it free.

A feather.

Of honey and ash, of feathers and bone, once more shall you find the pathway home.

Underhill was sending me signs? There was no rhyme nor reason for feathers or bone to be here—especially not floating in the damn air. There'd been no rhyme nor reason for the honey and ash to be around that other time either. In both instances, they came after our magics had intertwined.

Honey. *Seelie.*

Ash. *Unseelie.*

Feathers. *Seelie.*

Bones. *Unseelie.*

I could guess that my magic had created the honey and feathers, and Lan's magic had created the ash and bone, but otherwise this *had* to be a message from Underhill!

Fixated on the feather, I wasn't aware of company until a pair of feet scuffled into view . . . feet that were semi-translucent.

I didn't even look up. "Not now."

My spirit guide sighed heavily. "Now, Kallik. You must go. Find the Oracle. She is the only one who can help you now. The other paths are closing as we speak, and you are in grave danger."

Another long blink from me, and my 'friend' was gone.

"Good riddance," I muttered, "Every time you show up, my life goes even more to shit." Plus, Underhill had just whispered in my head. *Once more shall you find the pathway home.*

Maybe that meant I was close.

Pushing to my feet, I looked around at the fae in the pens. They weren't moving. Had we healed them? Goddess of the above and below, the pain would be totally worth it if they were okay, even if it was just a stopgap measure that bought us some time.

I took a step, and the bits of bone that continued to fall from the sky crunched underfoot. A gust of wind pushed feathers in swirling tumbles between the pens of the fae, and my heart began to pound as I truly saw the mad fae.

The twisted way they lay.

Angles all wrong.

Chests unmoving.

Dead.

I put my hands to my mouth as my eyes widened and swept the area. “What have we done?”

We.

Lan!

“Faolan,” I screamed his name. What if he was broken like these bodies? What if my magic had done the same to him?

I scrambled between the pens, seeing in a blur the broken limbs, necks, faces, and ripped-open bellies. I grabbed the edge of a pen, the iron burning my palm, but I clung to it as I lost the contents of my stomach, heaving until there was nothing left inside.

The burn of the iron helped to keep me upright as I searched for him.

Lan.

Ruby’s voice reached me first. “Kallik! Come away from this.”

I turned to see him behind me, at what used to be the front of the stockyard. His call made me remember that I’d heard his voice right before the explosion. Hadn’t he asked me to hold on?

The memory was vague and half-formed, and I didn’t care right now beyond wishing that Lan and I had waited for him to return before touching again.

But it was too late for such thoughts.

Ignoring him, I kept moving through the carnage and death I’d caused, my footsteps crunching over pieces of bone. Even though I knew the bones weren’t from the mad faes’ bodies and were a by-product of whatever was happening between my and Lan’s magics, the crunching just added to the general horror of the scene before me. I was in shock—the sight was nearly incomprehensible in its devastation—but I couldn’t think past Faolan. “Lan!”

A shadowed form lay to my right, at the back of a pen. Faolan’s back was to me as if he were sleeping. *Goddess, please don’t let it be a final sleep.*

Afraid to get close enough to confirm the truth, I stumbled forward and

fell to my knees beside him. Then I hovered my trembling hands over his body. “Goddess, please let me touch him without causing this havoc again.”

Please, Underhill. Grant me this mercy.

I shouldn’t do it. We’d already caused so much harm. But I couldn’t stop myself. Not when he looked . . .

Swallowing, I reached out and grabbed Faolan’s shoulders, then rolled him to face me. His chest rose after a long moment, and I dared to touch his face.

His dark eyes fluttered open.

“You have feathers in your hair,” he croaked, lifting a hand to brush one away.

He was alive.

Tears slipped down my cheeks as I sat back on my heels and tucked my hands away. Underhill had granted me mercy just now, but I couldn’t push it too far. “Lan . . . we made things worse.”

He sat slowly, looking past me to the pens. “Did we hurt them?”

“The explosion of your magics killed them all.” The pain in Ruby’s voice echoed across the pens to us. “It ripped them apart along with the protections on our sanctuary. We are no longer hidden. The humans and the courts have already marked our position.”

No. I gazed at him, hoping I’d heard him wrong. We’d shattered the sanctuary’s barriers? We’d killed all of the sick, crazed fae here. The ones who’d needed our help.

I was shaking. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to feel someone’s arms around me, to know I wasn’t alone. Head bowed, I struggled to hold back the sobs building in my chest. Because while I knew in my heart that this massacre wasn’t only my doing but was the result of my magic interacting with Lan’s, I had no doubt that he could have touched any other Seelie and not yielded . . . *this*.

Something about me had made the difference.

Strong arms slid around me and pulled me gently across the ground until I was settled on his lap.

“Let her go, Unseelie,” Ruby growled. “Have you not done enough?”

“The magic is gone,” Lan growled straight back, “and her heart is broken.”

Gone for now, perhaps.

But this time had proven that it would come back over and over again,

and that each time we touched people could die as a result.

This embrace was a stolen moment. I'd cling to the memory of it for days and months and probably years to come. Memories were all that could ever be between us. So I leaned into him and buried my face in the crook of his neck, breathing in his smell as tears slid down my face.

How many were dead? Too many.

They'd needed our help. *My* help. And I'd failed them.

Lan's arms tightened around me. "We'll make this right, Orphan. I don't know how, but we will. Don't give up."

I pulled back to see that his eyes were wet with unshed tears. I had to turn my face away because seeing him like this, vulnerable and grieving, would undo the scrap of control I still had over my emotions.

There was no option *but* to give up on us when this massacre was the fallout.

"Let her go," Ruby bellowed, and the anger in his voice drove me to my feet and away from Lan, as if compelled.

A moment later, Lan got to his feet, too, putting himself between me and Ruby. "Enough. We did as you asked and look what it got us!" He swept his arm out, encompassing the brutal scene. "Not a single one of the mad fae in here is still alive, never mind healed. We may have been the gun, but you pulled the trigger."

Above the pens, Ruby's face was unreadable. He released a weary sigh. "Come. We must leave the sanctuary. Our only hope now is to take the fight to those who would see us dead."

"Take the fight to who?" I asked. Because his words didn't make sense. He couldn't mean what I thought he meant.

Ruby's shoulders drooped even as Lan's tightened.

"He means to go into battle against both courts," Lan said softly.

"They will come for us," Ruby said, and I realized that a good number of fae had gathered behind him, gazing at the horrors within with the same dread that filled my heart. One of them was Drake.

"We do not condone violence," Ruby continued. "But neither do we condone violence done against us. We must protect ourselves. What has been done by Kallik and Faolan cannot be undone, and so we must make a decision." He turned to face his flock. "What would you have us do, children of the moon? Stay here and wait for slaughter? Or take the battle to the thrones of both courts, to Unimak?"

Children of the moon?

My head was still fuzzy from the explosion and the grief, and although the phrase was familiar, I couldn't place it.

I put a hand to my head, and my fingers came away sticky with blood. That explained a few things. But it didn't account for the feeling of discomfort at Ruby's words. He was wrong. This wasn't the right path. But my words froze on my tongue as guilt hammered at the insides of my rib cage.

A cry went up from the fae around Ruby. The lost ones, the outcasts, the criminals and those who'd been wrongly cast out.

"We fight!" The two words were taken up by those around us until the pens shook with the force of the shouts.

I looked at Ruby's face and saw the sorrow written there. Shaking my head, I started forward to join them, but Lan stepped in my way.

"No," he said in an undertone. "If they go to war against the courts, they'll die. Even if you fight with them, Orphan. The combined power of the Unseelie and Seelie can't be overthrown by ten thousand outcast fae. You know this."

His eyes locked on mine. "Tell me you understand what I'm saying." He paused. "Please."

I was pretty sure that was the first time he'd ever said please to me, and the plea softened my response.

"I understand," I said, fatigue weighing me down. "Which is exactly why I have to stop them."

Lan moved to the side and gave a little bow. "After you then, Your Majesty."

So much for softening me up.

My jaw ticked as I made my way past the pens of the dead, my soul breaking all over again.

Why did I think for a second that touching Lan would work out? Damn my hopeful heart.

I stopped in front of Ruby. "You can't let them go to war. They'll be massacred."

Next to him, Drake tensed. "Just because we weren't trained like you doesn't mean—"

I lifted a hand. "That's exactly what it means. The two courts would join forces to destroy you. It won't take them long to kill or imprison every single

one of you. And while I don't always like how things are run there, they would be within their rights to defend themselves. Here, you're in the right. If *they* attack, then you have every reason to fight back, and I believe that the goddess looks favorably upon those who defend themselves. I don't believe she looks fondly upon those who push war."

I'd never vocalized such a thing before. It was almost like I was speaking words that were not my own, though I really did believe them.

Ruby lowered himself to a crouch. "Wise words, young one. But I don't need convincing. You will need to convince the others here. Rage has filled their hearts and minds. I do not think I have the strength to calm them."

"Then why ask them such a question while emotions are high?" I said in irritation.

He blanched. "I am no leader. My role is to offer choice to those whose choice was stolen from them."

It was the first time I'd seen the giant look uncertain. He had to feel at least a fraction of the guilt pulsing through me. No one was operating at full capacity right now.

"Screw you," someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

"Only if you ask nicely," I replied. "Actually, maybe not even then."

The crowd surged forward. How the hell was I supposed to settle this mob?

Drake grabbed my arm. "What if you and Faolan pulled that stunt in the center of each of the courts? An explosion that wiped out everyone in the vicinity. You could kill thousands of fae in a matter of seconds."

My jaw dropped, and I stared in shock at the boy that I'd thought was one of the good ones.

I'd considered letting him into my bed, and now here he was . . . throwing me to the wolves. Worse, I could hear the glee and excitement in his voice. The thought of thousands of dead didn't make him feel sick to his stomach. And that made *me* sick to my stomach. It was almost as shocking as what I'd just done, and it tore at my faith in the outcasts.

The crowd cheered his words. "Yes, let's see them survive the mutt's power."

Was I no longer a person to them, just a weapon to be used?

Drake's fingers tightened around my arm as Ruby stood and turned to the others, huge fists clenched. "Please, let us be calm."

His words seemed only to enrage the crowd.

I jerked from Drake's hold and backed up until I bumped into Lan. As though scalded, I put space between us.

"Orphan?"

"Yeah?"

"I do believe we are going to have to make a run for it."

I swallowed hard as the crowd surged forward again through the obliterated stockyard. The damn spirit was right. We were in grave danger. "Where to? There are too many of them."

Lan backed up, his crunching footsteps barely noticeable over the bellows and pulsing of the crowd.

Ruby looked over his shoulder at me, his eyes so sad I could have cried. He knew as well as I did that he couldn't stop this mob. "I'm so sorry, Kallik of House Royal." He mouthed the last word. "Go."

Without a word, Lan and I turned and ran across feathers, bone, and the ruined remains of the stockyard toward the still-standing perimeter wall. Training in Underhill had prepared me, and Faolan's years of training as an Unseelie guard had trained *him*. We leaped at the same time, scrabbling up the wall with minimal handholds. Drawing a cool-blue tendril from the barbed wire above, I used it to power my indigo magic and coaxed the barbs away until only smooth wire remained.

"Thank you," I whispered, as moss grew under my hands in response to my Seelie power.

We paused at the top, looking down at the furious crowd.

The outcast fae gaped up at us, and I highly doubted any of them could follow—perhaps Drake if he'd still had both hands.

I turned away and leaped down the ten-foot drop. We had to get out of the sanctuary.

Lan landed in a crouch beside me. "We have minutes at best before they get to us another way. How do we get out? And better yet, *where* will we go?"

I shook my head. "I don't know how we get out." I chewed my lip. Underhill just spoke to me, but no pathway had appeared at all. Barring that, I only had the spirit's words to go on. A spirit I assumed was sent *by* Underhill. She'd told me not to come here. She'd told me to run just before. And she'd told me. . . I took a breath. "The Oracle, that's who we need to go to."

Lan paused. "She has one known haunt."

She *did*? "And why the fuck am I only hearing of this now?"

Lan shook his head. "Later. We need to get out of here first."

No shit. But seriously, why the hell hadn't he mentioned *that* until now?

He motioned for me to follow him, and we were off and running yet again down the street we'd entered the sanctuary upon. We were both fast, but would we be fast enough to outrun the furious roars of the crowd and their weapons?

Shouts rose up ahead.

"In here," I hissed at Lan, dragging him inside the first building. My nose twitched at the scent of hay and manure as we crouched in the shadows just inside the door.

A group of outcasts sprinted past in the direction of the stockyard.

Lan popped his head out. "We're clear."

Bursting upward, I stopped. "Wait. Did you hear that?"

"That's right, imbeciles. Keep on walking. I'll kick your heads in."

Lan's face blanked. "What did you just say?"

"It wasn't me." We really didn't have time for this, but I walked farther inside the stable and found a single land kelpie inside a darkened stall standing chained to the wall, the iron links holding him tight.

He shot me a baleful glare. "Fuck you."

This one was not like the other land kelpies I'd come across. *This* one was seriously pissed. And more importantly . . . "You're talking. I didn't know you guys could talk."

"Don't group me together with the peasants of my race, imbecile."

Yikes.

No time to give him a lesson in manners. Time to bargain. "Sorry about that. Look, if I free you, will you carry us to the Oracle? A favor for a favor?"

He let out a low snort, pawed the ground once, and then bobbed his head. A deal struck with a fae creature.

I hoped. Because that could be kelpie for 'screw you'.

Hissing low, I undid the iron shackles around the kelpie's neck and noticed both of its back legs were also bound. What the hell? "Lan, help."

He slid into view, and the land kelpie bared its teeth and growled. Lan held up his hands. "Just helping the lady here. Even if she's nuts for making a deal with you." Under his breath, he said to me, "Why do you think he's bound like this, Orphan?"

I ignored him, and together we had the land kelpie's hind legs free in under a minute. Which was good because I could hear the coming crowd.

The mob that wanted me to kill the courts for them. And theoretically, they could do just that. Judging from what had happened earlier, all they'd have to do was bind Lan and me together with a few ropes and then run like hell. Bingo. Done.

I mounted up on the land kelpie's back, and Lan leapt up behind me, setting his hands on my waist with *far* too much confidence. I tensed, but no sparks shot up between us. Frustration bubbled in my gut. Why did it happen sometimes and not others? Maybe we'd burned out that connection with the explosion like Ruby had guessed. Did it have to build up to a certain level again? Was that it?

I'd barely gotten a hand hold on the kelpie's mane when he surged forward, as if his body were a boat and we were slicing through roaring waves in the ocean. As we emerged out of the darkened stall, he let out a massive trumpeting challenge, surging for the sanctuary barrier.

It was unmanned, and we burst through onto the barren tundra, the kelpie heading north with single-minded ferocity.

"We have to find the Oracle," I called over my shoulder. "She's our only hope now. Lan, where's this haunt that you've failed to mention until now?" If he'd expected to slip that by me without comment, then he didn't know me at all.

Lan didn't immediately answer. "I shared some concerns with Queen Elisavana."

Of course he did. "How?"

"A small book. She has its twin, and we're able to communicate via writing in it."

Similar to the one I'd had for Cinth. Apparently, there was more than one pair in existence after all. "What concerns did you have? Wait, let me guess—Rubezahl."

He didn't reply.

I twisted as much as possible without sending myself sliding from the back of the fast-moving land kelpie. "Nothing to say?"

"Nothing you want to hear, Orphan."

Ruby had helped me when no one else would. Sure, things had been a little weird in the sanctuary, but he was still the only person who seemed interested in figuring out the mystery of Underhill and my magic, rather than pointing a finger or slaughtering people. "I don't buy it."

"You don't have to. It's my job to be suspicious. And that's all I feel right

now—suspicion. Rubezahl may not be up to anything sinister, but we're not getting his full story either."

The thing was, Ruby possessed far more good than most of the beings I'd encountered in life. He didn't *need* to do any of the stuff he'd done for the outcasts, yet he was wearing himself to the bone to help the mad. Or he had been until we'd killed them all.

Guilt twisted savagely in my stomach at the scene of horror we'd left. The unmoving bodies, the breaking of the sanctuary's protection. Tears stung my eyes, but I let the wind sweep them away.

Because for the first time in a very long while, I felt a glimmer of hope.

This kelpie had promised to lead us directly to the Oracle. She may not be the open door to Underhill but finding her was a close second.

Maybe our luck had finally changed.

"So Elisavana told you where to find the Oracle?" I asked over my shoulder as the kelpie slowed to descend a shingled slope.

Lan's voice rose over the scattering of rocks. "She didn't mention Underhill. Just that the Oracle likes to gather supplies at a certain market in Barrow on occasion."

No idea where that was.

I pressed a hand against the kelpie's neck. "Hey, we need to go to Barrow. Do you know where that is?"

"I will not go to any such place," he sneered.

My eyes narrowed. "We made a deal. You need to take us to the Oracle."

"Yes, imbecile. Do not repeat words and waste my time when a powerful foe is nearly upon us. I am taking you to the Oracle now."

Lan stilled at the same time as me. I forced the words out. "You know where she is?"

The kelpie flicked an ear backward and sighed. And then he spoke. "Of course. The Oracle is in Underhill."

Underhill. The Oracle was in Underhill.
And this kelpie was apparently taking us to her.
This had to be the luckiest day of our lives. And I didn't trust it for one second.

I leaned forward when we reached the bottom of the slope and the kelpie began picking his way alongside a stream. "Are you bringing us to the entrance as part of our deal then?"

He snorted—man, this fella had a real chip on his shoulder. "The entrance."

". . . Uh, yeah. Are we going there?"

"I'm a kelpie, two-legged imbecile."

I pretended not to feel the slight shaking of Lan's body as he contained his laughter. "I'm ignorant as to how exactly you being a kelpie fits in with taking us to the entrance of Underhill."

The kelpie stomped his way through the stream, sending a wave of icy water over my thighs in a way that seemed purposeful.

"We are the favored fae of the goddess. In ancient days, we carried her on great journeys through the realms," he deigned to respond. "I have no need of an entrance to access Underhill and reach the Oracle."

This entire time a damn kelpie could have taken me to the fae realm? Was this not common knowledge? As Lan grunted in surprise, I assumed the answer was no. "How many land kelpie are there?" I sat straighter. "The mad fae could access Underhill—"

"Only the oldest amongst our kind are able to make the journey," he

snapped, cutting me off. “And we are not steeds.”

Really? Because I’d ridden on land kelpies several times now and the others hadn’t appeared to mind. “How many are old enough?”

“One,” he thundered.

My brows shot right back up from where they’d recently lowered. “Just you?”

He ignored me.

Huh.

“Why were you restrained at the sanctuary?” Lan asked.

“I can access Underhill. Why do you fucking think?” He pawed at the ground, circling one spot. Blinking into my magical vision, I couldn’t see anything particularly special about the area, but the kelpie clearly didn’t agree.

Lan sucked in a breath. “The person who locked you up—”

“I grow tired of your incessant chatter, male.”

I grinned. *Ha!* The kelpie didn’t just dislike me.

My stomach lurched as the ground seemed to give way. The kelpie had long since left the stream for land, but it felt like we were traveling through water again. Almost as if . . .

I stared at the ground as the fae walked through it, sinking steadily. The stones and dirt closed over my booted foot and the leather cladding my legs, rising higher.

It was really happening, my mouth dried. This was just like the other times I’d been to Underhill. *Fake* Underhill, I suppose, but the experience was similar by design.

Lan tightened his hold on me as the ground crept over our torsos and chests—our rude mode of transportation had already disappeared.

I glanced back and winked. “See you soon.”

The ground sucked us under with a power that was entirely foreign to my voyages to Fake Underhill. My awareness of Lan and the land kelpie fell away as I was ripped downward and spun, shoved sideways and battered.

Yet seconds or hours later, I emerged still mounted on the asshole kelpie’s back.

“All right?” I shouted back at Lan.

“Wouldn’t want to make a habit of it.”

I could second that.

But now we had to pay attention to our surroundings. If Fake Underhill

was dangerous, how much more so would the real thing be? I swept my focus over the sandy dunes that were a borderline painful reminder of the first trial in the final Untried test. It surprised me how similar it looked.

Then, I'd held real hope for my simple and safe future on Unimak. Now . . . Now, the word "shambles" was a weak descriptor of my life. Even if the Oracle had answers for me, I doubted that I could ever return to my place of birth.

And did I want to?

Perhaps the future I'd so desperately wanted had really been me settling for a life that wouldn't have brought true contentedness.

Would it have made me happy at all?

But without it, what did I want in life?

"How far to the Oracle?" I dared to ask our helper.

"How loud is a banshee's scream?" came his reply.

It was Lan's turn to snort. My gaze narrowed. "Is that your rude way of telling me you don't know?"

The kelpie was picking up the pace. "Underhill cannot be measured, imbecile. We run until we reach the Oracle or are killed."

Lan stopped laughing. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"The Oracle has a deal with Underhill and keeps a safe haven here. Those in the Oracle's safe haven are protected, but she is the only one guaranteed safe passage *to* and *from* that haven. Did I dumb that down enough for you?"

Lan drew me closer until my back was flush with his chest. My heart stopped in dread anticipation, but if he was right and we'd drained whatever magic had built up between us, then it hadn't replenished itself yet.

"You're saying that Underhill will go out of his way to come after us," Lan said.

"*Her*," I chorused with the kelpie.

He huffed. "The female is less stupid than the male."

I turned my shit-eating grin to Faolan, who responded with an eye roll.

"Be prepared," the fae horse said as the scenery morphed in true Underhill fashion. Sand turned to cracked dirt, and the salty breeze went to scorching and dry in an instant. Twin suns beat down on our heads—and bodies that we'd dressed in clothing fit for summer in Alaska.

There was no option but to release at least one of my hands from the kelpie's mane, and I did so, drawing the queen's blade from the sheath on my back.

Lan sucked in a sharp breath. “Left. Incoming.”

I nearly gave myself whiplash turning to look. But I shook my head. “Just a lone naga. They’re only an issue if their children are around. Or if we get too close to their treasure trove. At least, that’s what they were like in Fake Underhill.”

A rattle disturbed the otherwise solid *thud* of hooves on hard dirt.

I glanced down as Lan said, “You mean like the gold coins we’re running over?”

Yup. That’d about do it.

The furious hisses erupting around us suggested the naga wasn’t so much alone either. While naga weren’t too different from fae other than their snake heads, they could be a nuisance if they chose. I cursed under my breath, leaning forward to draw my sword. “Their venom will land you on your ass for a month. Don’t get bitten. And don’t look at their treasure again. They infuse their power into it, and it will immobilize you into a trance.”

“Got it,” he said tersely.

“Run faster,” I ordered the land kelpie.

“Fuck off.”

Okay then. Ancient guy knew how to swear.

A naga launched at me, and I swung wide with the queen’s blade, slashing to keep the space around us clear.

There were so many of them. I’d barely injured another when a third launched at me, very nearly making it onto the kelpie’s back. Coins still rattled underfoot. I felt the clenching of Lan’s thighs as he twisted and dodged at my back.

Changing their strategy, the closest naga launched herself at the kelpie’s legs. Fuck! I threw myself forward, but I needn’t have bothered. The kelpie lifted his hoof and brought it down on her snake head with crunching finality.

The hisses grew fainter as the rattle of coins was replaced once more with the rhythmic *thud* of hard, dried dirt.

“They’re not following,” Lan said tersely.

I released a pent-up breath. “Good.”

As the word left my lips, a gigantic moon cloaked the twin suns, casting us in shadow. The sky churned a furious purple, and my eyes widened as deep red lightning struck the ground ahead.

Gone was the harsh desert, but it was so dark. What was that?

I peered ahead. “The ground changes ahead.”

“Hold on, imbeciles,” the kelpie said. “It’s about to get bouncy.”

As though he’d jumped on a trampoline, we shot upward. Lan’s alarmed shout was nearly lost to my shriek as I clung to the kelpie, my tongue bleeding from the jaw-jarring change. As we lost altitude again, I peered down to make sense of the latest shitshow.

The blue surface beneath us was translucent. *Huge*. And it spread out so far in each direction that going around would be impossible. Silver threads wormed through the translucent surface like rivers with branching streams. I’d never seen anything like it.

“It’s a membrane,” Lan whispered.

And then we were up again, bouncing across the stretched, flexible floor like kids at a fifth birthday party. The bone-jolting change wasn’t the issue. I was more worried about what this membrane contained—or what it was *attached to*.

An ear-splitting noise shook the very air filling my lungs.

“That didn’t sound great.”

Perhaps an understatement.

Ahead of us, something unfurled, so large it made Ruby look like a speck of dust. And as a great head emerged atop a long, curving neck, I understood what the membrane truly was.

Wings.

Of a beast I’d never *truly* encountered. Because the weak, three-headed, robotic copy I’d fought with the other Untried seemed laughable in comparison.

“A dragon,” Lan said in awe.

“A real dragon,” I repeated grimly. And here we were bouncing along its wings like bloody mosquitos. “Mr. Kelpie, I don’t suppose we could get to the Oracle in the opposite direction.”

He grunted. “No. The way is through whatever Underhill places in our path. Her tests must be passed.”

Which was exactly what I’d expected him to say, but it was worth a shot.

An extra layer of shadow fell over us, and a quick glance up revealed the dragon’s tail was primed for a swipe. The dragon twisted its great head to watch us and, with sickening certainty, I waited like a mouse on a cat’s back for the fae monster to make its move.

We shot upward and forward again.

And the tail began its arc toward us. It was going to connect on our

downward fall.

“Get ready to jump,” I called.

“Wait.” Lan wrapped his arm around my waist, and I felt his thighs tighten around the kelpie. A burning sensation started at the crown of my head and cascaded over my shoulders and body. I gasped as my body and then the whole freaking kelpie disappeared completely. Lan’s deep-red magic was covering us entirely, but before my eyes, that too vanished, the heat cooling into an ice that froze away every color trace of Lan’s charm.

This was how he disappeared!

The whoosh of the dragon’s tail halted and, careful not to dislodge Lan, I turned back to confirm the creature had paused its attack. Like a scorpion, it had drawn its tail back again.

With a shudder, Lan dropped his magic, sagging against my back.

“Can you do it again?”

“Only once or twice. It’s hard to keep others cloaked and I lost a lot of juice when our magics combined.”

I could hear the fatigue in his voice as we continued to bound forward, well over two thirds of the way across the dragon’s wings now.

But we still had to make it beyond the dragon’s head, and then we’d only be free if the creature decided not to pursue us.

We soared upward again, and up the tail went.

With a grunt, Lan repeated his Unseelie trick. This time, the dragon kept coming, but confusion caused the beast to alter his path. The rush of air as the spiked tail whipped overhead was almost powerful enough to drag me bodily from the kelpie’s back.

“Better make this a big jump,” I said to the kelpie. Yet the foam at his mouth told me our rude guide was working hard to get us out of this mess.

Up we shot. Lan erased us from sight, but this time the dragon didn’t move at all.

Something that didn’t bode well considering the rumored intelligence of these ancient fae. Next time, whether we were invisible or not, that tail would hit us.

Lan dropped our cover, now almost completely leaning on me. Shit.

“Can’t do more,” he slurred.

“Bounce off to the left next time,” I told the kelpie. One more jump would see us off the wing and beyond the dragon’s head.

I draped the three of us in indigo magic that was almost an exact match

for the churning purple sky. Once I'd tucked it around us, I tried to recall how the invisibility spell had felt. It was as if Lan had redirected his magic's heat.

Except my magic felt naturally cool.

So I did the only thing I could fathom. Drawing from the crackling sky, I directed red magic into mine, *heating* the cool cloak. The whoosh of the dragon's tail beginning its deadly flight sounded, but I couldn't tear my gaze from my rapidly disappearing magic.

It was working!

The kelpie had listened and angled us to the left, and we exploded in that direction as I managed to make us disappear completely from view.

I held my focus, continuing to fuel my cool magic with the red magic so the cover didn't drop. The tail swept far off to our right, and the dragon's eyes searched the space blindly for our presence as we passed its head. He'd wanted a nice snack after a long nap, no doubt.

Goddess, Lan hadn't been kidding about the toll of the spell. My body shook as I struggled to maintain the blanket. The dragon would be able to spot us for miles if it took flight or, hell, even if it kept its head raised.

Lan groaned against my shoulder blade.

"There are trees ahead," the kelpie said. "Hold true, young fae."

The shaking of my body amped up, and I couldn't even poke fun at him for being slightly nicer than usual. "Hurry," I gasped.

We plunged into the trees, and I released my hold, relief sweeping me from head to toe, though a deep, aching fatigue was left behind. I swayed in my seat, dragging in thin breaths to clear the spots in my vision. "Please tell me Underhill is done now."

The kelpie slowed his pace slightly. His icicles were long gone and sweat drenched his coat. All of us were weakened, and unless our next attacker was a baby andvari, then I highly doubted we'd emerge the victors.

"Underhill will finish when she so chooses," the kelpie said wearily.

As he spoke, the scene before us morphed again, and a cobbled pathway appeared through the trees, shimmering with a gray glittering quality I knew well by now.

I didn't need to ask the ancient kelpie to confirm it. "We're here."

The land kelpie ducked a front shoulder and literally slid out from under us, dumping both Faolan and me onto the ground in a tangled heap of limbs. On my back, I stared up at him and watched in fascination as the icicles in his sweat-soaked coat and mane regrew before my eyes until they were even longer than before.

He squinted at me. “Perhaps you are not as stupid as I thought. The Oracle waits for you at the end of this path. I suggest that you do not keep her waiting.”

I wobbled to my feet. “Thank you.”

“You freed me. We are at quits now.” He turned his back on us, flicked his tail in our direction, which felt an awful lot like he was flipping us the bird, and then trotted down the path ahead of us, his hooves clattering on the cobblestones.

From the ground, Lan gave a low groan. “Goddess above, I could just lie here for the rest of the day. I hurt all over.”

“You want to take the chance that Underhill gets pissed with us for lollygagging?” I asked.

Lan pushed hard to his feet. “No. No I don’t. This is nothing like Fake Underhill. This is . . . beyond what I could have thought possible.”

I placed my feet on the glittering cobblestone path, and a burst of tiny bugs shot into the air. Not bugs . . . birds of every color, no bigger than the tips of my fingernails. My breath caught as a series of high-pitched calls wove between the flocks that rose in the air around us as they fluttered and darted, chasing one another.

“Like flying flower petals,” I murmured. They brushed against my skin, and I held a hand out, palm up. Some of the birds landed and preened their feathers. *Amazing*. They were so delicate in contrast to everything that had just tried to kill us. Repeatedly.

“Do you like them?”

We both spun at the ringing voice to find a woman behind us. She was plain of face, her light brown hair bound in a simple braid, her eyes a light blue-green. A dress made of tan material covered her from wrist to ankle and moved like silk. She’d belted it at the waist with a darker brown sash.

She clasped her hands, waiting.

I blinked a few times. “Yes. They are beautiful.”

“Who are you?” Lan asked, hand going to the hilt of his knife.

The woman smiled. “I am the Oracle’s friend. She asked me to watch for you.”

I noticed she didn’t give us her name, not that I was surprised. Names had power in the fae world, and she had no reason to trust us. Nor did we have any reason to trust *her*.

Her words penetrated my brain fog. “The Oracle knew we were coming?”

“She saw you in her scrying mirror.” The woman tipped her head toward us. “Come, she is waiting and can be grumpy if left to her own devices for too long.”

The woman brushed past, close enough that I caught a whiff of her perfume—sea salt and ocean. The flocks of tiny birds rose into the air like a multi-colored storm to surround us. There was a moment when the air felt heavier, as if I could sink under the weight of it, and then the pressing sensation was gone, and I was following this strange woman whom I hoped would take us to the Oracle instead of kill us.

“Kallik,” she said, glancing back. “That is your name? And Faolan, correct?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Hmm.”

Lan and I shared a look. This was on the stranger side of the conversational scale, but she didn’t seem dangerous, at least not right now.

The cobblestone path dipped downward, following a slope covered in wildflowers that spread out on either side. I stared as tiny rainclouds hovered over the wildflowers, raining on different patches. We were close enough that I simply reached out and slid my fingers through the nearest cloud.

A crackle of miniature lightning erupted around my fingers, and I snatched my hand back as an equally miniature thunderstorm spilled out of the cloud.

“Just can’t help touching, can you?” Lan muttered.

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me you *can* keep from touching?”

His eyes locked on mine, and the tension rose so fast there might as well have been another thunderstorm between us, lightning cracking as my fingers itched to splay across his chest or through his dark hair.

“A bond such as yours is difficult,” our guide or potential killer said, breaking the moment. “I have seen it before. You will have a choice soon, to give up everything else or give up each other.”

My heart dropped. “Oh . . . is that all?”

“Yes. But that choice will not come today.” She waved us forward, and I got my feet going again. Her words didn’t leave me, however.

“I don’t suppose you care to share any more details about this so-called bond,” Lan said.

“No. I do not.”

He growled, and I didn’t dare look at him. Because . . . what the hell did she mean by all that? I’d never truly thought we’d be given the choice to be together, but she’d made it sound like it was possible.

And Lan and I had already confessed to each other that we would seize such a chance in an instant.

The slope leveled out, and we walked across a meadow dotted with horses of all shades and tones, from the deepest black to the purest white. There were even a few blues and reds that stood out. One bright white horse lifted its head, and a golden horn flashed in the sunlight as it stretched a pair of wings that had been tucked tightly to its back.

Alicorns.

A quick whinny drew my gaze to the land kelpie who’d brought us here from the human realm. He trotted down to a stream that cut across the meadow, splashing and playing in a way that defied his bad attitude, sending sprays and waves toward his fellow equines—not that I’d ever dare suggest he was of the same ilk. The alicorns stepped away from him, shaking their heads at his approach. Not in condescension, more like the way you’d look at a child playing in a puddle.

Fondness and humor. Understanding.

There were no ranks here, for better or worse. I took a deep breath and

felt a sense of calm permeate some untapped part of me.

Lan placed a hand on my elbow, and I tensed, but no sparks flew. “There, ahead.”

I turned from the frolicking land kelpie to see a mounded hill of red-brown rock and earth up ahead, extending high into the sky in a dome-shaped structure. River stone studded the structure here and there, and a door and multiple windows had been cut into it. Grass and flowers grew untamed over the bottom section, lending it a natural camouflage. Ivy wove along the edges, tying stone, earth, flowers, and grass together in a tight lattice.

“That wasn’t there when we first stepped into the valley, I’m sure of it,” I said, though it *did* blend in really well. “Did you see—”

“I looked away and back, and there it was,” Lan replied.

The flickering of lights from within beckoned us forward. That, and our guide was headed straight for it.

“I suggest you hurry,” she murmured. “Nightfall in Underhill is dangerous.”

“Daytime in Underhill is dangerous,” I said with a snort.

She smiled over her shoulder, showing a pair of tiny fangs. “That it is, young fae.”

Goddess! She was a blooded fae!

Supposedly extinct like the mystica fae. Yet here one stood in front of me, one of the deadliest warriors our kind had ever known. Blood drinkers, they were related to the sirens and could bend another’s will with a single look. Somewhere along the line, a human had caught on and created a highly romanticized version of them called a vampire.

And we’d followed her to this place. Was facing her our last test from Underhill? I’d be pissed if the blooded fae tried to stuff us into an oven or something equally as messed up.

I found my feet slowing and stopping even as the light around us blinked out. As though a switch had flipped, day turned to night, and stars and two moons rose lazily above us.

Lan didn’t pass me. “What is it?”

“She’s blooded,” I whispered. “What in the name of Balor’s beard are we doing following her?”

She turned at the doorway, silhouetted by the light. “Balor was a right prick, and I don’t mind saying so. But I should also mention that behind you comes a pair of tarbeasts, and they very much want to tear you to pieces.

Which I do not.”

Tarbeasts. Shit a brick.

Built like oversized boars with multiple tails they used as whips, they oozed a sticky black substance—hence their name—that numbed and paralyzed their prey. They were known to hunt *only* at night. A grunt and a snort behind us, accompanied by the sound of cloven hooves on the ground, sent me running, fatigue and wariness about our guide washed away by a surge of adrenaline. I didn’t even want to look behind me. A childhood haunted by stories about these monsters, a favorite threat of the orphanage’s nannies, was enough to spur me forward like an entire mob of furious outcasts hadn’t managed.

I bolted past our guide and almost leaped into the house, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness of the multitude of candles.

Lan joined me at a more sedate pace, amusement in his gaze as he looked at me. “Still afraid of tarbeasts, Orphan?”

Yes. With my eyes, I dared him to laugh out loud over my reaction. He pressed his trembling lips together.

Whatever.

Standing at the hearth of an oversized fireplace was the Oracle, stirring something in a huge pot. “’Bout damn time you two fools showed up,” she muttered, back to me. Her long gray hair was bound in a single braid that hung to the backs of her knees. The hunch she’d had in Fake Underhill was gone. Had it been a lie, or had she taken up some serious yoga?

A powerful urge to laugh came over me, and I bit the inside of my cheek to stop the traitorous and delirious giggle. This wasn’t funny. I was exhausted, and the mixture of that with adrenaline and finally feeling safe—hopefully—was pushing my mind over the edge.

“You aren’t going to ask why I did what I did?” The Oracle turned to face us. Her one eye had a slash across it—yoga hadn’t fixed that—while the other held all the colors in the spectrum. They flickered from one hue to another, sliding between the shades constantly.

My mirth was wiped clean in an instant. “You mean why you set me up with that blood on the dagger routine?”

She grinned, displaying yellowed teeth. “Oh, someone set you up, Dandelion, but it wasn’t me.”

Lan lifted an eyebrow at me and mouthed, “*Dandelion?*”

I shrugged. Who the hell knew what she was on about? “Are you going to

tell me? Or is this going to be a game of riddles and guesses? Not my favorite, I have to tell you. And lately it's all anyone wants to play."

Our guide laughed softly, and the Oracle's expression softened. "You met my friend. What do you think of her?"

Odd question, but sure. "She didn't try to eat us. I'm grateful for that because I was tired and really didn't want to kill her if at all avoidable."

Lan choked, muttering, "Probably not the best thing to say, Orphan."

The Oracle's 'friend' slid around to stand in front of us. "I am here for the Oracle's protection. As you pointed out, Underhill is dangerous no matter what the time of the day. I'm fond of the old biddy, though she becomes crazier by the day."

The Oracle snorted. "I'm your only friend, twit."

The blooded fae sank into a chair that put her soundly in the shadows of the fireplace, perhaps the only place in the massive room that was cloaked in darkness. "Perhaps I will make a new friend soon. Maybe young Kallik will be my friend."

There was a flash of white as the blooded fae grinned at me, her eyes glowing in the dark. "Better your friend than your next snack," I said.

The blooded fae threw her head back and laughed. "Yes, I like her."

The Oracle grunted. "I was not looking for your approval. Now, back to the task at hand."

She promptly ladled something out of the pot and into a dark brown stone bowl. My stomach grumbled as she handed it to me. I wouldn't have turned down a bowl of dog food at this point, and what she'd given me was far from that. The deep purple surface of the liquid reflected my face like a mirror.

My jaw dropped. "Is this what I think it is?" I sunk to a cross-legged position in front of the fire.

"What is it?" Lan asked, and the Oracle chuckled.

"You can't guess? Girly there did."

"Cinth has never been able to make this," I said softly. "She's tried and tried but never . . ."

I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell rolling off the surface of the liquid as I thought about what I wanted. The scents morphed as I breathed them in, my desire for comfort literally creating the food I craved most. I opened my eyes and the liquid had shifted to a solid chunk of steamed halibut crusted in pine nuts, a light bearnaise sauce drizzled over it.

A fork was shoved into my hand, and I dug into the first bite of flaky fish,

a moan slipping from my mouth. “My mom used to make halibut just like this.”

“I don’t understand.” Lan stared at his bowl. “It’s just purple liquid?”

“Close your eyes and think about what you want to eat,” I mumbled around a mouthful of perfectly cooked fish. “It’s a bruadar bowl.”

Lan’s head snapped up. “Cinth has been trying to make it?”

“Close your damn eyes,” I said, and I realized I was at the bottom of the bowl already. Well, that blew—I was still hungry.

The Oracle took the bowl from me and refilled it. “Here, pathetic puppy eyes.”

I laughed and took the bowl again. Closing my eyes, I thought about Cinth’s pixie bread covered in huckleberry jam. I peeked and grinned as I scooped up the bread and bit into it.

“Just like Cinth’s,” I groaned. The bread melted on my tongue, and I went slower this time, savoring the flavors.

Lan stared into his bowl, and I leaned over. He tried to pull it away, but I saw the bright red berries covered in chocolate and whipping cream.

“Didn’t take you for having a sweet tooth.” I handed him half of my pixie bread.

Lan wouldn’t look at me as he took the bread and stuffed it in his mouth. The Oracle? She just cackled. “He don’t be thinking about food, girly.”

I barely heard her, frowning into my empty bowl. My belly was full, but who knew when we’d eat next?

A sharp thump on my head snapped my eyes up to the Oracle. Having just hit me with it, she now held out a bag to me. *My bag.*

“Here are your things. I shimmied them here from the sanctuary. Go and wash up. And the book that connects you to your friend is in there too.” She held out a second bag to Faolan. “And yours, Unseelie boy.”

Lan stiffened at the term.

“But—” I started. We had to get answers and book it back to the human realm. Time was of the essence.

“I assure you that there is space to discuss. For you to heal, Dandelion. I will tell you when the moment of departure is upon us. Until that comes . . . perhaps the pair of you can learn what it is that comes for you through the shadows and darkness.” Her single eye filled with so many colors locked on me. “This is your calm before the storm, Kallik of All Fae. I suggest you take it.”

An hour-long soak in a copper tub filled with water that stayed the perfect temperature from start to finish, and yeah, I hadn't felt this relaxed in . . . eight years and a couple of months, give or take. The fact that I'd willingly remained in the tub for that long told me the fae realm was working its remedial magic on me. I'd never felt such down-to-my-bones contentment. Which made me understand that I'd never once experienced the true Underhill.

In all fairness, I could barely recall the two field trips the orphanage had brought us on to the fae realm, but my training had *never* felt like this.

It made sense that older fae like Rubezahl would have instantly known the difference between the illusion and original after Underhill closed up shop.

What I couldn't understand—okay, *one* of the things I couldn't understand—was why Underhill was keeping herself closed. She possessed unfathomable power. Surely she could reopen herself. What the hell was I capable of that an entire *realm* couldn't achieve? Unless sarcasm was the key, I was fresh out of ideas.

Lan entered my room carrying a tray.

“Didn't want to knock?” I said lazily over the high lip of the tub. He probably couldn't see in.

Probably.

“Figured I should make sure you hadn't drowned,” he drawled, a slow grin spreading. “The blooded fae said she'd do it, but I offered to take her place.”

I'm sure he had. "How kind of you."

"I thought so. The blooded fae made you a hot chocolate."

"Poisoned?"

He took a sip. "Guess we'll find out."

I sniffed the air, the rich chocolate flooding my senses. "Might be worth dying for."

Lan took another sip. "No, don't worry. I'll protect you."

"Don't drink it all!"

Smirking over the rim of the cup, he took a third sip.

Oh, really? Two could play at this game. I stood up in the bath, rivulets of water running between my breasts, across the flat plane of my stomach, and lower yet.

Lan choked and spluttered, and I bit back a smirk of my own as I reached for a towel robe, pivoting to give him a full 360-degree view. I was that nice.

Covered up, I crossed the space between us and swiped the hot chocolate from him. "Everything okay? Or have you never seen a naked woman before?"

"Not one that looked like you," he said hoarsely.

The rawness of his reply stole some of my thunder. I sipped the chocolate drink from the blooded fae and moaned. "Goddess, this tastes good."

He took a few steps back, the edge of my bed hitting him in the backs of the knees, and he sat and sucked in a breath, his dark eyes swirling with buried color.

I liked when that happened. I wished he did it more. When his eyes gleamed and danced like this, it felt like his walls had dropped, giving me a glimpse of the boy I'd known all those years ago. The one who'd pulled me from the river.

I sat next to him on the bed. "So . . . Underhill."

"We bounced here over a dragon's wings. What more do you want to know? It's a weird-ass place," he said gravely.

I snorted, and a low laugh shook him. A hoot burst from my lips, and soon we were howling with mirth, tears streaming from my eyes as I wheezed for air between bouts.

Wiping my eyes, I chuckled. "It's only funny because the dragon didn't eat us."

Lan shuffled back on the bed to lean against the wall, crossing his legs at the ankle. Leaning forward, he snatched the mug of hot chocolate back again.

“You figured out the Unseelie trick.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I murmured, watching to see how much he drank. Seriously, it was good shit. “You showed me how to do it, and I was able to copy you.”

A wrinkle creased the space between his brows. “You’re not giving yourself enough credit. The Seelie have tried to figure *that* little number out for centuries.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Beats me. I usually have to work for weeks to get anything right. The school tutors should’ve chucked a real dragon into the mix years ago.”

A knock sounded, and the Oracle popped her head in. “Good bath.”

“Yes, thank you,” I said with real gratitude.

“I know. That was me telling you. I’m the Oracle.”

Oh, uh . . .

“I see.”

“No. I do. Stop blithering, Dandelion.” She pushed the door open wider. “You have time here. Ample time. So rest now, and do not fear that the magic between the pair of you will spark while you remain in Underhill. Here, you can touch without fear.”

Lan jolted and stared at her. “It won’t play up at all?”

Her lips twitched. “Not at all, grandson of Lugh.”

I blinked. “But we’re still Unseelie and Seelie. One of us will die if we touch.”

The Oracle’s lips twitched. “I think you’ll find that doesn’t matter either.”

“Why?” I pressed. “Did we drain it with the last explosion?”

“Ha!” The Oracle’s shoulders shook. “*Drain it*. Idiots.” Still laughing, she began to pull the door closed.

Lan called after her. “You have not told me where I’m to sleep.”

The old woman scoffed. “You want a bed of your own? *Complete* idiot.” With a slam of the door, she was gone.

The tension thickened as Lan and I studied the single bed we sat upon.

Was he going to talk or should I? Someone had to talk. Goddess, he wasn’t going to do it.

I racked my brain for a topic.

“Guess that’s that,” Lan said in a deep voice, removing his shirt.

“What?” I blurted, my heart beating at my ribs.

His gaze glittered with mischief. “While some people were taking an hour

in the bath, others were waiting to take any bath at all.”

My mouth bobbed. “Oh, shit. I didn’t realize.”

He stood, hands going to the front of his pants. “And I chose not to tell you. You needed it.”

“That could be interpreted two ways.”

“I know. I’m saying that you reeked.”

Laughing, I bundled his tunic up and threw it at his face. Winking, Faolan dropped his trousers. My laughter died as I took in every inch of him. *Fuck*. I’d literally fantasized about him naked for years, and none of those fantasies lived up to this. He had the reverse triangle torso that some men would kill for. If I hadn’t already known Lan was as strong as he was agile and quick, then this close-up inspection of his lean-muscle body would have confirmed as much. My eyes drifted over his legs and arms—gorgeous, of course, but there was a slight waxiness covering his skin in both areas.

“It was only fair, Orphan,” he said huskily.

My focus flew back to his face so quickly, my vision had to catch up to refocus. Only fair . . . Oh. *Oh*.

Not trusting my voice, I merely arched a brow.

And he saw right through it. But thankfully, my Unseelie fantasy climbed into the tub and settled back, closing his eyes as he sunk chest-deep into the tub.

I let my exhale shake its way out of me and crossed the room to my pack. Digging through it, I dragged past the spare tunics and leathers until I found what I was looking for.

Clutching the small leather journal to my chest, I grabbed a pen off the small desk in the corner and jumped back onto the soft bed. I needed Cinth desperately. And not just that . . .

I wrote:

Cinth, I miss you so much.

Please tell me you’re all right.

It’s been . . . well, heaps of stuff has happened. So much it might take a day to write it out.

I’ll cut to the chase.

The outcasts are coming for Unimak—for the courts. You need to leave the island immediately.

Promise me that you’ll get away.

I waited, but a reply didn't appear. Did this thing even work between realms? The thought hadn't occurred to me until now. Dammit. I had to warn Cinth. I mean, she was fierce with a rolling pin and all, but . . .

My gut churned at the thought of losing her. She was already putting herself in danger for my cause. I couldn't let her keep taking risks.

"She'll be okay, Kallik," Lan murmured.

I shot him a curious look. His eyes weren't even open. How had he known what I was doing? "Doesn't stop me from worrying."

He opened his eyes at last, and I could tell he was contemplating my words, not trying for some glib response. "True. It never stopped me from worrying about you when you were in training."

Lan worried about me? "I took care of myself."

"And yet . . ."

I acknowledged that with a small smile. "When we met again after my training, I never would have guessed you'd thought of me at all during that time."

"It never made sense to show you. What with . . . me being Unseelie. Wasn't like we could make it work."

I nodded. "I know. And yet . . ." I borrowed his words.

"Knowing we were destined to be on opposite sides of the river was almost worse than being from Lugh's line and having Unseelie powers," Lan said softly.

"A punch to the gut I never recovered from," I agreed in a voice just as soft.

He splashed water over his face, disappearing from view as he dunked underneath to wet his hair before grabbing the soap. Oh, to be a fish in that water.

When he came up again, his hair sleek and wet, he said, "Something always drew me to you, Orphan. This bond the Oracle speaks of, perhaps. I'm not sure. Even as a child, I just wanted to be near to you. To make sure that orphanage didn't eat you whole. It was nothing romantic for a long time, but I always hated to be away from you."

He did? "I hated watching you leave after a visit." Because before my teen crush on Faolan, I'd just plain old missed him in between visits. He'd been my friend. And looking back, that was really strange. Something I'd

never had with another person. Cinth and I were as close as could be, yet my connection with Faolan had always felt different. “I wonder why our magic didn’t play up then.”

“We were just children. Or maybe Underhill was still operational back then. Maybe the fake came later once I’d gone to the Unseelie court. Then you left for training.”

I tried not to watch him washing his body. He made lathering soap look like a strip show. “Guess so.”

He rinsed off, dunking again, and ran his hands through his wet strands as I watched his arm muscles tense with the action. Yeah, I wasn’t looking away anytime soon.

“What are those marks on your arms and legs from?” I asked quietly.

Lan stilled—just for a second—before leaning back in the tub again. His dark eyes roamed my face before I saw the buried color in them rise to the surface again. *No walls*. “My mother tried to train the Unseelie out of me using iron.”

I didn’t voice my horror, just absorbed it and let it fuel the mounting and furious anger I felt against Lan’s pathetic parents. They would answer for what they’d done one day. Daughter of a hero my fucking ass.

There were so many replies I could utter, but I went with, “You’re no less because you’re Unseelie. I wish I could convince you of it.”

He smiled without humor. “I know. And yet . . .”

There it was again. Some things had to be learned on your own timeline. Hadn’t he said something similar to me about worth? But I could no more take his word for it than he could take mine. “What your parents did was wrong, Lan. Your mother is no hero, and that’s why she didn’t recognize the hero in you.”

He shook his head. “I am no hero. My grandfather’s spear does not light up at my touch.”

The fiery spear of Lugh—a legendary weapon—and one I’d often gazed upon because Lan’s mother was never seen without it. “And when did you last touch it?”

He rested his head back against the lip of the tub. “When I was sixteen, just before I was tested.”

“About the same time you stopped visiting me.”

“Now you know why.”

I did. It was funny how many parallels ran between us, really. Magical,

situational, emotional. Nerves erupted low in my stomach, and I swallowed hard. “I do. But Lan, you know that we choose our own families, right? Like I chose Cinth.” *And you.* “You don’t have to be who they limit you to be. Carve your own likeness.”

He nodded after a beat. “Tell you what? I’ll give it a go if you will.”

I stared at the journal in my hands. Cinth still hadn’t written back. I squared my shoulders and looked at him again. “Deal.”

“Good. Now, unless you want to get hot and bothered again, I suggest you look elsewhere.”

My lips curved as I continued to look at him, and a slow grin started across his face in response. “Hot and bothered it is,” he said.

I put the journal on the bedside table, giving him some privacy as he grabbed another towel robe that I hadn’t spotted before—or maybe it had just showed up? “How do you know I’m hot and bothered, anyway?”

“Your breathing,” he murmured, walking closer. “The flush of your skin. The shining of your eyes. The way you sit so carefully still, as though you’d like nothing better than to fidget and moan.”

Lan leaned over me, forcing me to recline back on my elbows.

We were magically, situationally, emotionally parallel already. Who would’ve thought we’d end up physically parallel too.

“Observant.” I found my voice. “You know how I can tell you’re hot and bothered?” I couldn’t track the myriad colors in his eyes. They were mesmerizing on a breath-stealing level.

“How, Alli?” His gaze fixed on the slope of my shoulders as my robe slipped a little. He trailed his focus up my neck and over my jaw to my parted lips.

I bit down on my trembling lips. “Your erection is on my thigh.”

He blinked and glanced down. I let my head fall back as laughter shook my body.

His grin was wry, and my breath hitched at the sparkle in his expression. “So he is.”

This couldn’t be happening.

I’d dreamed of this forbidden moment. Of how it might be if I wasn’t Seelie and he wasn’t Unseelie, and if his kiss and his hands on my flesh didn’t cause such catastrophe. But I’d never allowed myself to be truly open to the possibility, knowing that such a union would drain the life from one of us.

But in Underhill.

For this moment in time.

It *was* possible.

My chest rose along with my gaze. I searched his face, licking my lips. “Lan, I want you.”

One of his hands had migrated to my hip. His grip on me tightened at my barely breathed confession. He shuddered over me—as though I’d drawn a finger down the middle of his spine.

It wasn’t just *want*.

I needed this man. I needed him so much that I’d take whatever I could get, even if I regretted it later. Reaching down, I unfastened the tie of my robe and pulled it open, exposing myself from breasts to upper thighs.

He stopped breathing, then, “*Kallik*.”

“Faolan,” I said calmly. “We may not get another chance like this. Ever.”

If anything, my words had the opposite of the intended effect. His gaze shuttered. “That’s why you want to do this?”

“Of course I want you. I’ve wanted you for years. I’m just saying—” I broke off. “Don’t you feel desperate too? We could die when we leave this place, Lan.”

“Never more so,” he replied solemnly. “But there’s got to be a way to overcome the volatility of our combined magic, otherwise, we couldn’t feel this way. This thing between us couldn’t exist.”

I averted my gaze. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’ve never wanted to forget myself more than now, when your beautiful body is laid bare before me. But you aren’t a woman I’ll take to bed on a whim. When I’m inside of you at last, *Kallik*, it will be completely without desperation. We deserve that much. I want it to be real, not a dream.”

Disappointment swirled in my stomach, but his explanation touched my heart, even as it frustrated my bouncing libido. “I can understand that.”

Lan retreated and pulled me upright, then tilted my chin and forced my gaze to his again. “Don’t make me be the responsible one again. I’m not sure I have the strength.”

I smiled despite myself. “You’ve always been the responsible one.”

“Don’t mistake that for wisdom though,” he countered. “So I’ll just need to . . .” Lan gripped the edges of my robe and stared forlornly at my breasts for a few breaths. “I’m a fucking idiot.”

I laughed and tied my robe again. “Better?”

He glanced down. “What do you think? He’s not going anywhere anytime soon.”

And if I had a dick, it’d be in about the same state.

“What I would like,” my Unseelie said, “is to sleep next to you, holding you, all night. Without dragons, naga, giants, wild fae, kelpies, or anything else waking us up. What do you say?”

Blood flooded my cheeks in a way the possibility of sex hadn’t generated. He wanted to cuddle.

In answer, I placed a hand on his chest and rose up on tiptoes, brushing a kiss onto his full lips. When I was certain he’d stopped breathing, I shrugged into a fresh tunic and turned to the bed, pulling the top blanket back, then crawled to take the space nearest the wall.

I tucked a hand under my head, my long hair spilling forward, and patted the small space with my other hand. “I say okay.”

Faolan joined me and took my hand, planting a kiss on my palm before he threaded our fingers together. “We’re going to figure this out, Alli. I swear.”

My preferred name had never sounded better than from his lips.

I smiled, cataloguing his face in the flicker of candlelight before I closed my eyes, breath already deepening. Though nothing else had changed, his words filled me with hope. “I know, Lan.”

And there was no ‘and yet’ about it.

Nightmares . . . I hadn't had a true nightmare since childhood. At least, not in the way that left me dazed, thrashing, screaming, uncertain where I was, and afraid to open my eyes.

Darkness and fear. Something chasing me. Something terrifying in front of me, just out of view. Screams of anguish and hatred, and a bone-deep sense that I could change it all.

If only I understood.

If only I were strong enough.

"Alli, wake up!" Lan's voice cut through the madness of the dream, and I jerked awake, eyes popping wide and breath coming in gasps.

I was flat on my back, Lan on top of me and holding me down. His fingers gripped my wrists, and his mouth was next to my ear, leaving me to stare through his dark strands to the bed's canopy above.

"You're here with me." His voice softened. "I won't let them hurt you."

I flexed my fingers, and he drew one of my hands around his neck and the other around his waist, one at a time, then rolled to the side so we were nose to nose.

I couldn't speak, my throat tight with emotions that crushed me. Swallowing hard, I tried to find the words as Lan moved a hand in a slow circle over my bare back. "Talk to me, Alli. Quiet you is quite possibly the scariest thing I've seen thus far."

A grin cracked my lips, and a traitorous tear tried to escape the corner of my eye. "Bad dream."

"That was not just a bad dream." He smoothed my hair back from my

sweat-soaked face. “I couldn’t wake you. You were thrashing and . . . your heart was slowing.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Your heart slowed,” he whispered. “I would fight anything to keep you safe, Alli, but there was nothing to fight. So you need to tell me what you saw in the dream.”

I closed my eyes, and his hold on me tightened.

“Don’t close your eyes. Please,” he said raggedly.

I looked, *really* looked, at him.

The tension around his eyes and mouth, the way his eyes swirled and locked on mine with desperate need.

Lan was scared of what had almost happened.

I drew in a shuddering breath and leaned my forehead against his. “There was nothing specific. Something chasing me. Something terrible in front of me. No way out. A feeling of helplessness. Someone . . . hating me?”

I frowned, then tipped my head up so our lips were pressed together. Not kissing. Just resting there, touching lightly.

“Nothing else?” The brush of his lips pushed away the fear, and a different emotion rose, rather quickly if the feeling of his body against mine was any indication.

“Nothing else,” I whispered and took that moment to press my lips against his again, my tongue darting between his lips to tease him forward.

“Kallik,” he growled my name. “Don’t distract me from the point of this discussion.”

I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth and bit down gently, dragging my teeth across the fullness, savoring him. “What was that again?”

Maybe he’d forget if I sent all the blood from his brain straight to his—

“Your heart slowed.” He cupped my face with both hands, holding me still. “Much as I would like to continue this, something attacked you while you were asleep. The Oracle needs to know. Or maybe she—”

The door banged open, and the blooded fae stood in the doorway dressed in black leather from her chin to her boot tips. Her eyes drifted over the two of us tangled together.

“Do you mind?” I said dryly. “I’ve been trying to get into his pants for a while.”

Lan snorted, and the blooded fae lifted a brow, eyes narrowing. “I waited for a man for over three hundred years. Your supposed wait is but a speck in

the passage of time.”

I sighed and flopped onto my back, uncaring that my breasts were on display. Lan could look all he liked, perhaps he'd be able to forget his morals, and the blooded fae didn't so much as bat an eyelash.

“Do you have something we can call you besides blooded fae?” I asked. “So that I can properly cuss you out the next time you break down the door?”

Her lips twitched. “You may call me Devon.”

I rolled out of bed and rubbed my hands over my face.

“Come with me. The Oracle awaits.” She spun on a heel and left us there. The door was wide open, and the smell of frying batter rolled into the room.

Was it morning?

I rolled up and pulled on clothes—they were clean, thank the goddess—and grabbed the leather journal on the way out.

At the silence behind me, I turned and looked back.

Lan sat on the edge of the bed, sheet twisted in his lap and tented by a very obvious erection.

I grinned and winked. “Maybe next time.”

“Goddess willing,” he muttered.

I left as he leaned down for a pair of pants. Not that I didn't want to watch his oh-so-lovely-when-naked body before he managed to cover it again, but I really preferred seeing the clothes come off, not go on . . . and that smell was dragging me forward in a way that I couldn't deny. Because it smelled like Cinth's cooking.

It smelled like her waffles she infused with honeysuckle and cinnamon. I paused in the long, carved stone hallway, and just breathed it in. What I wouldn't give to see her, to feel her arms around me and know that she was safe.

I flipped open the leather journal, and my heart leaped at the words scrawled hastily in reply.

*Not safe.
Alli, I'm so sorry.*

And that was it.

I clutched the leather journal hard, grabbed the quill, and scrawled back.

Don't you dare die on me.

THAT WAS IT, I had to leave. Hyacinth wouldn't scare me on purpose. Not ever.

I tucked the journal into my belt and strode forward. If I had to face down the Oracle and Devon together, they weren't going to stop me.

The hallway opened to the main area, lit like the night before with candles everywhere. The fire raged, and a woman bent over the liquid in the pot. Not the Oracle. Not Devon.

"Hyacinth?" I stumbled over her name, beyond shocked.

She turned and grinned, opening her arms to me as she smiled.

But the angry red line that crossed one side of her face, running over her burn from her forehead to her jaw, stopped me from running to her. "Who the fuck did that?"

Her smile faded. "It's a bit of a story, and if I don't pay attention, then this food won't resemble food when we eat it."

Forget the fucking food. I'd go hungry for a month if it meant she was really here. If it meant she was safe. I ran to her and caught her in my arms. She hugged me back, and her shoulders shook.

"Don't cry," I whispered. "Please don't cry."

"I thought you'd died." She hiccupped. "Ruby said . . . he said that you were dead."

I didn't let her go, just hung on for all I was worth. "I don't know why he'd say that, but he was wrong. *Is* wrong. Just . . . how did you get here?" I did pull back then, just to look at her. To let myself absorb that she was really here. *Impossibly* here with me in Underhill.

"I brought her." The Oracle tapped the floor with her beating stick, drawing my eyes to her. She sat at the large hand-carved table that dominated the main room. "When I saw her death coming, I knew I had to stop it or you'd be derailed in way none of us would survive."

The blood fled from my face and sunk to my toes. A vise tightened around my throat. "You saw her death."

The Oracle nodded. "That path is closed now. She's safe. But yes, I saw that she would be killed as a way to draw you out of Underhill before you

were ready. I couldn't have that happen. Not again."

"What do you mean, *again*?" I clutched Cinth's hand.

"You were so very close to opening that door," the Oracle replied in a dry tone.

Tell me about it. "The first or second time?"

"*All* the times. There were many. But there was no opening the door when you returned to the same tree for the second time. Not with the company and magic present."

Huh, Rubezahl had wondered about that as well. Looked like he was right. "You mean the wild fae?"

"And the one who controlled them." The Oracle's eye glittered.

"Underhill," I blurted as Cinth jerked away from me. "She was herding us to the door."

The old woman smiled archly. "Indeed?"

That *wasn't* Underhill? "That's what I'd assumed."

"Only idiots assume," the Oracle mused as she crossed to the table.

Idiot I may be, but it wasn't as if people had been super forthcoming in recent times.

Cinth caught Lan in a hug as he walked in, rushing to say, "You stayed with her. I knew you loved her, you fool of a man." She caught his face with her hands and planted a rather loud kiss on his lips.

Envy twisted in my gut. Not because I was worried something might happen between them, but because she could touch him with such ease. Without any worry of what might come of it.

She hugged him again. "I am glad you're alive, too, Faolan."

"Thanks? Wait." He shook his head. "What are you doing here?"

I quickly recapped and then pointed at the Oracle, still thinking about the revelation she'd just dropped on me. "I'm past ready for story time."

The Oracle motioned for us to sit with her. Devon was off to her left, just inside a deep shadow that seemed to move with her. But she bothered me less than she had the night before.

The Oracle took a long drink from a cup of what smelled like steamed herbs. "I brought Cinth so Kallik would stay and have a better chance of success. While there are others that she cares for, none are as close to her heart and soul as you two." She looked first at Cinth, then to Lan. "Which means you are her weaknesses, and her enemies know this too. I would keep Kallik here long enough to train her properly. Not like she did in that mess of

a false Underhill.”

Devon let out a snort. “The fae fooled only themselves.”

“Of course they did,” the Oracle snapped, “but we all paid the consequences, didn’t we?”

“The madness,” I ventured.

Devon stepped out of the shadows. “There is no madness, or at least not in the way that you have been led to believe. The madness is a construct, just like the false Underhill. A way to keep fae in line. When Underhill was cut off from the human world, the fae’s power began to fade. While that might have scared some of them into a sort of paranoia, madness was never a danger.”

Under the table, I took Cinth’s hand. Her parents had been executed because they’d succumbed to the madness. If there was no madness, then what the hell were we dealing with? What had really happened to her parents and all of those fae in the sanctuary? “We had guessed that Underhill withdrew from Earth herself. You’re saying someone else shut her out?”

Goddess, was I the unknowing culprit after all this time?

The Oracle sighed. “The one who closed Underhill forcibly did it with the aim of controlling the fae world.”

I released a breath. *Phew*. Not me then. “Why?”

“The one who can open and close Underhill’s doors controls the amount of power that’s allowed to reach the fae. In essence, he would hold the keys to both courts, giving him ultimate power in time.”

He.

“What about the madness though?” Cinth asked quietly. “If it’s only a construct, then what happened to my parents? I’ve *seen* the madness at work.”

The Oracle smiled sadly, her glittering eye focusing on my friend. “You were there when they were supposedly in the throes of the madness. What did you see? The truth this time, little flower.”

The truth? My mind circled around that one word. “Cinth, no matter what you say, I’m here.”

Cinth swallowed hard and peered straight down at the table, hair sweeping forward to cover the sides of her face. I squeezed her hand.

She spoke slowly. “They told me to run and hide, that bad men were coming. They said I had to go, but there wasn’t enough time. The men came into the house, and my parents fought them.” She lifted her eyes. “My parents

killed all seven of the intruders, and then they tried to run with me. We were caught at the docks, as we made to leave the island. The general said the madness had taken them. I tried to correct him, but my mom told me to hush. To never speak the truth.” She looked at me. “And I didn’t, until today.”

Silence reigned for a solid ten seconds before her words sunk into my head. “A cover-up. Holy fuck. Who were the men?”

Devon replied, “They belonged to the one who closed the courts. He’d send them on suicide missions, knowing that those who killed them would be marked for death. Any fae who asked questions and began to dig for the truth were . . . dealt with in such a way.”

The Oracle nodded. “People were deemed mad because it served as proof the ‘madness’ existed. The one who wanted the throne set it up, with the help of spies in both courts. Those who suspected there were truths hidden in the shadows were killed and marked as mad—like your parents, Cinth. They knew something more was wrong. They knew that Unimak was no longer the safe haven it had once been.”

That was all well and good, but . . . I shook my head. “I’ve seen the madness at play.” I glanced at Lan. “We’ve seen it eat people away.”

The Oracle leaned back. “Tell me what you saw, Dandelion. Or what you think you saw.”

“I saw a fae named Ivan go mad,” I said.

“Tell me, did he say anything?”

I stilled, frowning. “He . . . he spoke Tlingit.”

“Yes, Dandelion. That was not madness. Someone was speaking to you, as you’re well aware.”

I’d wanted to know the answer to this for so long. Would she tell me though? I took a breath. “Underhill.”

The Oracle nodded. “Underhill.”

Words flowed from my mouth. “She was speaking to me through the spirits then—the radio and Ivan too.”

The old woman dipped her head.

“But what about the group of young giants? And the wild fae? What about the mad fae we saw locked up at the outcast sanctuary?” Had *that* been Underhill too?

She held up a hand. “Recall that Underhill is merely one player on the board.”

I groaned, rubbing my temples. “Okay, then you’re saying the person

possessing me when I touch Lan is the ‘one’ you speak of. The guy who cut us off from the fae realm.” Just when I’d decided that murderous rage had to be from Underhill.

This stuff was giving me whiplash.

“No,” her lips curved, “I think you’ll find that the one ‘possessing’ you is none other than Underhill.”

Lan grunted.

The sound was a paltry response to her words. Underhill had been taking me over all this time. I finally had my answer, and even though I’d known in part, the Oracle’s confirmation rocked me to my core. “I thought she wanted me to find the damn door. Why would she try to kill me like that? And make me kill others!”

The Oracle regarded me, her rainbow eye swirling as though talking to someone I couldn’t see. “She *did* want you to find a door. Any door. Anywhere. Killing you was—and is—not yet on her agenda. And the life you took . . . Underhill’s power does not work well on small scales. I imagine you were channeling a flicker of annoyance or rage from her. She likely did not intend you to become a murderess.”

A flicker of her annoyance made me kill someone. Nearly *several* someones.

I shook my head. “Every time Lan and I touched, *she* made our magic explode?”

“Correct, Dandelion.”

Lan spoke. “But it wasn’t every time. Why is it that Alli and I were able to touch on occasion?”

Devon answered. “You already know the answer. Tell me, grandson of Lugh. The door would not open for Kallik the second time. Why?”

“Because of the company and magic present,” he repeated the Oracle’s previous words.

I straightened. “Lan and I could touch sometimes because of the company and magic present too?” I slumped again. “But the wild fae weren’t around all the time.”

“The one who forced Underhill’s retreat *was*,” the Oracle said. “In some way or form. And *she* would not act through you in his company. The danger was too great.”

Act through me. “I’m her . . . vessel or something then?”

The Oracle smiled. “We are all her vessels. You could be something far

more. For now, I can only temper your curiosity by telling you that when you and Faolan touch, Underhill and Underhill *only* is at play.”

“And when I hear Tlingit?”

Her smile widened. “Very good. Underhill.”

Through my deep-rooted shock at everything she’d just said, grimness found me. I pressed my lips together in a hard line. “The gigantic wave when me and Lan were thrown from the vessel. Who controlled that wave?”

“The one. He sought to throw you from your path. To make you more vulnerable.”

I’d thought that was Underhill throwing us *toward* the door. “Underhill was the lightning strikes.”

The Oracle nodded. “And she sent a spirit to guide you also.”

The spirit who’d told me and Lan to touch. “I remember.” I swallowed. “Everything else—the wild fae, the giants, the rotting fae—is this guy?”

“Correct.” She leaned back, opening her mouth, but Faolan cut in.

“You said Underhill wouldn’t act in his company.” He glanced at me. “I can touch Kallik here. What reason is there for that?”

Devon chuckled. “What need is there for Underhill to communicate with you when you are already here?”

The Oracle hissed at her, but the blooded fae just shrugged.

Communicate with me? That’s what Underhill had been trying to do? “What need is there for her to *kill* me when I arrive if she wanted me here?”

Both Devon and the Oracle grinned.

“Funny joke?” Lan bit out.

“Underhill loves her tests,” the blooded fae said. “You passed. Though she is aware people change nearly as swiftly as her landscape. That makes her fond of tests—something you’d do well to remember.”

I scowled. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell us just *what* she’s trying to communicate?”

Even Devon’s face turned stony at that.

Great. I sighed. “And I don’t suppose you’ll tell us who this mysterious ‘one’ is either?”

“That, I *can* divulge, Dandelion.”

My eyes widened. “Really?” Goddess, the future must be a damn complicated business.

The Oracle paused and looked into her cup of tea. “To understand, you must hear the entire story. Fifty years ago, there was a fae who lived on

Unimak, favored by the Unseelie queen for his quick wit, attention to detail, magical strength, and the power of his music. He was her friend and confidant. Understand that she was new to the throne then and still learning, but she trusted him fully. Except when he asked for her hand in marriage, she denied him. She would take no man. None. For her throne was hers alone.” The Oracle smiled. “Even then, she was a spitfire.”

“And?” I asked after a moment of silence.

The old fae ran her finger over the rim of her cup. “He stayed for a time, claiming continued friendship was enough. They were very close. But slowly, others around Elisavana saw changes. She’d never been unjust or unreasonable in the past, but she would bend her morals for him. Her suitor had begun to drug her with herbals.”

My mind snapped to a single memory.

He motioned for me to sit across from him, and I moved closer to the rough human-sized wooden bench by the fire. Heat rose from a stone cup resting on the wood, and he motioned at it with his pipe. “That is nothing more than hot tea infused with herbs and honey. I have a penchant for herbals. I’d like your thoughts on the combination.”

No.

Lan stiffened beside me, but the Oracle raised her hand. “I can see you know of whom I speak but let me finish. The young fae was asked to leave the Unseelie side of Unimak, but because of his strength, power, and wit, he was offered a place in the Seelie court. Unusual, but not unheard of. He gained the ear of the king—your father, Kallik—for he too was young and new to the throne. The same scenario occurred, and after he tried to control the king, the fae was finally cast from Unimak. Only, he cursed the island before he left. Madness would reign, he pledged, if he was not made a ruler one day. He spoke the words at the winter solstice and declared them prophetic.”

At that solstice, the two courts stood on opposite sides of the river to sing the old year out. Which meant he’d had a full audience.

My jaw dropped open so wide it felt as though it would hit the tabletop.

The Oracle looked at me. “He was and still is Unseelie, Kallik. What happens when an Unseelie draws on magic?”

My heart pounded a thousand beats per minute. “The price is death.”

“And if they choose to draw their strength from another fae?” She asked the question lightly, but the horror of it cut through me like nothing else

could have. Doing such a thing was against our most fundamental rules. To do it was abhorrent, the worst crime a fae could commit.

My mind latched on to something else I'd been too wrapped up in lies to properly see. The gray-skinned fae penned up in the sanctuary hadn't been dying from madness at all—they'd been dying.

From being *drained*.

"He wields his power to create madness amongst the outcasts," the Oracle said. "And he drains those same fae of life to fuel his cruel power."

My stomach rolled as Cinth gasped. Lan reached under the table and took my other hand. I barely felt the touch through the horror and shock roaring in my head. It couldn't be. The Oracle had to mean something else. *Someone* else.

But she leaned forward. "You know of whom I speak, do you not?"

I shook my head, denying it even though I felt the terrible truth roil in my belly like a bad meal.

He'd been kind.

He'd mentored me.

Protected me when I had no one else.

Protected all outcasts in the Triangle as his sole task.

It couldn't be Rubezahl.

“**M**y mind is whirling so much, I feel like I missed something crucial,” I admitted, staring out over the meadow of wildflowers as Cinth approached from behind. She had a brisk shuffle—born of hours in busy kitchens.

She sat next to me. “That’s why I didn’t bother listening to the details. The consensus seems to be that the world could end, and the only person who can stop it is you.”

I snorted. Well . . . pretty much. “Sure hope the Oracle gives me a manual then. I’ve only managed to fuck things up thus far.”

Cinth shrugged a shoulder, softening her voice. “Maybe Ruby being your guide had a lot to do with that. He was with you—with *us*—at every turn. How many of the decisions we’ve made have been our own?”

A wrinkle formed between my brows. I still couldn’t make it fit. This was *Ruby* we were talking about—the protector of the outcasts. I mean, sure, knowing his history explained a few things, chiefly the uneasiness I’d sometimes felt over his decisions. But the rest . . . for Cinth to say he’d helped me was a gross understatement. He’d told me the *truth* of Underhill when no one else would, not even the father who’d finally decided to accept me. He’d helped me understand my magic’s ability to shatter illusions.

I’d unburdened myself to his nonjudgmental ears.

And for me to just turn around and condemn him without at least hearing his side of the story . . .

I sighed. “I owe him a chance, Cinth.”

Right now an entire island was tearing my name to shreds. It was an easy

thing to do to anyone. The Oracle could have referred to *me* as a power-hungry orphan who'd spent her life worming her way into King Aleksandr's pocket, only to arrange his assassination so I could inherit the throne.

Yet that wasn't one bit true.

A story could be skewed. People could be misrepresented.

I nodded. "I owe him a chance," I repeated.

Cinth's eyes focused on the side of my face. "If that's what you need to do."

"You know something that you're not sharing?"

"Just thinking about that tea Ruby used on the queen. Faolan said you drank Ruby's tea recently. You don't think—"

I'd had the thought myself, but I just couldn't believe Ruby would do such a thing.

"Surely not." I set my jaw. "I would've felt it, wouldn't I? I'm not stupid. I could taste the individual ingredients. Plus, didn't you drink it? You're a cook—your palate is far more discerning than mine."

She shook her head. "He never offered it to me. And now I have to wonder if you're right and he decided giving me the tea was too risky with all the years I've spent in the kitchen memorizing every fae and human spice and herb."

Ruby had only ever offered it during our one-on-one chats. "There wasn't any magic in it. Without magic, I would have certainly felt the effects. Plus, Ruby said my magic *eats* other magic." I groaned and dragged my fingers through my hair.

"Let's talk about something else," Cinth said with forced cheer. "How about your shattered reputation back on Unimak?"

I glared at her but couldn't stop the twitch of my lips. "And my reputation was so faultless before. I'll really miss it."

We laughed quietly.

I extended my legs, which had been hugged to my chest for the last hour since the Oracle had dropped her Rubezahl bomb. "Go on. Tell me."

"Everyone knows everything about you now—who your mother was. Where you grew up. Training. All that. It's . . ." Her nose scrunched. "You'd think Adair and Josef would have no trouble convincing everyone—you know how Seelie can be."

Did I ever.

"But without me even trying, there was a kind of natural sympathy for

you from some. Mainly the lower tiers, but we know they're the cool ones anyway."

"They believe me?" I asked in wonder.

She winced. "Wouldn't go *quite* that far, lovely. More like they sympathize with your past and think it explains why you lost your mind and killed the king."

"Right. Adair and Josef?"

"Josef was meant to be crowned a week after you left. That was pushed out. Then again. Just before I left, Adair had announced that they were delaying his coronation until the summer solstice because of the outcast threat."

The summer solstice wasn't far away. I hummed. "Interesting. Why not put him on the throne?"

"She could want it for herself."

Undoubtedly. But she'd always been content to sleep her way to the top. Why change that now? With angry outcasts pouring onto the scene, why make herself the target? "So she *did* kill my father."

Cinth sucked in a breath. "You think so?"

"Why take the throne herself if she can get my uncle to do it? Smarter to put the target on someone else's back, someone pliable that she can manipulate. That way she's still ruling in everything but name."

"I'll leave the truth digging to you. I'm afraid my skills reside in the kitchen."

I leaned over and took her hand. "And yet you stayed in Unimak to clear my name."

She squeezed my hand. "We needed an ear on the ground. Ruby requested that I remain there and do what I could in terms of damage control."

My eyes narrowed. "That's not what he told me. He said you'd chosen to stay there to spread the truth."

"I didn't need much convincing, honestly, but I wanted to come with you. Ruby made it clear that . . ." Her face flushed.

"What?"

"That I'd be in the way," she mumbled.

It bugged the hell out of me that he'd taken it upon himself to say that. That he'd hurt her. But still . . . he wasn't wrong. In a lot of ways—mainly fighting and survival ways—Cinth might have been a hindrance at times. Or

at least a distraction. I was pissed at Ruby for taking the choice out of my hands, but I could understand where he was coming from. “He must have felt bad for saying that. That’s why he gave us those journals.”

Cinth pressed her lips together and didn’t reply.

“Your last message scared the pixies out of me,” I said, blowing away a tiny cloud afterward. “I was ready to storm Unimak. What happened?”

Cinth leaned back, and two tiny clouds instantly zoomed to her chest. Couldn’t blame them for thinking her breasts were small land masses. “I’m not sure if you know this, but Ruby has a legit network on Unimak. They’re everywhere—on the Seelie and Unseelie side. Anyway, I made a point of getting to know most of them.”

Of course she did. Cinth may be naturally social, but she was also fucking smart. “Nice work. You didn’t even have that long.”

Cinth sneezed, scaring the clouds away. “Yeah, I had incentive. Anyway, I got this strange feeling after a while. His spies just went . . . cold, you know? I felt like there were eyes on *me* all the time. By then, I’d seen how they operated. They want someone off Unimak or out for good, then they go to the outcast court guards, and that person will just disappear one day. In hindsight, maybe their attitude switch had to do with Ruby’s army coming for Unimak, but they didn’t even tell me about that. Nope, this girl decided to go with her gut and leave.” She slapped her stomach for good measure. “I thought for sure I’d have until summer solstice to do so, and that they’d never suspect me leaving prior, but the Unseelie head chef was at my secret sleeping quarters when I finished a shift one day. I’d just read your message in the journal, but it was too late. Luckily, the Oracle turned up because he can do more with a kitchen knife than fillet fish.” She gestured to the still-healing cut across the burned side of her face.

I gritted my teeth, feeling another wash of fear. I’d come so damn close to losing Cinth. Had Ruby’s guys struck out on their own to attack Cinth because of her connection to me? Ruby had tried to stop the outcasts. He’d pleaded with me to change their minds about warring against the courts. So I wasn’t willing to assume he’d had a part in arranging Cinth’s death.

And yet I had almost lost her. *That* made me fucking furious. “I’m so glad you’re with me now.”

“Ditto.”

Leaves crunched, and I glanced up to find Lan striding toward us.

“What happened there?” Cinth hissed, leaning in.

I spoke from the corner of my mouth. "I'll tell you later."

"Something *did* happen." Her jaw dropped. "How are you both still alive?"

"If you figure that out, let me know," Lan answered her, stooping to press a kiss on my head.

Dammit, I was grinning like a goof. Something my friend definitely noticed. I controlled my face with effort. "Learn anything more from the Oracle?"

Lan grimaced. "I asked about the ingredients in Rubezahl's tea, actually, but she was more interested in condemning me for not 'putting out' last night."

I choked on air. "*What?*"

His expression was bemused. "Yes. That was about my reaction."

Cinth cleared her throat. "Why didn't you though?"

I widened my eyes at her, but she smirked back.

Lan met her challenging stare head on. "Because I don't want to rush things with Alli."

My friend's stare wavered and she rubbed her chin. "Well, damn. That was a pretty good answer."

And this conversation was killing me. "Hey, the Oracle made bruaradar last night."

Cinth's jaw dropped.

"And it was perfect," I added, going for the throat.

My friend shot to her feet, then halted. "Don't think I'm unaware of your manipulations!" Still, she hustled back into the Oracle's abode without another backward glance.

I kind of felt for the Oracle. But maybe it would keep her prophecies out of my bedroom.

Lan took Cinth's place, shuffling a lot closer than my friend had sat. "It was like the Oracle wanted us to have sex."

"That's crazy though. She knows as well as everyone else that it's forbidden for a good reason. And we're that reason on steroids."

He slanted a look at me. "Maybe we should have sex to save the world, just in case."

I rolled my eyes. "Hey, I wasn't the holdout."

"You know that wasn't because I didn't want you. Don't you?" His dark gaze bored its way into me.

I tucked away a smile. “I know. I’m the ultimate catch, and you don’t want to fuck it up.”

I’d intended for him to laugh, but his serious expression didn’t crack. My humor faltered. “Lan, what the hell am I supposed to do? I need to talk to Rubezahl because I don’t buy that he’s the evil villain here, not without more proof, but what if I’m wrong? What the hell am I meant to do about an ancient giant, Seelie royals who want me dead, and an outcast army storming Unimak as we speak?”

He rested flat, using his arms to pillow his head. “Sounds like the start of a joke.”

I lay next to him. A joke—that was essentially my life at this point. “The Oracle mentioned training. Real training. But we don’t have time for that, even with the time differential.”

Lan pulled me into his side, and I went without resistance, melting into his embrace in the wildflower meadow.

“And this,” I said hoarsely, pain twisting under my ribs as though someone had stabbed me. “This can’t go on. I won’t be able to take it when things return to normal.”

“We,” my Unseelie said.

“We,” I repeated in a whisper.

“I’ve seen Queen Elisavana make a few decisions in my time,” Lan said after a stretch of quiet. “From the outside, those decisions may have appeared ruthless, but knowing the alternatives . . . Sometimes choices aren’t instinctual and easy. Sometimes the best decision means others will get hurt—but less than they might have otherwise.”

He wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t know.

I couldn’t be everywhere at once. And really, *really*, if I rushed back to Unimak, what the hell could I do to stop this war?

I’d been running around in circles for too long. And deep down, I understood that if I didn’t get answers to the questions that had been prodding me on, then this cycle would never end.

Not for me and Lan.

Not for the realms.

Not with me alive.

This was another test I had to pass.

Rolling from Lan, I stood.

“That’s my girl,” Lan said, closing his eyes with a curious smile on his

face.

My stomach flipped, and I considered lying right back down beside him, but my resolve sharpened, and I marched back to the Oracle's house, pushing inside.

Cinth was whipping up a storm in the cauldron, but I passed her to where the Oracle sat smoking at her table.

She cocked a brow, squinting at the obnoxiously loud wooden clock ticking in the far corner. "Right on time."

"You mentioned training." I approached the table and leaned forward on it. "I'm ready."

"Yes, Dandelion. Don't state the obvious. And don't tower over me like a damn troll. It hurts my neck."

I sat.

"Very good," the Oracle said. She glanced around, attention flicking over a furiously muttering Cinth and the otherwise quiet and orderly kitchen. "Yes, everything is as it should be."

I held my breath. "Everything that has happened. To Underhill. Everything that *keeps* happening to me with the spirits and the explosions and chaos when I touch Lan. It has to do with my magic, doesn't it?"

"It has to do with your magic," she confirmed, taking another puff. "Your Seelie magic." Her smile widened, and she tapped her smoke on a tray, her eye no longer meeting mine.

"And, of course, your Unseelie magic too."

I stared at the Oracle, white noise buzzing in my ears as she continued to tap her smoke against the tray, knocking off ash before she brought it back to her lips. Cinth said nothing, but she was uber focused on her brудар bowl. From past experience, I knew a bomb could have gone off and Cinth wouldn't have so much as blinked.

Like this particular bomb.

Unseelie magic. In *me*? That wasn't possible.

The Oracle stood and curled her fingers. "That was like letting out a fart after a first date. You have no idea how long I've held that truth in for. Now, come to my work room, Dandelion. We shall discuss this matter further. I can see the questions you have, and they are valid. But let Hyacinth cook in peace or we'll not get a good meal out of her. And she must make a good meal. The very best, in fact."

. . . Really? *No pressure, Cinth.*

She shuffled across the hard-packed floor and led me down the hall, opening the first door, which was etched deeply with random symbols and inset with colored glass. I followed her into the densely packed room.

Books covered the walls and she'd stacked papers precariously on top of one another from the floor up above my head, column upon column, leaving only a small space at the center of the room. There was no obvious organization to what I saw, but the Oracle went straight to a stack, grabbed a book from the middle and yanked it free. Part of me thought the rest of the books would stay up. Because magic.

Nope. They tumbled down, crashing to the floor around her and taking

out two other stacks before the contents of the room stabilized once more. She held the purple leatherbound book up triumphantly. “Here. The lineage of the fae, of your people.”

“My mother was human,” I said lamely, wondering how I’d take a single step in this place without causing another paper avalanche. “She raised me until she died, and I look like her. She wasn’t Unseelie. So this is a complete and total fuck-up.”

The Oracle raised a finger. “You are Seelie and Unseelie, Kallik of All Fae. But you are right in part, you were born of a human’s loins, and you carry some of her essence, what the humans call DNA.”

She flipped through the book, skim reading as she searched. “Here.” The Oracle poked the open page. “This book does not lie. It is made from the skin of a blooded fae—Devon’s mother, so fate would have it.”

I scrunched my nose. *Gross*. But if that was so, then the book really couldn’t hold untruths. Blooded fae couldn’t lie—that was where the myth about fae only telling the truth stemmed from.

My name was written in perfect calligraphy at the top of the page, my parentage written underneath.

Kallik of House Royal.
Father: Aleksandr of House Royal. Seelie.
Mother: Unknown. Unseelie.

No name.

I sighed. “I could get a book and print my name in it too, you know. Hell, I could make myself a giant that way—daughter of Rubezahl.” Some of the strange fear that had eaten into me faded away. A book with my name in it meant nothing. My gut twinged at the sight of the skin binding the book, but I brushed it aside. Truth could always be manipulated. I’d used Seelie magic my entire life. I would have noticed things dying around me. I mean, maybe I’d mimicked Lan’s invisible magic once without any obvious life-sucking consequences, but that was because I’d figured out a Seelie way to replicate his Unseelie power . . . wasn’t it? “There isn’t any mention of my mother, who carried me and gave birth to me.”

The Oracle looked up at me. “Do not joke about being related to that traitor.” She snapped the book shut, using it to jab at me. “The story of Avona, Dahlia, and Bale. Do you know it?”

I raised a brow. "That's a story. Nothing more."

"Tell it to me then, Dandelion. Humor an old woman. Consider it the start of your training to recall this . . . story. Because I believe you need to remember it fully."

Doing my best not to grind my teeth, I nodded and dug through my memory bank. A long time had passed since the story was a favorite in the courts. "Avona was an Unseelie royal, and she couldn't carry a child to term. Her cousin, Dahlia, had several children already." Here I paused, but the Oracle motioned for me to continue. "Avona procured a spell that allowed for her chosen mate, Bale, to bed Dahlia, but it would be Avona's child." Basically an old school in vitro fertilization using magic instead of science. Personally, I'd love to know how the hell they got the egg from Avona into Dahlia, but . . .

My mind froze at the thought.

"No." I choked the word.

But I could see the spirit of my mother standing before me, just like she had when I was condemned to death. I'd written it off as delirium, but I could see her talking to my father once more. Could *hear* the words that they'd spoken and suddenly . . . suddenly they made sense.

Just as she'd said they would.

"You can still save them," my father had said.

"Still save who?"

"Our people. They are lost in the wilderness, Kallik. Your name is Tlingit, as that of the woman who carried you for nine months, who loved you for five years, and loves you still."

"You mean my mother," I pointed out dryly. His smile didn't slip but instead grew larger.

"You know the meaning of your name?" he asked.

"Lightning," I said. "It means lightning or lightning strike."

His body shimmered, and from the shadows stepped my mother dressed in thick furs, her hair braided over one shoulder. "The forest, when it is dry and dead, is struck by a single bolt of lightning. The lightning starts a fire that cleanses the forest and allows for new growth. Healthy growth."

She held her hand out to me, and I took it, not feeling shackles on my wrists. "You are that spark, Kallik. Your father knew it. So did your mother."

I frowned, her words sparking a deep and unnerving fear inside. "You are my mother."

She sighed and looked to the fae king. "She will understand soon."

My knees shook, and I sank to the hard-packed ground. "You're saying I was only carried by my human mother. That she wasn't my mother at all. But that can't be true."

"Deny it all you want, but the truth is the truth and that is perhaps the hardest part of all. Your body and soul recognize this on a visceral level. It is not your fault that you were fooled. That comes from your age, and from the way this lie was reinforced for you from infancy."

Grief rocked through me, and I struggled to breathe through a keening that started in the back of my throat.

I couldn't lose her too. I couldn't lose the woman I *knew* was my mother. The only parent I'd ever had. The woman who'd brushed away my nightmares and who'd held me tightly as the winter snows blew over the top of our home.

My mother. The one person whose unconditional love I could always depend on, even after she was gone.

"No." I whispered the denial. It was all I had left. I lifted my eyes and saw sorrow reflected back at me from the Oracle's many-colored eye.

It was the truth.

I was up and moving, running, scrambling like a wild thing to escape the room and get away from other truths that might come tumbling out of the Oracle's mouth. Books fell all around me, as if to trap me, and I leapt over them, reaching the door before sprinting down the hall to the kitchen.

"What's on fire?" Cinth yelled at me, but I raced away from her too, out through the meadow, disturbing the herd of alicorns. The land kelpie bellowed at me from his place in the stream, but I didn't slow to hear his words.

By Balor's beard, I didn't even know where I was running *to*, only that I had to be alone. I had to find enough space to breathe.

My mother.

I could almost see her in the snow, ice fishing, turning to beckon me forward as she looked over her shoulder. A memory. A good one. And then it was gone in a flash of pain because she was not truly mine.

She never had been.

Below my feet, the ground shifted, bucking, and sent me sprawling out onto my belly. I blinked, and the landscape shifted from a summer meadow to something far more familiar and far deadlier.

Snow flew around me in a thick, wet sheet, soaking through my clothing in seconds as an icy wind cut across the barren and blisteringly white landscape. I spun in a circle, the blowing snow limiting visibility to a few feet.

The clang of metal on metal, a bellowing roar, and then a pair of figures slowly emerged from the white shadows of the storm.

Upright on two legs, a lurching creature bent at the waist to swing its massive three-fingered hands at Lan. Its claws clanged as they encountered his blade. Lan fought off the roaring beastie that appeared to have crawled from the belly of the storm itself.

Around me the storm howled, and I turned, feeling the weight of a gaze on my back. Another snow creature.

And another, and another.

There was no fighting this many creatures, I could barely see them as they lumbered forward, long white fur making it hard to see them clearly.

“Lan,” I screamed his name, bolting toward him. He danced back from the beast, his dark eyes finding me a split second before I grabbed his arm and towed him along with me, running for all I was worth.

“We can’t fight,” I yelled, “We have to hide!”

Lan took my hand and we sprinted blindly through the storm. My skin was freezing as the temperature rapidly dropped. I felt the ice cracking on my face and knew our time was short. Never mind the beasties that were behind us, the weather would kill us in no time at all.

“Here!” Lan tugged me to the right, and I stumbled up a set of snow-covered stairs and through an open door.

What the hell?

Lan let me go and slammed the stone door, sliding a thick wooden bar into place across the entryway.

A thump of a massive body hitting the door shook the entire structure, and I turned, hugging myself. “Lan, what are they?”

“Does it matter?” His teeth chattered, and I realized I was beyond the point of shivering. Which was bad.

We waited in freezing silence while the creatures sniffed around the stone house, banging into the corners.

After a few minutes, I stared around the room. There was a simple wood stove, a table and chairs, and a larder to one side . . . but it was the bed I stared at. It dominated the room and was so thick with furs and blankets I was

pretty sure I'd sink into it and never return.

"I think they're gone," Lan whispered, skin pale with the cold. "We have to warm up."

"Yup, gotta warm up," I whispered, pulling on my magic to push it into the woodstove.

Nothing happened.

Oh, shit.

"There's a block on my magic," Lan growled. He frowned and put his hands to the wall of the house, pulling back a second later with a hiss. "There's iron in the walls."

We'd put ourselves into a cage? But the fear that tried to climb through me was eclipsed by the need to get warm.

"Old school then." I struggled to get my clothes off. They were frozen to my body, and I whimpered as I worked them free, feeling the layers of my skin ripping off with each garment.

The clunk of wood, followed by the smell of sulphur told me Lan was at the woodstove, attempting to light the fire.

I was down to skin, only that wasn't helping because while the fire was going, it was dull and flickering as though a mere sneeze would put it out.

The cold air sunk deeper into my bones, even though the sloppy wet and frozen material was off and I was drying.

Lan stood and stumbled to me, scooped me up, and threw me onto the bed.

"Not really how I imagined it," I whispered through numb lips. "I hope you don't want me to take part because this position is all I got right now. I'm frozen into it."

He stepped back and stripped his own clothes off.

Seriously, if I had a penny for each time I got naked with a guy to warm up, I'd be . . . well, still pretty poor, but I'd definitely have a few pennies.

With a naked Faolan involved, there'd be no complaints from me.

He shivered violently. "I want to know why Underhill is trying to kill us this time. Didn't she want you here?"

I burrowed deeper into the bed. "Devon said Underhill was fond of testing character."

"She just tested us though."

My stomach churned—only because I knew the answer. "I've changed since then."

Lan was quiet.

“Wish there were a heater,” I mumbled, eyelids heavy.

He slid under the furs, pushing his body flush with mine. We were skin on skin in a way that we’d never dared—never *hoped*—to try. In many ways, this was similar to the moment I’d shared with Drake on the boat to warm him up, yet in comparison that was a laughably pale and weak version of what Lan and I now shared. *This* moment was real and true and meaningful. I couldn’t even decipher the myriad emotions tightening my chest. Desperation? Anguish? Yearning? Awe?

Love.

This had to be what love was.

And I’d known it for a long time. I’d denied it to this very breath because of the impossibility of our situation. Letting it out now hardly made sense. But I just couldn’t keep a lid on what I felt anymore. There was no chance of stuffing this back in the box.

I loved Faolan with every bit of me.

Lan threw a leg over my hip and tugged me closer, his ice-block hands splayed over my back.

With his eyes closed, I could just look at him and drink him in. Sure, I was freezing my left ass cheek off, but in this moment, no one was watching us, and no one was attempting to break into this cage either.

Perhaps Underhill had just tried to kill us. Or *maybe* she’d given me the exact refuge I’d needed after talking with the Oracle.

Faolan’s shivering slowed, and I let myself breathe.

Forget what I’d learned.

Forget what the Oracle had just said.

Forget that this was forbidden and couldn’t possibly end well. I reached up and brushed my fingers over the ridge of his brow and down the side of his face to his lips.

A low growl whispered out of him. “No fair, Orphan. I’m freezing, and so are you.”

I lifted my face to his and brushed my lips over his full mouth. “Guess you’d better warm me up then.”

He hooked an arm under my head, dislodging a pile of furs there. Seriously the most comfortable bed of all time. We could stay here forever, me and him.

Except we couldn't, which just made this more precious and bittersweet.

"I'm gonna need some time to convince my friend that he should warm up too," Lan said wryly.

I lowered my lashes, staring deliberately at his lap. "Taken refuge inside your body?"

"You could say that."

"Every woman's dream."

He pulled me closer. "You better believe it, baby."

I snorted and snuggled closer, feeling a wisp of warmth sneak its way into my flesh at last.

He rested his cheek against the top of my head. "Want to tell me why you sprinted past me like the last batch of cherry and beetroot tickles was sitting on the other side of the meadow?"

An accurate description. My mind catapulted right back to *why* I'd left. "Not really."

He waited.

I groaned. "Fine. The Oracle thinks I'm Seelie and Unseelie."

Lan went completely still. "What?"

"Yeah. King Aleksandr was my father, but my human mother wasn't my mother. She just carried me and passed on a bit of her DNA or something. An Unseelie woman magicked me there from her body, apparently. Guess she's

my real . . .” The word *mother* lodged in my throat.

Lan rubbed my shoulder. “Shit.”

“Yup.” That about summed it up. “Oracle thinks I have both types of magic in me.”

“But you don’t kill things. You bring life.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway. Things got a bit much. I had to get out of there.” Understatement of the eon.

He was silent for a time, and I listened to the crackle of the fire, relishing the warmth it pushed through the small cabin.

“Do you believe her?” he eventually asked.

“Hard not to when the truth is written in a book bound by blooded fae skin. How did I never notice, though?”

“People see what they expect,” he murmured. “No one noticed my Unseelie power until the Oracle sorted me. But do you think this is why your magic becomes so violent when we touch?”

I raised my head and looked at him. “My magic?”

“Underhill channels through you. I feel the urge to remain touching you, but when we separate, I don’t experience her fury like you do. I’m just wondering what your Unseelie magic may mean for us.”

Us. I tried not to melt into a puddle of happy goop at the word.

He wasn’t wrong, though. Everything had channeled through me until this point. We knew the chaos of our touch was Underhill trying to tell us something, but was *all* of the anarchy Underhill? Because why would she try to kill us? That part still made no sense. “Do you think maybe the Unseelie part of me . . . messes our touch up somehow? Maybe it sees your magic as an enemy or something.”

He shook his head. “It’s as solid a theory as any of the others we’ve come up with.”

Which was to say, not solid at all.

“At least it’s one answer. And if the Oracle knows that, then she knows more.” I sighed.

Lan pushed me back and drew his thumb across my cheekbone. “That’s a heavy sound for someone so beautiful.”

“I don’t want to go back,” I admitted. Even knowing I’d have to—for me, for Lan, and for the realms.

It was just a lot for one fae to bear. Everything I’d thought I’d known about myself was a lie.

Faolan kissed the corner of my mouth. “Then let’s delay a little longer, huh?”

Our lips met, and I moaned. “What about your virtue?”

He stopped to snort against my shoulder. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

I brushed his dark hair back. “I may make fun, but what we share . . . I want everything you have to give, Lan—bad—but I also want it to mean everything it can. I get why you held back last night. I’m just a little impatient, okay?”

His gaze darkened, and he jerked me against him, grinding into me.

I gasped, my eyes flying to his. “Really?”

“We have time here. I’m not jumping straight to the main course—”

“—are you going to talk about appetizers?” I arched as he trailed kisses down my neck, shuffling downward to kiss my chest.

His voice lowered. “No, Alli. I’m going to make you scream my name.”

My breath hitched. “Oh?”

Lan massaged my breasts, and my mind faltered for a beat as his hot mouth descended on them.

“Oh,” he mocked me after.

My stomach tightened as my Unseelie peppered attention there next, before lowering himself back onto my side.

“Don’t look so disappointed.” Lan laughed at my expression, which turned sheepish.

Leaning forward, he caught my earlobe between his teeth and glided a hand over my flat stomach, cupping the area between my legs.

I froze, my whole body set aflame by his touch. I’d wanted this for so fucking long. “Touch me. Now.”

“With pleasure,” he growled.

Lan propped up on an elbow and, with his other hand, slipped a finger inside of me. Heat flushed my body as he crooked his wicked finger, and I gripped my head to stop from losing myself completely.

His hand moved, and soon it was impossible not to move with it.

“That’s it.” He spoke low and fast. “Fucking beautiful.”

I opened my eyes to look at him or maybe silently plead with him. Lan was still propped up and watching me come undone like it was the greatest show in two realms.

And I loved it.

He added another finger and gripping my head was no longer enough. I slapped both hands on the bed, clutching the furs in fists as my chest rose and fell.

“You like that, Alli?” Lan murmured.

I nodded, speechless.

“I like watching you.” As his fingers continued moving, he pressed his thumb against me and started to circle. *Fast*. “Fuck,” he hissed as I widened my thighs further.

Cold was the last thing on my mind now. I’d never felt hotter. My body had never burned before.

But it did now.

A heat built within me, and my pants were only interrupted by breathless moans.

“Fuck it. Just one taste.” Lan’s voice was strained.

The furs were thrown away and he was crouched over the top of my thighs in an instant.

His mouth replaced his circling thumb, and I *did* scream then.

“My *name*,” he pulled back to say. “Scream my name.”

I shoved his head back down and felt his smile against me, but—*damn*—I didn’t care. My movements were frantic, and his fast but measured pace was excruciating.

And exquisite.

And—my thighs clamped around his ears and I barely registered him forcing them wide again as white blanketed my vision. My body.

My being.

He didn’t relent, and I lay limp in the aftershocks, suspended by the latent pleasure. Finally, I made a soft noise of complaint, and Lan lifted his head.

Blinking lazily, I took in the glistening of his lips and his smug smile.

“You screamed my name.”

Really? “I don’t remember that part.” My core pulsed again, and I bit down hard on my lip.

Lan climbed up, and I curled against him.

“Better?” he asked.

I grinned. “Better. Thanks. Can I return the favor?”

He grabbed my hand and pressed a kiss on the inside of my wrist. “It would take a stronger man than me to turn that down.”

Clasping a fur to me against the bite in the air, I sat up, intending to

torture him, but the sight of the cabin walls cut me short. I sucked in an inhale. “*Lan.*”

He was at his sword in a second, but even the masculine curve of his ass couldn’t distract me—too much—from the orange-red oozing from the very walls of the cabin.

“What is it?” I whispered, clutching the fur around me as I stood and moved closer. The walls were dripping with the orange-red substance.

“Corroded iron,” he answered under his breath.

It *was*. The iron had rusted and was seeping.

And that was the tip of the iceberg. With it, the cabin walls had buckled and warped, exposing large cracks and divides, which explained the drop in temperature.

“Guess we were distracted,” I joked, but Lan’s serious expression didn’t falter. Instead, he pushed open what remained of the door and gestured.

I followed him out and stared at the wildflower meadow. It had extended to us all the way from the Oracle’s territory, visible just over a small mound.

But these wildflowers were different, just one color.

“Indigo,” I said quietly.

“Your magic,” Lan said with equal softness. He crouched by a flower and touched it.

We both stared in shock as a tendril of red energy rose from the flower, cutting Lan’s flesh open. He drew his hand back, but even as a drop of blood oozed from the wound a tendril of blue energy rose from the very same flower. It lathed over the bleeding cut, healing and smoothing the blemish entirely.

“What the hell?” My ears rang.

“*Not* indigo. Red and blue magic, Kallik.” He looked at me. “Your magic is *purple.*”

I backed up, real panic finding me. “There’s no such thing as purple magic.”

Lan glanced down again to see the flower had now doubled in size. “That’s why no one picked it up. Indigo is a Seelie color. Yours was always dark for indigo, but no one ever questioned it.”

No one.

But no, that wasn’t quite right.

Rubezahl had always described my magic as purple.

Lan gripped my arm, pointing back at the huge flower in the field I’d

apparently created. “Just now, you corroded the walls of the cabin—death. You created this field of flowers—*life*. You’re life and death. Seelie and Unseelie.” His eyes were wide with awe, his gaze darting frantically over my face. “Orphan, you’re balance itself.”

The evidence was before me. “But I’ve always struggled to train my magic. I . . . I’ve never done *this* before.”

But that wasn’t strictly true.

The fae woman in the pen back at the sanctuary. I’d tried to heal her. A small amount of ivy on the wall had exploded into profusion in response to my Seelie magic, but I’d puzzled over the presence of rotten hay—an Unseelie toll—afterward.

I’d thought it was from the woman.

I’d thought—

“It just needed a little encouragement to come out and stay out,” a frail voice called.

I spun to face the Oracle, who limped between the flowers toward us. “What do you mean?”

She glanced first at the fur still clutched to my body, then to a very naked Lan. “You believed you were half human because that’s what you were told, Dandelion. You believed your magic was Seelie because that’s also what you were told. Do you know what happens when you wield Unseelie magic and attempt to use it like its Seelie alternate?”

Faolan answered, “It doesn’t work.” He glanced at me, and I didn’t need him to tell me that he’d tried to do just that hundreds of times before his sorting.

“Ruby told me I wasn’t using it right.” I drew a hand over my face. “He knew.” *And never told me.*

“No doubt,” the Oracle said, scowling.

“So what?” I said, clearing my throat. “My Unseelie side likes Lan?”

Her scowl curved into a mocking grin. “More than likes him, I’d say. It’s never *come* out for anyone else.”

Did she have to emphasize the word ‘come’?

“Ruby wondered about that too,” I said. “He thought that Lan was somehow amplifying my magic or helping me to open to it.”

“Why is that?” Lan asked.

The Oracle regarded us. “Because she is part Unseelie, of course. And because of your bond.”

I stared at her. *Of course*. “Unseelie and Seelie can’t be together because their magic will duel for the upper hand, always ending with the weaker of the pair dying. But I’m part Unseelie. What exactly does that mean?”

Recently, I’d wondered if it messed up the connection between Lan and me. But what if . . .

My heart stopped beating. Just *stopped*.

The Oracle arched a brow. “Your hopes are based in fact this time, yes. Though Underhill prevents Unseelie and Seelie unions, the pair of you are an exception to the rule.”

Lan’s breath hitched. “The chaos when we touch has always been Underhill then?”

“Always, grandson of Lugh.”

I exchanged a loaded glance with him. Because damn if that wasn’t *some* good news. The ‘magic dueling to the bitter end’ thing had been an absolute barrier between us. Now, there was just Underhill’s *communication* to deal with.

If we figured out what the hell she was trying to say . . . My stomach flipped. Me and Lan could be together. *Really* be together.

Faolan had clearly reached the same conclusion. “How do we figure out what Underhill wants?”

“Time will tell, grandson of Lugh. For now, we work with ‘how.’ Namely, how we will use you as the key to unleashing Kallik’s Unseelie power. Until I help her get the hang of it. Maybe ever after.”

Lan and I exchanged a glance.

“Uh . . . what do you mean by that?” I asked. Because . . . I wasn’t having sex in front of her. Some lines had to be drawn.

She glanced back at the cabin. “You weren’t stupid before you orgasmed, Dandelion. Don’t be stupid after. Now, don’t dally. We have work to do.”

The Oracle hadn't been kidding when she said there was work to do, only it turned out there wasn't a whole lot of 'we' in it. As in everyone else sat around and watched me train. Definitely my idea of a good time, and two weeks went by in this manner, each day the same as the last. Up before dawn and working with the Oracle, then Devon until dark. Faolan was often with us, helping me open my Unseelie powers with kisses and fleeting touches, but we were never left alone again. By the time each day was done, I had no energy left for anything . . . recreational when it came to my magic.

That being said, he slept at my side every night. Holding me. I flushed thinking about it, because I'd never felt safer in my whole life. I'd considered Lan's body and looks dangerous in the past but being with him had given me a deep sense of security.

Hope.

I felt hope. Maybe I didn't see the house ownership and regular wage future on Unimak any longer. That didn't hold any allure for me now. I did, however, see—and desperately want—a future with Lan.

What if he slept at my side every night?

“No, not like that. You cannot work your magic like that, you fool,” Devon scolded. The blooded fae circled my position in the center of the Oracle's meadow. She used a willow switch to swat the backs of my legs, which seemed borderline barbaric, but whatever.

I didn't jump—this wasn't the first blow she'd sent my way—and simply glared at her as she came back into view. “Necessary?”

Her face was tight with obvious frustration. “You aren’t focusing. You need to allow both the Unseelie and Seelie magic to work through you at the *same* time. If you do not, you will eventually—”

“Silence,” the Oracle snapped. “Do not speak of it, *Devon*.”

I rolled my eyes as Cinth came into view, bringing us our midday meal. This bickering between the Oracle and her friend wasn’t new. They slipped into a language I didn’t understand, literally going toe to toe as their voices rose rapidly.

I’d tried to stop them the first day. After the third time, I’d realized this was just how they operated.

Cinth dropped off a tray and whispered, “Better you than me,” then made a hasty retreat.

Sighing, I sat and took a bite of the pixie bread. She knew it was my favorite next to the beetroot tickles. Every day she’d made one or the other for me—her attempt to smooth over my intense frustration from attempting to connect with both sides of my mercurial magic.

The meadow was one of three places that the two older women trained me. The others being the land of the winter storm and the edge of an ocean full of deep purple water. That last I’d be happy to never see again.

“You cannot let her go in blind,” Devon finally shrieked in my language and stomped a foot.

The Oracle placed her fisted hands on her hips. “You agreed that I would be the one to decide when and where she learned things. Do you wish to change our agreement?”

Now *this* was interesting. I’d been assuming the Oracle was solely and always in charge. I stood and took a step, but Devon flung her hand toward me, capturing me in . . . something. Her magic curled around me like a climbing vine gone wild, and I struggled to breathe. “She is better off dead than trying to face the giant untrained.”

The Oracle didn’t seem bothered by the fact that I couldn’t breathe. That Devon was *strangling* me. No one did.

But I objected.

“Be that as it may, you agreed to my terms. So unless you wish to renegotiate, I suggest you release her and let me train her my way.”

I couldn’t even struggle against the power that held me. I’d known Devon was strong, but I’d had no notion of the depth of her abilities until that moment. My lungs were on fire. The bonds around my body were so tight,

my ribcage couldn't budge an inch.

Desperate to breathe, I opened my mouth, but there was nothing, not even a tiny gasp of air. The scene fuzzed out as my eyes fluttered closed. Goddess, this was honestly not how I'd thought I would die.

Should have fought harder when Devon had first taken hold of me.

I could hear shouting, although it seemed far away, in the distance. Lan?

The magic on me disappeared, and I hit the ground face first, gasping in a lungful of air, pollen, and flower petals. Coughing, I pushed to my hands and knees as Lan crouched beside me, a hand on my lower back.

"Orphan, you okay?"

I nodded and used him to help me stand. "Devon, what the fuck? Are you trying to kill me?" I spat the question at her, along with a few petals that possibly ruined the effect of my rage.

When she turned and locked eyes with me, I regretted the question. She arched a brow, looking down her nose at me, and snorted. "You have no idea what is coming for you. Let it be known that I wash my hands of this supposed training." She turned on her heel and strode away, anger vibrating off her.

The Oracle waved a hand through the air as if waving away a bad smell. "Ignore her. She's pissy because she usually only answers to one person."

"What does she mean by that?" Lan asked, hand still on my lower back. Warm, safe. I was *safe* with him.

And it felt incredible.

"No idea," I muttered back.

The Oracle tapped the ground with her walking stick, and the scene shifted from the meadow to a desert scape. Which only served to show the extent of her relationship with Underhill. "We try again."

The point of all this training, the thing that the Oracle wanted me to do? To create and destroy at the same time. I'd barely wrapped my head around my magic being purple and not indigo as I'd always believed.

And now she was saying I'd somehow need to weave my red and blue magics together. Not in a mediocre way as I'd always done through sheer ignorance of the Unseelie side of my power. No, I'd need to weave them together *seamlessly*. Understand them. Gain complete control of them.

To beat *Rubezahl*.

My friend. Who I couldn't even believe was really a villain—the giant who'd told me my magic was purple in the first place.

So that was awesome news all round.

We spent all day in the desert scape, sweating and cursing until my skin itched from hanging on to two magics at once—neither of which wanted to obey me or work alongside the other. And like every day that had come before, the Oracle had Lan put his hand on my skin to strengthen my connection to the Unseelie magic.

“Hyacinth, take her other hand,” the Oracle ordered my friend.

I bit back a sigh. We’d done this before.

No matter how many times I tried to create a fucking doorway, the two magics inside of me bucked, one smashing the other. More often than not, I could feel the Unseelie magic trump the Seelie side of me, and that . . . scared me. Because no one had told me that Unseelie magic didn’t just create death when used, it drew darkness to the surface.

Or did it just do that with me?

The thought of the potential answer kept me silent on the matter.

Clasping Lan with one hand and Cinth with the other, I focused intently for what felt like an age. Eventually, both magics rose at my command, but the darkness came with it, swelling violently as my red Unseelie magic began to thrash like a snake’s tail.

”Let me go,” I hissed at Cinth as she tightened her hold on me. I jerked my hand away as my Unseelie magic tensed as if about to explode.

The hurt in my friend’s eyes was immediate, and I looked away.

”I’ll go work on the bruadar,” she said cheerfully.

A shift in the landscape brought us back to the meadow, and I sank to my knees. Sweat had dried in faint white lines down my face in the desert scape, and I stayed like that for a long moment, breathing in cool night air.

I’d hurt Cinth’s feelings. Again.

”I’m sorry,” I called after her. *Again*. Would she still believe in me if I kept doing the same thing again and again?

”Perhaps tomorrow, Dandelion,” the Oracle said with far more kindness than I was used to from her.

Things had to be bad.

”How much time do we have?” I said between breaths. “I don’t have years here, not while Rubezahl is out there doing whatever he is doing.” I still didn’t fully believe that he was the bad guy, but as more time passed from when I’d last seen him, I could feel a slight difference within me. Perhaps there really had been something in that damn tea.

Still . . . I needed to talk this over with him. The idea of fighting him seemed ludicrous. Didn't it?

The Oracle looked me over. "You are correct, we are running out of time."

Then she turned her back on me and strode away.

I let Lan take my hand and followed him quietly back to the Oracle's home. He put some food in front of me, then brought me to my room and helped me strip and get into bed.

Releasing both magics was a fucking exhausting affair. I didn't even have the energy to be ashamed that I was as docile as a lamb right now—and about as strong.

"Alli," he stroked a hand down my face, turning me toward him, "you haven't spoken a word since the meadow. This isn't like you."

I nodded and leaned toward him, pressing my lips to his. Tasting him. I meant for it to be a simple kiss, but our time together was short, and I was suddenly frantic for his touch. For the first time ever, being with Lan felt possible. With my Unseelie power, our magics wouldn't duel until death. But being with him felt further away than ever too. I just couldn't figure this magic shit out, and if I couldn't do that, then all this touching would need to end as soon as we re-entered the earth realm.

What if this moment, here in Underhill, was all we had? What if I couldn't figure out how to use my two magics at the same time?

Fear strangling me, I wanted nothing more than to forget it for a while.

I slid my hand between us to grip his very obvious desire for me. A groan slipped from his mouth as I adjusted my hold, drawing my hand up and down in a slow rhythm that had him tensing and arching his hips toward me. "Seems to me that we got interrupted before I could return the favor."

"It has crossed my mind a few times," he choked even as he lay back and closed his eyes. I slid my other hand up over his chest, tracing the Celtic tattoo there and never slowing my movements.

I whispered, "Now, that's hardly fair."

"Not fair," he repeated, groaning.

"Wrong. All is fair in love and war," I teased. Kissing the edge of the tattoo, I bit him lightly.

He groaned louder, and I tightened my hold, sliding my mouth further south until his velvet tip was against my lips.

"Killing me," Lan groaned as he slid a hand into my long hair.

“Ah, but what a way to go,” I whispered and slid my mouth over him.



LAN WAS SOUND ASLEEP, his body sprawled in a perfect starfish position. I pulled the blankets over him, much as I enjoyed the view.

Sighing, I pulled on my clothes and slipped out of our room, heading down the hall, through the kitchen, and into the night air.

I had to figure this out.

I had to find a way to balance my magic.

Through the meadow I went, keeping a close eye out for tarbeasts. I beelined for the stream that cut through the middle of the flowers. The land kelpie stood sleeping with his head hung low, lips brushing the top of the water.

“Hey,” I whispered, and he startled awake, splashing and spinning to face me.

His eyes wild, he spluttered at me. “What in the name of the goddess are you doing?”

“Do you know where Devon went?”

The land kelpie let out a low snort. “Do I know? Damn it. Get on, imbecile. I’ll take you to her.”

This was far better than I’d hoped for. “Really?”

“Make no mistake, I dislike you. But the worthy one made me promise if you came looking for her, I would take you to her. Get on before I change my mind.”

Did he need to use those specific words? I kind of had a chip on my shoulder about worthiness at this point.

I took a quick running step and leaped onto his back. The icicles omnipresent in his hair were there, far smaller tonight.

I clutched his mane as he leapt forward, splashing through the stream.

A tarbeast’s bellow nearby sent a spark of fear through me, but we were past the meadow in seconds, the landscape shifting. We ran through the winter storm for some time, long enough for the cold to seep into me, but then we burst into the sweltering desert scape, the scuttle of bugs and scorpions audible as we galloped over the sand.

The crashing of waves reached my ears before we saw the dark purple

waters of the ocean.

My favorite . . .

“She is here.” The land kelpie slid to a stop. “Get off, idiot.”

I slid off his back, my eyes on the figure who had her back to me. “Thank you.”

Devon didn’t move as she stared out at the waves. They crashed just beyond reach of the tips of her boots, almost as though they feared her. I couldn’t blame them.

“You wish to learn properly?” she asked.

“Don’t think I have a choice.” In hindsight, I understood what she’d tried to do by strangling me in the meadow—she’d wanted to push me to the brink so my instincts would take over. Kind of like the test Ruby had pulled in the sanctuary.

I didn’t like it, obviously. But we were running out of time.

“The water scares you.” She turned to me then, eyes glittering. “And that makes it the best place to force you to submit to your magic.”

“Submit?” That wasn’t a word anyone else had used in my training.

Devon nodded. “There is great power in submission. There is no more fear, there is no more questioning, only acceptance. You are a conduit for the power, nothing more. If you can relinquish control, perhaps you can yet survive.”

Wait.

“Survive?”

She smiled and flicked her hand at me. Her magic caught me in the belly and threw me out over the purple, raging ocean. She held me suspended in the air. “Either you prove yourself strong enough to face what’s coming for you, or you die and allow another to take your place.”

Fuck me! Take me back to the Oracle’s training.

Her magic released me, and I dropped through the dark purple waters like a stone.

Down, down, *down* I went until my feet touched the sandy bottom. I tried to swim upward, tried to fight my way out. Finding that impossible, I instead held my breath, but this wasn’t like the other times I’d been submerged.

I couldn’t hold my breath!

My eyes widened as a small, close-lipped scream left me. Panic seized me in its iron grip as the ocean surged around me, the undercurrents dragging me along the bottom and away from shore.

Deeper, into the unknown.

No!

My Seelie magic flared as I struggled to reach the surface. Plant life bloomed around me as I pulled on my first and therefore most instinctual magic. But it wasn't enough.

A wisp of red rose from my hands and, desperate, I called on my wild Unseelie magic. The water around me cooled rapidly, followed by the plant life dying, but I was still no better off than before.

My chest tightened. The blooded fae wasn't joking around. This would be my grave unless I did the impossible.

I needed to wield both of them together.

Limbs slowing down and darkness crowding my vision, I fought the urge to take a frantic breath. Fought it for all I was worth.

But I couldn't fight anything else. That was the key.

Submit.

That single word resonated through my head. My body jerked as a final stream of bubbles erupted through my clenched teeth.

Submit.

I'd have screamed if I had any air left in me. The pain in my chest increased to unfathomable levels.

Submit.

There was no longer any choice in the matter. I opened my mouth and breathed in the surrounding ocean water. I gave up. I couldn't figure it out. I wasn't the person for the job.

Let it have me.

My eyelids fluttered closed as the dark purple water filled me, sliding through every vein, every bone, and every molecule of my being.

If this was death, I sure felt alive.

Goddess, I was alive.

I lifted a hand, and though my eyes were closed, I could see the red and blue magic that denoted my Seelie and Unseelie sides wrapped around my fingers. The strands merged and dove into my flesh, weaving around and covering me before they erupted in a flash of brilliant white light.

The ocean fled as though scalded, and I fell to my knees, shocked when I encountered wet sand.

A bolt of lightning struck the ground beside me.

There was no coughing. No spluttering. Yet the dark purple water I'd

breathed in stayed with me now, or perhaps it had always been there, waiting for me to unlock the floodgates.

Devon walked toward me from shore, parting the remaining water with a careless wave of her hands. “Now, little lightning . . . you know what it is to submit.” She smiled widely. “You are worthy. You are ready.”

A few days after the whole breathe-in-the-ocean scenario, I was back in the meadow and training again.

I inhaled and exhaled, slow and steady, as I raised both hands palm up. Visualizing the purple ocean water, the merged red and blue, in my veins, I opened myself to the power completely. Devon was right, I was just the conduit to this combined magic.

Because I could feel the purpose in it, and it was bigger than me.

Sparks of white lightning webbed between my fingers, some zapping upward from my hands.

Smiling, I held the connection steady and reached for the one remaining sword of the pair gifted to me by the queen, drawing it from the sheath.

Immediately, lightning writhed up the blade like a snake, darting in and out of my body. I'd been warned my magic had to be instinctual.

Something it had never, ever been—for me, at least. Fighting with a sword, I'd *made* that a reflex thing.

But now that I'd cracked the code, I could do the same with this magic. In time. I hoped.

Except time was the one thing I didn't have, or so I kept getting told. In all honesty, I'd expected the Oracle to boot me out of Underhill the other night after I'd returned from the ocean. Instead, she'd just stood at door of her abode and welcomed me back in, silent and seemingly accepting of what occurred.

Standing, I adjusted my grip on the blade and, still holding on to my new magic, began to warm up at half speed. I could train faster than I had a few

days ago, but I still couldn't go full speed. If I tried that, my magic went running for cover. Or me overthinking matters, slipping into old habits, and therefore losing that crucial conduit connection.

The first beads of sweat appeared on my forehead when I felt Lan approaching. My white magic literally stretched toward him, and even though I'd 'figured out' how to conduct this power, I wasn't holding my breath for what would happen when we touched on Earth.

That had to mean something though—the white magic reacting to his proximity—and it had to be why Underhill had reacted so violently whenever we'd touched, but neither the Oracle nor Devon had deigned to answer our questions on the subject. They just watched me. Devon smug, the Oracle considering.

Lan was important. I knew it in my bones.

"You're moving faster," Lan said.

As he said it, I noticed my rapid pace. Just like that, my connection to the magic was broken. The white rushed from me and disappeared, leaving my legs shaky and weak. I sat heavily on the ground and tossed my sword onto the grass before me. "Yeah, in a perfect scenario, where my opponent allows me time to warm up and promises not to distract me."

"It's been three days since you figured this out, Orphan," he said, passing me a waterskin.

I drank deeply, wiping my mouth after. "Lan, I'm meant to take out Rubezahl."

He didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Rubezahl was an Unseelie fae of uncertain age. He either chose not to disclose it or had genuinely forgotten. Neither boded well for me. Less so because despite the Oracle and Devon's very obvious and huge combined power, *they* weren't taking him on.

"I'm way out of my league against an ancient giant with a magical fucking harp," I said, sighing.

"—that once belonged to Lugh," the Oracle called out as she limped up to us, patting the land kelpie as she passed him.

Lan stilled. "What?"

"The harp carried by Rubezahl once belonged to Lugh," she repeated as if she hadn't pulled the metaphorical rug out from beneath Faolan.

"Since when?" he demanded.

She bared her teeth before gritting out. "Until rather recently. Does that

bother you? It should.”

Should it now?

Lan had a wild look in his eye. “It does.”

The Oracle smiled.

I cleared my throat. “So when will it be time to go?” The thought of leaving filled me half with hope and half with dread. I wanted this done, but didn’t want to die, and that seemed very likely. I also knew that as soon as we re-entered the earth realm, Lan and I wouldn’t be able to touch again—Devon had warned me of as much last night.

“We will know when the time is right,” she said with frustrating calm.

Cool. “Any update on Unimak?”

“The outcasts will soon reach the island’s shores.”

Faolan frowned. “Then we need to go. To meet them head on.”

“And yet, go you shall not.”

His eyes narrowed at that. “Me, specifically, or both of us?”

The Oracle waved her hand, and an ornate chair carved itself into the tree stump behind her. She got settled on it, then said, “Calm yourself, grandson of Lugh. You must also go, for you, too, are necessary to ensure the correct path for our kind.”

I exchanged a loaded look with him. “Like what?”

“He will play a part in the demise of Rubezahl, assuming all goes well and you two don’t revert to being stupid.”

We waited.

Lan broke the quiet. “And how will I do that?”

“Figuring something out is half the doing,” she snapped. “Fae. Always after the easiest damn answer. There is an inherent responsibility to seeing all that could be.”

I grimaced at her sharpness, but it didn’t deter Faolan.

“You knew I’d go to the Unseelie court at sixteen,” he asked her, diverting his focus to the stream.

The Oracle dipped her head. “Any fool would have seen it if they had but chosen to look closer. Alas, the Seelie court in particular is not known for peering too hard at those of high status, of which your mother certainly is. No one would have dared to even whisper that her son might not be Seelie.”

Couldn’t argue with that. Both courts had their faults, and that was assuredly a valid criticism of the Seelie.

The Oracle watched Lan.

“I thought that perhaps Queen Elisavana and King Aleksandr had guessed,” he said at last.

Her lips curved. “I would not call either a fool. In some areas, but not in most.”

He nodded.

“I knew Lugh,” she stated suddenly.

Knowing how rare it was for Lan to talk about this stuff, I’d kept quiet, but at this I straightened, saying, “Really? What was he like?”

That earned me a wry look from his grandson. Sue me, Lugh was practically a deity to fae. The guy had a whole slew of swear words to his name—now *that* was a legacy a person could be proud of.

The Oracle lifted a shoulder. “Nice man. Devoted his spare time to pondering moral or ethical dilemmas.”

Wow, anticlimactic.

“My grandfather killed the tyrant Balor,” Lan said, an edge to his voice.

“Can’t argue with that.” The Oracle cackled. “Bit boring though. Your mother certainly inherited that part without any of his inherent good. Received other things she shouldn’t have, too. Damn careless with them. Do not growl at me, Faolan of the Unseelie. Your grandfather’s goodness may have been tedious on occasion, but he was a better man than most.”

Lan pressed his lips together.

I leaned forward. “What thing shouldn’t she have—?”

Smack. The Oracle lashed her walking stick across my thigh.

“Ouch!” I glared at her, rubbing the welt. It was just a question. But . . . *maybe* the swat could be interpreted as an answer in itself. Another glance at Lan, and he smiled tightly.

He’d reached the same conclusion. His mother possessed something—more than one thing—she shouldn’t have. Did that mean *Lan* should have it?

“I did it!” Cinth’s faint scream came from the Oracle’s abode.

We all turned to look, just in time to see my friend race from the tower, cauldron in hand, and her boobs bouncing with her high-kicking glee.

“I fucking did it,” she hollered.

The Oracle tapped her stick on the ground. “And so it begins.”

Cinth stole my attention again as she skidded to a stop. Drawing a bowl from Lugh knew where, she ladled something from the cauldron into it and stood back.

I stared at the mixture, a wide smile breaking across my face when it

formed a fae-lafel burger. “You’ve done it. Bruadar.”

Her chest puffed with pride. “It’s only taken me a decade or more.”

I’d never heard of a cook who could make it, so a decade really didn’t seem that long. “You’re a master.”

“There’s much more I can learn.” Her cheeks pinkened.

My grin stretched further. She didn’t really mean it. Cinth may cover it better than most, but she was still a Seelie.

“Congratulations,” Lan said quietly.

“Enough,” the Oracle’s voice whipped over my head. “It is time.”

I was on my feet in a second. “Time to go?”

“What else have we been waiting for?” she snarled.

Bruadar, apparently.

“Get your things,” the ancient woman murmured, staring at the darkening sky. “There is not long. War has broken upon Unimak, and many good fae shall perish if you do not arrive in time.”

No pressure.

Heeding her warning, I sprinted back to the abode alongside Lan, bursting into our room seconds later. Sheathing the queen’s blade, I swiped up my duffel, shoving a half-dried tunic inside. Lan was in front of me as we returned to the meadow.

Cinth had stayed there, grim-faced.

“The journals,” I said, already turning back to the abode.

“They are best left behind,” the Oracle cut in. “There are three linked journals in that particular set.”

Lan was strapping on his sword. “Who has the—” His expression shuttered. “Rubezahl.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s . . .” But it wasn’t impossible at all. In fact, Ruby had given those journals to Cinth and me.

Shit. That was how he knew I was in Underhill.

How long was I going to deny that he’d been playing me for a moron? It would be extra idiotic of me to go into this expecting him to sit down for a nice chat. No, I had to look past my feelings on the matter—past the lifetime of adults letting me down. Because right now, that sentiment wanted me to cling to the mentor who was nearly drowning under evidence of foul play.

I should expect the worst and hope for the best.

“Kallik of All Fae,” the Oracle said. She’d put a cloak on and pulled the hood up, appearing far more like the ominous version of herself that I’d met

after the trials. She extended two objects to me that I hadn't seen in some time.

I extended both hands for the shield and second gifted sword. "Where did you get these?" I'd lost the shield on the vessel, and the sword had been obliterated when I tried to open the door to Underhill on that tree.

"Stole the shield. A mutual acquaintance was holding it hostage in the knowledge that you would likely need it. And the sword? Well, you can thank Underhill's generosity for that. What she took, she merely decided to return."

My jaw clenched. "I see." Rubezahl again, no doubt. Anyone could have taken the shield from the ship. When no one had returned it to me, I'd assumed that the gift was lost to the sea.

"I will go," the land kelpie announced. "I have unsettled business with the giant. I intend to smash his kneecaps in."

The Oracle's face hardened, and she sent him a look that I couldn't interpret. I never had asked the land kelpie why he'd been shackled. I could likely assume at this point that Rubezahl had known the fae was the only one of his kind who could access Underhill. He'd kept me from the ancient land kelpie on purpose while sending me on a wild redcap chase around the Triangle.

What a dick.

I closed my eyes as one of the last threads of trust I had for Rubezahl frayed and snapped. I welcomed it.

Because I was going to Unimak to fight him. Kill him. Restore peace. Or die myself.

A crunch of flowers behind had me spinning. Devon approached at a rapid pace, almost appearing to glide but for the sound of her steps. "If they do not depart now, it will be too late."

"Do not lecture me on time," the Oracle returned, but she turned to face me anyway. "Dandelion, pay heed. This is a moment in Underhill that we cannot undo."

She held my gaze, and I narrowed mine. She was trying to tell me something. Since our conversation after I'd first arrived, the question burning in my mind was constantly of Underhill's intent. *What* did she want me to do?

"You must make an entrance," she said quietly.

An entrance . . .

I stared at her dumbly. “You can’t be saying what I think you’re saying.”

“An entrance to Earth,” she said in that frustrating calm.

“That’s,” I trailed off, searching for words to describe the craziness of that. “*Madness*. That’s why I’m here? Underhill wants me to make an entrance? I can’t do that? Especially not on the damn spot!”

The Oracle pressed her lips together.

Damn it all, there was *more* again? So this didn’t just end with me making an entrance—something I was pretty sure I couldn’t do in the first place—there was a reason *behind* me making an entrance. But if this had everything to do with me, then why had Underhill only tried to communicate with me in the past when I touched *Lan*?

My brows drew together as I tried to ‘pay heed’. “I need Lan for this entrance.”

The Oracle didn’t shake her head, but said, “The power is yours.”

“I have no idea how to do this!” Panic crept up my throat.

Devon gripped my shoulder, her green gaze searing into me. “You have passed the first hurdle, Little Lightning, but there are more to come. Trust in the spirits even if you are yet to understand. Forget your tasks at the peril of those around you. And never fear the magic. Never.”

I swallowed. “Got it. The only way I’ll fuck this up is if I stand in my own way.”

A ghost of a smile lingered on her lips. “Exactly.”

Steeling myself, I took a few steps from the others and faced the direction of the snow land. My purple meadow was visible in the distance, and I let it remind me of the ocean water I’d inhaled while submitting to the wild, primordial force within.

“Tonight is the summer solstice. The fabric between the two realms is at its thinnest,” the Oracle’s voice floated to me.

That was today?

“Visualize the strongest memory you possess,” she continued.

I took a breath. Okay. I had to at least give this a shot.

Visualize the strongest memory you possess.

That was easy, actually. My strongest memories were those of my mother—who hadn’t been my biological mother at all, but what I could recall was happy. A memory of the home we’d once shared.

I drew forth the scent of fry bread and roast rabbit.

Peering over the table to sneak a stick of raw rhubarb, I quickly dipped it

in sugar and then ran before my mother could see me.

“Got it,” I murmured, softly so as not to dispel the vision.

“Where are you?” she whispered.

“Home, waiting for dinner.”

“Hold strong to the feeling the memory inspires.”

I latched onto the yearning and happiness swirling within. “I have it.”

“That is your anchor. You must adapt the memory now. You must move to where we want to go.”

I struggled to absorb that while holding tight to the emotions of my memory. “Which is?”

“The bridge of solstice. Move your mind there now. *Do not release what you feel.*”

Mentally, I burst from the entrance of the home I’d shared with my mother and ran at implausible speed to the dividing river, following it toward the courts.

To the bridge of sorting. The bridge of solstice.

The connection between Seelie and Unseelie and light and darkness. The power within me was drawn to this because it was all of these things at once. Division was something it didn’t know.

Letting the purple ocean wash through me, I focused on that bridge back in Unimak.

“Now release everything,” the Oracle demanded.

The magic was aware of my desire, and I let it consume me. On this subject, it seemed that we were in agreement. The power allowed me to contain it even as it built up, stronger and stronger.

And when the pressure threatened to send me scattering through Underhill in a million directions . . .

Only then did I scream and throw both hands forward toward the ever-present fabric separating this realm from another that was in sore need of saving.

My hands shook. My palms *burned* with my combined magic as lightning danced between my fingertips and the veil separating Underhill and the human world.

It thinned.

Like watching a silent movie from a distance, I could see fae moving around on the earth side of the entrance I'd just created.

A stage had been set up across the river, something that only happened at the sorting and solstice. Queen Elisavana stood across from the bitch Adair and my weak-willed uncle. Behind each of them stood their respective courts.

But where was Rubezahl? Surely a giant would stand the fuck out.

"The summer solstice has begun," the Oracle said from beside me. "We must move now. Dandelion, hold the opening until we've passed through, or I'll whack you with my stick."

Oddly, that order made sense to me. I could *feel* what she meant by holding the entrance open. I obeyed, shaking like a leaf in a windstorm—and the shaking had nothing to do with the imminent threat.

The Oracle stepped through first, followed by Cinth and the land kelpie. Devon didn't cross.

"Go," I ordered through gritted teeth.

"I cannot. I am bound here." She tipped her head to me. "Take your man and do not forget . . ." She looked at Lan. "Rules are made to be broken, even those we vow to follow."

He didn't flinch, just gave her the barest of nods and stepped through to the human world.

I gave Devon one last look. “Thank you.” *For nearly killing me.*

She waved a hand. “You will be tested like no one else. Now go. Save us all if you can.”

One last deep breath, and I plunged through the opening, feeling the tips of my toes brush against the collapsing entrance.

The serene meeting of royals and courts had already exploded into shouts and the clamor of clashing weapons. Making sense of the frantic throes of battle was impossible, but a crackle of flames and the hum of magic flared around me. Unseelie and Seelie tendrils rose in the air, a deep bass and a high tenor harmony. How had I never heard it before?

I stood there, stunned as the two sounds merged into a steady thrum. Even amidst the surrounding discord, the music of the magic cut deeply into me, rooting me to the spot, filling me so all I wanted was to stand docile and listen.

A blade swung toward me as if in slow motion. I watched it come for my neck for a moment. Then, stepping back, I lifted my palm to the sky and flicked my fingers. Lightning roared down my arm, zipping through my body and into my attacker’s chest. Seelie. A king’s guard.

There was a blip in the magical thrum around me as his heart stuttered then picked up a weak rhythm to match his unconscious state.

“Do not waste your energy. Use your weapons!” The Oracle’s voice cut through the ringing din. She stood next to Cinth watching from a copse of trees.

But *who* was I fighting? There wasn’t any sense to the madness of this battle.

I only had time to glimpse Lan and the land kelpie on either side of me as another blade came for me.

I pulled the queen’s swords clear and brought them together in an X, catching the offending blade of my attacker and shoving him into a nearby fight.

No.

Before I fought anyone, I had to make sense of this shitshow.

A quick scan of the bridge and riverbank on either side showed me that the Unseelie queen and Adair remained on the stage that spanned the river. Elisavana was dressed in leather, as if she’d known a fight was coming—or maybe she was always just that badass—and Adair clutched at her own body as if she didn’t know what to do in a battle.

Faolan was at my back now.

Unseelie in their dark garments and Seelie in their bright clothing were mixed together, side by side, and I could assume they'd united to fight the outcasts. The outcasts, obvious from their rudimentary brown, green, and gray garb, streamed up either side of the river and had already spread over the bridge to clash with the courts.

But something wasn't adding up.

It took me a few beats to see just what.

Some of the Unseelie and Seelie were turning on their own sides. Were they insane?

"What the hell?" I whispered, dodging a flying punch.

The answer slammed into me as I caught sight of a bearded fae who looked like he hadn't washed in a year.

A wild fae.

Balor's right nut! Some of the Unseelie and Seelie were outcasts in disguise. They were trying to turn the courts on one another. Not like it was hard to parade as a Seelie or Unseelie. You just had to have the right clothing and the right color of magic.

If I still held one shred of compassion for the giant, it fled in that moment.

He'd planned this all along.

"Where is he?" I shouted, knowing the outcasts would hear me and understand who I was looking for.

My lightning arced wildly around me out of pure rage as I fell into the rhythm, parrying thrusts and dodging blows as I searched for Rubezahl.

I drove a foot into the gut of a thin—borderline starved looking—fae and sent him catapulting into the crush of people.

The courts had slowly but surely widened a circle in the middle of the bridge.

The flow and sound of the two magics around me was electrifying, and at the same time I could feel my energy dipping as time slipped by—I couldn't control the wild lightning arcing from my body. It was exhausting me far more than the physical battle at hand.

A sudden surge of dark purple flowers rippled outward at my feet as I pulled on my magic to ease my growing exhaustion. Yet the borrowed energy drained away in the next second as white magic crackled around my body.

I glanced over at Lan as he drew energy off the same flowers, which died to fuel him.

“We have to stop this,” I yelled to him. We had to get the outcasts to listen to us. They’d been thwarted just the same as me.

He dodged the deadly sweep of a broadsword. “Look at them, Kallik. I don’t think they’re capable of listening right now.”

What?

I took a good look at the outcasts closest to us, and this time I saw their blank expressions as they launched themselves at opponents.

This was Rubezahl’s doing.

This was the madness he manufactured with his magic and Lugh’s harp.

The outcasts were as plain as day now that Lan had pointed them out. But something else was happening. Everyone touched by the spelled outcasts went under the same spell, their eyes blanking within seconds. It was like a fast-spreading disease.

Shit.

I reached for Lan. “We need to stop Rubezahl’s spell. We can do it.”

Before we could touch, the boom of heavy feet filled the air, the resulting concussion of the bridge throwing us apart.

Dread filling me, I pushed off the ground and looked north.

Rubezahl wasn’t the only giant here on Unimak.

On the Unseelie side of the river, seven giants strode through the masses, swinging clubs as if they were golfing. Screams rent the air as they made pass after pass at the groups of fae that had simply gathered for the solstice. Unarmed. Unprepared.

Women, children and the aged. Not fighters, *not* a trained army.

Horror clawed at my throat as a small figure flew through the air, his body twisted at impossible angles. The closest Unseelie guardsmen swarmed the first giant, but they were plucked off by the other six. They were flung away without a second thought, like bugs thrown from a shirt, their bodies disappearing into the woods surrounding the river.

“We have to stop them,” I yelled, running to stand and face the seven giants.

Seven.

Could I do this? “Watch my back, Lan!”

“Always,” he growled as he stepped around me, giving me space while clearing away the fae and outcasts who might stab me in the back. He’d always been watching my back, even when I didn’t realize it. The thought trickled through my consciousness, but I pulled in my focus.

I had to drop those giants. Now.

Lifting my hands overhead, I let the balanced magic in me rise. I let the white light grow until it was near to bursting, and then . . . I submitted.

Lightning arced through the sky in seven jagged lines of brilliance that drove through each of the advancing giants. They bent backward, suspended for one brief second before they toppled with a booming crash.

A weak cheer went up from the crowd around their fallen bodies.

“Kallik!”

I spun to my left to see Drake push his way through the crowd. He wore the tattered outfit of a king’s guardsman, the edges torn and beyond repair. Just like the other outcasts.

“Drake, you have to stop. This is literally fucking madness! Rubezahl is using us, using us all.”

His face hardened as he took in me. Slowly, he shook his head. “He was right. Ruby said you’d turn on us, but I told him he was wrong. I came here to help you escape, but you’re just like them.”

He came at me, shield strapped to his stump arm, sword swinging for my midsection. I flung my own swords up. At least that was what I’d hoped to do.

I could barely step out of the way, never mind get either weapon up. My limbs were as heavy and thick as if I were tied to the ground with ropes, my feet caught in mud.

The cost of using so much magic at once.

I dropped to one knee and looked up as Drake swung his sword. I didn’t call on Lan. I just stared at Drake.

He wouldn’t do this. Those green eyes of his were glossy with moisture as we stared at each other.

He lowered his weapon. “I . . . I can’t.”

Thank Lugh for small mercies.

“I was afraid of that, young Drake.” Rubezahl’s voice seemed to come from all around us. He hadn’t been there a moment ago, but he appeared directly behind Drake, dagger in his hand. The Unseelie hiding trick? Of course his giant dagger was the length of one of my swords.

Drake didn’t even get the chance to turn around.

Rubezahl slid the dagger through him, piercing his heart.

“No!” I screamed the word, staggering to my feet and forward. Drake wasn’t my match. He wasn’t my love. But despite his flaws he *had* been my

friend. He didn't deserve to be betrayed by the one person he'd thought cared for him.

I knew how that felt.

Drake slid off the dagger tip, and I caught him.

"You should look out for yourself, young one," Rubezahl said softly.

I collapsed under Drake's dead weight, not daring to take my gaze off the giant.

The fae who'd completely fooled me from the start.

As he'd done once before, Rubezahl snapped his fingers and the world around us disappeared. We were in his study with the crackling fire as a backdrop, everyone else gone.

Except for Drake. I released his body and stumbled backward, hitting the wall.

"You drained too much of your power killing my children." Rubezahl sighed. "Just as I knew you would. Youth is predictable. So instead of wasting time, I will tell you that this is the path, Kallik of House Royal. Your path. The only path. Someone of your power could never be contained by a single crown. You are destined to wear both, and it is my job to help you."

I managed to put the table between us. Even though he hadn't moved, I could feel the threat as surely as if he'd pointed his dagger at my throat. "You'd be what? My court jester?"

His lips twitched. "Such venom in you. So little finesse to back it up. It is a wonder you haven't already been killed a thousand times over."

I spun for the door and wiggled the handle. Nothing. How the hell did I get out of this place? "Not venom, truth," I said. "Elisavana didn't want you in her court, and neither did my father. Why would I want you? And even if I did, you aren't going to get in good with me by drugging me and attacking my home or killing my friends!"

His face didn't so much as twist in a grimace. "So much you do not understand. Please, sit. Let us talk."

"I'm done talking."

His bushy eyebrows shot up. "But you can't fight, young one. You can feel the fatigue. You nearly burned out your magic, using it in such a way."

Eyes locked on mine, he unfastened his harp from his belt and strummed a chord that hung in the air like thick, pine-infused smoke.

I could barely breathe.

"No," I whispered the word, feeling the effect of his magic immediately.

I tried to lift a sword, but my wrist didn't obey me. I slumped forward, and Rubezahl reached for me.

If he touched me, it was over. I knew in my gut, with every instinct I had.
Submit.

I sunk to the floor, and my magic flared, crackling to life around me. I drew from the manufactured world around me, drew from everything I could magically touch. Flowers burst to life around me, only to immediately die as I poured their energy into the white power that used me as a conduit.

A boom rippled and Rubezahl's illusion shattered.

Crowds of fighters were thrown off their feet, my magic flattening them, flattening all of the fae in the vicinity.

The sounds of battle slowed and halted.

So tired.

Rubezahl loomed over me, dagger raised. "You had a chance to walk your path, Kallik of House Royal. You chose to turn away. I will take your magic for my own, young one, though it is not the path I had wished for."

Yeah, only because he preferred a behind-the-scenes leadership role. Bastard.

The sword descended, and like before, I could see it moving, inching down, as if I had all the time in the world.

Only I couldn't move. And there was no one close enough, fast enough, or powerful enough to save me.

Cinth screamed my name.

Lan yelled to me to get up.

I tried to submit to the wild magic in me again, but I couldn't touch even a spark of it—not a single ounce.

A leather-clad form stepped between me and Rubezahl, blocking my view with her shapely ass.

"You will not kill her while I stand, Rubezahl," Queen Elisavana said. "She is under my protection."

The sound of his dagger slamming into her sword cracked through the air, and I was dragged backward, my limbs still limp and drained of energy.

Lan wrapped his arms around me as we watched the Unseelie queen battle with the giant who'd been her closest confidant. Around us, the air roiled as storm clouds drifted in, dark and ominous. A boom of thunder sounded, the distant sparks of lightning calling to me. But my eyes were riveted on the pair.

I couldn't face Rubezahl.

I wasn't strong enough.

But the queen was. I didn't know anyone better equipped to salvage this disaster.

"Do not do this, Ellie," Rubezahl said in a low voice. "Do not force my hand. I care for you still."

"Then go! Leave. You are cast out," she said, voice cracking through the air like a whip.

He plucked a note from his harp. A single, tortuous note that hung in the air, as cloying as grief and as thick as a wet, hot woolen blanket.

And the queen froze in place.

I thought he'd scoop her up and run away. Take her as a hostage and try to convince her once more that he should be at her side, on the throne—or just behind it, in his preferred spot.

But the giant drove his dagger forward. "You have created this madness, and only I can end it."

How could he speak such a lie, even now, as his dagger slid into the queen's abdomen? Her gaze found mine in that moment, and I felt the shocking pain of the dagger as if it were sliding through my own body.

Because that look she gave me . . . it was as though she'd spoken. Words flashed across my mind as if I were seeing them for the first time in the Oracle's blooded-fae-bound book.

Kallik of House Royal.

Father: Aleksandr of House Royal. Seelie.

Mother: Unknown. Unseelie.

Mother: Unknown. Unseelie.

No.

No.

I screamed the word before I truly understood.

The Unseelie queen cut off our silent conversation and lifted her hand.

Magic flared around her as she drew from *everything*. The fae, the plants, the earth, the air. Her magic was nearly black, with deep swathes of red running through it.

Not like Lan's ruby red. Identical to the crimson of the Unseelie half of my magic.

“Perhaps it was always going to work this way for us, old friend. You are banished.” Her words were like ice as his magic curled around him in a protective layer. The giant roared as something opened up behind him.

A way to Underhill? A portal within the earth realm? I couldn’t be sure.

A clattering of hooves on the cobblestones drowned out Rubezahl’s roar. The land kelpie—covered in blood and gore—charged the giant, ramming into his knobby knees.

He toppled backward through the opening.

And the opening shrunk smaller and smaller until it disappeared completely.

Rubezahl was gone.

And so was Queen Elisavana.

I stared at the empty space where the stabbed Unseelie queen and Rubezahl had fought moments before. *Seconds* before.

My hands trembled, and Lan tightened his hold around me.

“Is it over?” I asked myself more than him.

His voice was uncertain as mine. “Your guess is as good as mine, Orphan.”

“Lan . . .” I swallowed hard, bolstering myself to share the discovery I’d made. The discovery I was nearly certain was truth. That Queen Elisavana was my mother, the donor of my Unseelie power and the woman who’d embedded me in a human surrogate.

The swords.

The shield.

Assigning Faolan as my protector.

I *knew* it. I was the child of the Seelie king and Unseelie queen. My breath quickened, and Lan pulled me upright, waiting until I locked my weary legs in place to release me.

Glancing up at him, I caught him gazing at the same spot that had occupied my attention in the shocking aftermath of battle. “Lan?”

He blinked. “She gave her life for yours.”

She had. “I think she was my mother.” The words left my numb lips, sounding thick and slurred.

Lan sucked in a harsh breath. “Your—”

“Dandelion.” Just like that, the Oracle was by my side, and Cinth hustled up on the other side, looping an arm around my shoulders.

I squeezed her hand. “You okay?”

“Had to beat someone with my cauldron and spilled the brudard,” she replied, sniffing with disdain. “But I’m okay.” Her expression faltered. “Kallik, what did Ruby do to you?”

The Oracle beat me to it. “She overcommitted her magic before the main gig.”

I had. And now it seemed I’d never hear the truth from Elisavana’s red-painted lips. “He transported us to another location and immobilized me without any effort whatsoever. I had nothing left in the tank.” The words burned my throat as surely as they burned my cheeks. Most of me hadn’t expected to beat Rubezahl, but still . . . I’d screwed up big time.

Lan lowered his voice. “You saved lives by taking out those giants.”

“And more lives will be lost because of it,” the Oracle snapped.

Cinth’s eyes narrowed so much they turned to slits. “And you were clearly withholding information, old woman. Have a fucking heart or shut up.”

My bestie schooling the revered Oracle might shock me later, but right then I couldn’t feel a thing other than confusion. Grief. Fear.

The Oracle ignored Cinth and stepped closer to me, taking my forearm in an iron grip. “What would have befallen us if I had?”

I saw the shadows and sorrow in her swirling eye.

Cinth opened her mouth again, and I shot her a look. “It’s okay. I’m okay. I’m guessing the alternative was more horrible.”

Did I imagine the tiny breath that escaped the ancient fae before me? Holding the paths of the future must be far more burden than boon.

I mentally shook myself. “The outcasts. We need to round them up and . . .” I rubbed my temples. Gross, I felt like roadkill.

“Your magic will take several days to replenish,” the Oracle said, the usual bite returning to her tone. “But there is work to be done.”

Gathering myself, I turned to face what remained of the battle behind us. The fae I’d flattened with my magical explosion were getting to their feet. I scanned the masses for the outcasts, trying to pick them out as I had before. “Where are they? Did they leave with Rubezahl?”

Surely not.

The answer came to me. “They’ve been freed from his hold.”

“Correct, Kallik of House Royal,” the Oracle said, making me wonder why she’d started using that title today when I was usually Dandelion or

Kallik of All Fae. “With enough time, those who are here will regain control of their true thoughts. Weeks for those recently brought into the fold. Months or years for those who have supported Rubezahl for an age.”

I’d felt the effects of the giant’s tea. It had taken weeks in Underhill for me to completely shake the effects, and that was in the restorative *fae* realm. Even upon getting to this realm, part of me had still wanted to talk it out with the guy. Which was ridiculous in hindsight.

Yup, he’d well and truly duped me. *Us*. “We need to round them up,” I told Lan. “They need to be held and housed until Rubezahl’s tea is out of their system and his spelled madness has worn off. We may have trouble picking them out.”

He bowed slightly. “The outcasts are wearing a harp broach on their cloaks. It’s how they identified each other in battle.”

I didn’t question his observation, just nodded. He searched my face and then strode off toward the queen’s guard.

“I’ll go with him,” Cinth said. “I know almost all of the spy outcasts who were already on the island.”

She hustled after Lan, and the Oracle watched her go. “That part of Rubezahl’s plan backfired most assuredly. He intended to weaken you by taking her away. And the grandson of Lugh too. But some bonds resist all modes of outside treachery.”

It was fair to say the giant had manipulated me in every one of our interactions. All with the design of putting me on a double throne while he whispered commands in my ear. “Queen Elisavana made a portal. Where did it go?”

“To Underhill,” the Oracle replied calmly.

I frowned. “But how? Is her magic balanced like mine? And if so, why the hell didn’t she just do that before now and solve all of our problems?”

“Because some things require the ultimate sacrifice—the life of the fae wielding the magic. Even then, Elisavana only succeeded because it is summer solstice and magic works in curious ways on nights such as these.”

A lump rose in my throat. “She’s dead then?”

The Oracle’s unwavering gaze landed heavy on me. “Yes, Dandelion. She is gone. But there will be time for you to understand everything that was . . . and can be . . . once the blood has washed away and the dust has settled. Come, there are matters for us to attend to.”

She settled a hand on my lower back, ushering me forward.

Weary beyond measure, I stumbled along beside her, my entire focus on remaining upright under the fatigue of depleted magic, fresh regrets, and the growing weight of the surrounding stares.

Unseelie and Seelie alike had regained most of their senses. They held their weapons at the ready, though they clearly recognized something far greater than a battle was afoot. I quickened my pace. If the truth about Rubezahl closing off Underhill wasn't disclosed to Adair and Uncle Josef as soon as possible, battle could break out anew.

They stood on the stage still, surrounded by the guards who'd served my father. At my approach, they tightened ranks—no wonder, given the rumors my beloved stepmother had busily spread in my absence.

In their protective midst, the queen consort sobbed like a scared toddler. Kudos to Josef, who only appeared befuddled by current events, not frightened in the slightest. Or maybe he really wasn't that bright. I cleared my throat, but the Oracle guided me in a different direction. Past them. To the middle and center of the stage where she spun with a speed belying her age to look out over the remaining fae.

“Silence.” Her voice exploded over the riverbanks and enchanted trees in a deep, shaking *boom*.

The fae didn't need an introduction. We all knew of the Oracle's power.

Hood still tilted, she demanded the attention of all, speaking again. “Cease this battle. For you have been hoodwinked most soundly, fae of the courts. There are those among you, dressed as you are, who came here with the very purpose to incite anarchy today, to set the courts at each other's throats.”

I watched the dawning comprehension on the faces of the innocent as they caught sight of Lan, Cinth, and the Unseelie guards pulling bewildered and blood-splattered fae from the crowd.

“Sheath your weapons,” the Oracle ordered.

And they did. In under a minute, the surrounding fae had dropped their hostility. It was also long enough for Adair to dry her face and find the bravery to leave her circle of guards.

“Seize her,” she cried, pointing a finger at me.

“Silence,” the Oracle snapped at her.

Okay, petty it may be, but I was officially Team Oracle after that. I didn't bother hiding my grin as Adair paled.

“Honored Oracle.” She switched tactics, sweeping a tiny curtsy. “We

thank you for aiding us against . . . ” She blanched, likely realizing she had no idea what had just happened, but she recovered with a beaming smile that had probably charmed the pants off of my father—and Uncle Josef, too, no doubt.

“It is not I who defeated the villain, Rubezahl—self-titled Protector of the Outcasts,” the Oracle said, her voice still soaring over the masses. “Your gratitude is better directed to Kallik of House Royal, who not only defeated seven giants but was able to greatly weaken our enemy so Queen Elisavana could finish the job.”

I did my best to control my eyebrows at that.

Greatly weaken, my ass.

“The queen is dead,” the Oracle announced with mind-shaking directness.

The outcry from the Unseelie was horrible, and it only grew as they absorbed the news. In many ways, the Unseelie were darker and more barbaric than their counterparts, but they felt pain just the same as everyone else.

And their pain was clear to see.

“And so it is today,” the Oracle spoke again after they’d quietened or—in some cases—sank into tears, “that providence has guided me to perform a unique task. On this summer solstice, you will bear witness to the uprooting of a buried truth, a righting of a wrong done by past leaders. On this night, one fae will be sorted at last.”

Oh. Fuck.

I couldn’t help looking at the Oracle. “What are you doing?” I hissed, my heart pounding out of my chest.

“What should have been done when you were sixteen,” she answered grimly.

I half turned so my back was to the murmuring audience. “They’ll know the truth.”

“Yes, Dandelion. They will.”

No way. They’d kill me if they knew, and I’d come too far to die. Maybe the simple life on Unimak I’d always envisioned wasn’t a viable future now, but I had a future with Faolan. A future I wanted.

I took a single step in Lan’s direction. He’d split away from the Unseelie guards—and the Seelie guards who’d joined them to help separate the outcasts—to watch. His dark eyes were lit with a wariness that I’d never experienced from him. A wariness that had only appeared in him when I’d

confessed my suspicion about Elisavana being my mother.

“If you do not allow this, all shall perish,” the Oracle’s voice floated into my ears and then my mind.

I peered back, heart sinking. “There’s no other path?”

“There is another path, and I have told you the consequence of taking it.”

Everyone would know what I was. To these people, I’d been an orphan, mutt, Elite tried, criminal, princess, and murderess in turn. They were convinced of my guilt. And now the Oracle wanted me to impart another truth to them.

One that I’d barely had time to come to terms with myself.

One that would solidify my guilt in many of their hearts. Because fae were always Seelie or Unseelie. They were never both.

A fae that was had to be unnatural. An abomination. Ignoring that reality had been easy in Underhill where oddities were everywhere.

Searching the crowd, I located Cinth, who’d relocated her cauldron somehow in the disaster zone. For some reason, the sight gave me strength.

Because at the end of the day, I’d always have my friend the cook.

And I’d always have Lan, my protector. Searching for him again, I frowned when I couldn’t find hide nor hair of him.

But he’d be around. He always had been, whether I could see him or not.

And so I faced the Oracle. “You better be right about this.”

Adair shot me a wide-eyed look. “You are speaking to the Oracle, mutt. How dare—”

“Was my father’s body cold before you jumped in bed with his brother?” I asked her.

The Oracle cackled, then waved Adair away. “If I were you, Queen Consort, I would consider keeping my own counsel until after the sorting.”

Adair pulled up short and then looked at me again, shrewdly. Regaining her composure with impressive speed, she curtsied to the Oracle and retreated a small distance.

“To your knees, Kallik of House Royal,” the ancient woman directed, her voice booming for all to hear once more.

Sighing, I did as bidden, bowing my head.

The Oracle drew her dagger—the same damn dagger that had torn my world apart not long ago—and rounded behind me. I gasped as she slit through my garments and ripped them apart, exposing my back.

“What are you doing?” I whispered at her. I’d seen plenty of sortings over

the years. None of *them* had ever gotten their clothes torn off.

It was good old Uncle Josef who answered from where he'd walked to hover beside Adair. "Royal sortings differ from the norm."

I threw him a curious look. Because I'd never really believed that my father's brother had the guts or malice to be wrapped up in Adair's plot.

Of course, Rubezahl could have also been behind my father's death—something I'd never considered until this very moment.

Just another truth I was determined to figure out before my end.

The Oracle rounded to stand before me again and extended her hand. Submitting to whatever fate she'd foreseen, I rested my hand in hers, unflinching when her dagger sliced through my palm.

It was a deeper wound than the one she'd dealt to me in Fake Underhill, and she let the blood gather until it coated the entirety of the vicious weapon. Tilting the dagger, she cupped her hand and let blood spill into it and pool.

Walking around me again, she slathered my blood across my back, then stepped back, muttering words that nevertheless echoed and rang out for all to hear.

A burning began on my skin, and I shook against the urge to topple forward onto my hands and knees. Tears stung the corners of my eyes, and I latched on to the outcries from the watching fae.

I clung to their shock and confusion through the agony.

Until, with a final searing blast, the torment faded to a throbbing ache.

Blinking away spots in my vision, I panted until my body stopped trembling and then raised my head.

The Oracle dipped her head my way, then addressed those behind me once more. "Behold the sorting tattoo of Kallik of House Royal. See the white rose that marks her as the daughter of King Aleksandr, rightful heir to the Seelie throne." She paused. "Furthermore, fae of Unimak, behold and witness the crescent moon that marks her as the daughter of Queen Elisavana and the rightful heir to the Unseelie throne."

The murmurs rose steadily to a clamor, but those making noise were soon hushed by those desperate for answers.

The Oracle spoke her last damning words that tightened around my neck as surely as a noose would.

"Stand now, Kallik of House Royal, as Queen Kallik of the Unseelie *and* Seelie—Ruler of All Fae. Stand now and claim your rightful place as our leader."

Kallik of All Fae. Hadn't she titled me that from the moment I set foot into Underhill? But I didn't want this.

I turned my head toward her, uncaring that Josef and Adair might hear. "There's no need for me to be their leader. The danger has passed." There had to be some process in place for succession . . . and abdication. I didn't want to rule.

No one wanted me to rule.

"Rubezahl lives yet," the Oracle answered, not looking my way.

The stage under my knees seemed to disappear. "He's locked in Underhill," I rushed to say.

"The problem is not that he is locked," she said carefully. "The problem is that Underhill must open or fae magic here will die. What do you think happens when Underhill is eventually opened though, Dandelion?"

Rubezahl would get out.

And he'd be coming for enemy number one, a.k.a. *me*.

I closed my eyes and curled my hands into fists that only served to ramp up the throbbing in my back. Forcing the last shred of my energy into my legs, I stood tall, looking straight ahead at the dividing river of my childhood home, which was to become my kingdom.

Fate had a twisted, shitty sense of humor to sort me directly in the middle of the two courts.

But laughing wouldn't get me anywhere.

Crying, fighting, raging, refusing . . . No.

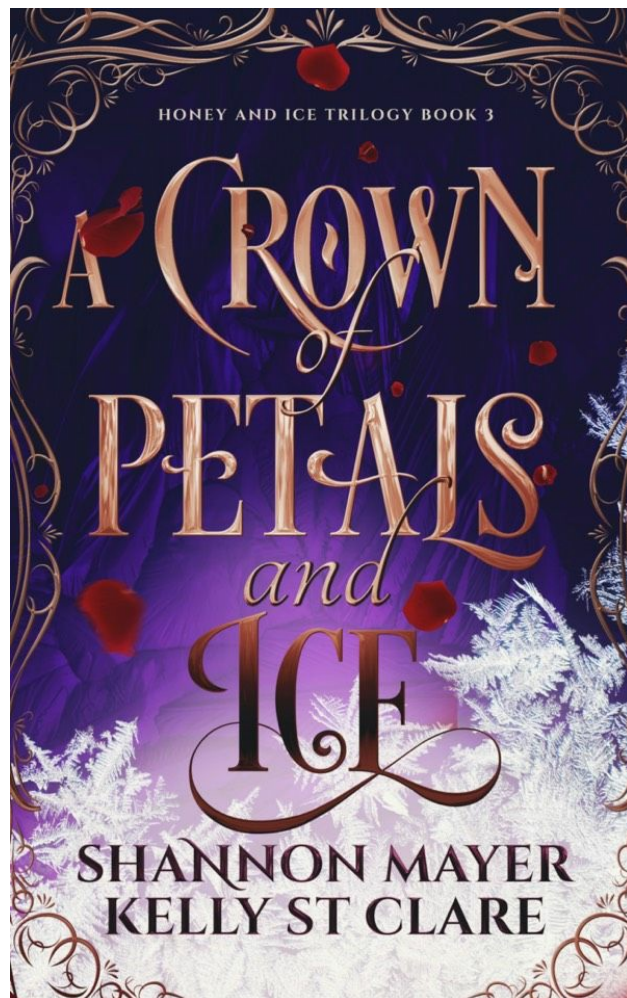
Sometimes the only answer was to submit. To embrace that which was yet unknown because trying to understand was impossible.

And so.

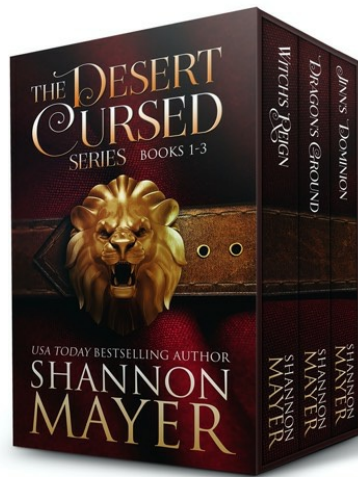
Taking a deep breath.

I turned to face my people.

UP NEXT!



The final book in the “Honey and Ice” Trilogy! Releasing Jan 2022
Can’t wait and need more to read?



Dragons and danger and magic collide... And it's only Monday.

The Witch's Reign...a land of eternal, unnatural winter ruled by the Ice Witch. This witch? She's guarded by three supernatural creatures who wander her lands hunting for unwary souls, killing any who cross their paths. Throw in a sentient magical weapon that tries to kill me every time I touch it, and a small dragon that has a penchant for Shakespearean insults, and you've got my journey in a nutshell.
May the sands of the desert swallow me whole because this is going to be a damn bumpy ride.

Series Almost Complete ;)

And from Kelly St Claire . . .

THE DICE ARE ROLLED AT MIDNIGHT.



As the twenty-one-year-old heiress to the Le Spyre fortune, my life should consist of strawberry mojitos and golf carts, right?

But my city is a giant board game. The players are vampires, including an overbearing crown prince whose unwanted attention could spell my demise.

Now, I must play their deadly game, or my grandmother will pay the ultimate price

Complete Series. Available Now!

Want to stay informed on the next book in the “Honey and Ice” Series? Sign up for our [JOINT](#) newsletter. (And yes, there will be in this world! SHHH, it’s a fucking secret!)

That’s it.
The End.
For now.
Until next time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR