



The Fated Series

Binding
Fate

Katarina Martinez

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Binding Fate

The Fates Series: Book 1

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To my sixteen year old self...

We did the damn thing.

Contents

[Playlist](#)

[Content Warnings](#)

[Pronunciation Guide](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1. Corvina](#)

[2. Corvina](#)

[3. Atticus](#)

[4. Atticus](#)

[5. Corvina](#)

[6. Corvina](#)

[7. Atticus](#)

[8. Atticus](#)

[9. Corvina](#)

[10. Corvina](#)

[11. Atticus](#)

[12. Atticus](#)

[13. Corvina](#)

[14. Corvina](#)

[15. Atticus](#)

[16. Atticus](#)

[17. Corvina](#)

[18. Corvina](#)

[19. Atticus](#)

[20. Atticus](#)

[21. Corvina](#)

[22. Corvina](#)

[23. Atticus](#)

[24. Atticus](#)

[25. Corvina](#)

[26. Corvina](#)

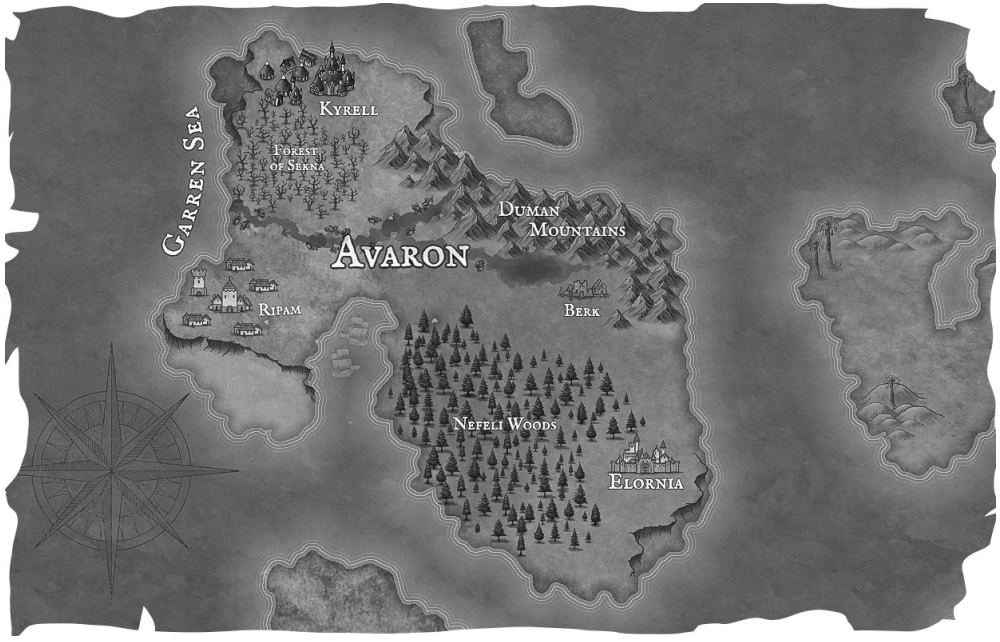
[27. Atticus](#)

[28. Corvina](#)

[*Epilogue*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)



Playlist

Overcome- Skott
Ceilings- Lizzy McAlpine
Never Know- Bad Omens
Like That- Sleep Token
In My Room- Chance Pena
Take a Moment to Breathe- Normal the Kid
Middle of the Night- Loveless
Are You With Me- Nilu
Give- Sleep Token
Let It All Go- Birdy, RHODES
Carry You- Novo Amor
Possibility- Lykke Li
War- Chance Pena
Just Pretend- Bad Omens
Would That I- Hozier
Feel- Montell Frazier, MFHD
Numb- Linkin Park
Deep End- Birdy
Daylight- David Kushner
Falling Apart- Michael Schulte
Bleeding Out- Chance Pena
I Am Not Who I Was- Chance Pena
The Night We Met- Marianne Beaulieu, Justin Beaulieu

Content Warnings

Sexually explicit content

Depression/Anxiety

Death

Nightmares

Descriptions of dismemberment,
stabbing, injury, and blood

There is a sexual assault scene in chapter two.

This scene is NOT between the female and male main characters.

Pronunciation Guide

People

Corvina (Core-Vee-Nuh)

Ardin (Are-Den)

King Oberon (Oh-Ber-Rahn)

Cordelia (Cor-dee-lee-uh)

Macoy (Muh-Koy)

Queen Kasaia (Kuh-Sih-Uh)

Eiran (Air-An)

Elion (Ell-Lee-On)

Places

Avaron (Av-Eron)

Elornia (El-Or-Nee-Uh)

Kyrell (Kye-Rell)

Lyra (Leer-Uh)

Prologue

It's been almost fifteen years since the fate of Avaron was changed forever. From the stories of the townspeople within the walls of Elornia, the First War was the bloodiest and deadliest, but quickest, battle in our history. In the time before the first war, Elornia was the biggest kingdom on the island of Avaron. The kingdom lost thousands of its people but something else changed that day. There was a great fear that swept over the kingdom after King Oberon and his supporters overthrew Queen Kasaia. This fear was strong enough for my mom to flee in the moonlight, like many others, leaving only a note for my sister and I that read *One day I hope you both will understand I left to protect you. Stay together. I love you, always. Mom.* I always dismissed it as grief after losing my father in the battle, but she never came back for us like I had always hoped she would.

According to the elders who are still willing to discuss her, Queen Kasaia was a compassionate and fair ruler, just as her family had been for generations before her. The publications in the kingdom's atheneum that once held knowledge about Queen Kasaia, her family, and dark magic were burned immediately at the demand of King Oberon and his proclamations. His first proclamation erased the history of Queen Kasaia's rule and anything predating his ascension to the throne. The information of what the abilities those with dark magic held are lost to us now. They say that King Oberon doesn't like things he can't control and dark magic is rumored to be the most uncontrollable of all the forms, with abilities like animal shifting, seers, and shadow wielding abilities.

On your thirteenth birthday you manifest an ability within one of the five categories; elemental, somatic, mage, abstract, or dark. Elementals are the most common of all the abilities, all of us favor one of the four elements; water, air, earth, and fire. My sister, Raine, and I both share the same water manifestation ability as our father. Most of the somatic have the strength of a hundred men, but there are others who have inhuman speed and agility. Mages have the abilities to cast enchantments or make potions, but very little of their kind are left in Avaron. King Oberon favors the abstracts over all other abilities. The rarest of all abilities, the abstract can creep inside your mind, hear your thoughts, or make you act in ways you wouldn't otherwise. His second proclamation was the listing of your abilities and the banishing of any who manifest dark abilities. There is a grace period of one week after your ability manifests before you have to go and meet with the lister. Once you disclose your ability to the lister, they will give you a job within the kingdom where you will be of most help. However, if you manifest with a dark ability you are banished out of the castle walls.

It is believed that the gods and goddesses from before us each sacrificed some of their magic and gave it to us, our abilities only manifesting a sliver of what they were able to do. Abstracts are believed to have their magic descended from Senka, the goddess of the stars and sky. Her twin sister, Nefeli, was the goddess of earth and bestowed the mage with their magic. Garren, the god of the sea, was said to have blessed the somatic with the strength of the sea. Duman, the god of the abyss, was said to have bestowed his abilities to the dark. The elemental abilities all come from the four of them, but one element is always the strongest.

King Oberon's third proclamation was the building of a barrier wall around the kingdom, entrapping the villagers within the walls. The wall is almost as tall as the castle King Oberon resides in, towering over all of Elornia. The stone bricks are made of limestones that vary in size and color variations, but all relatively the same thickness. Once the last stone was placed

Elornia's fate was sealed and those within the kingdom were unable to escape, for once they left the confines of the wall they weren't able to cross back through the threshold. Nobody knows what happens to those that possess a dark ability or where they go when they are casted out of the castle walls. However, townspeople say if you listen closely when the castle guardian raises the portcullis, you can hear the howls of wolves in the Senka Woods.

1

Corvina

I can hear the distant waves crashing along the face of the cliff as I harvest carrots from the soil. The sun is nearing the horizon as its heat beats down on my shoulders and back. The dirt crumbles off the carrots and falls onto my deep red dress as I move them from the ground to my harvest basket. I regret that I didn't wear the apron that Raine insisted I bring today to the garden, but I'll never admit that out loud to her.

She wouldn't gloat about it, Raine isn't one to do that. My sister is six years older than me and we couldn't be any more different. She is the epitome of sunshine, with her delicately freckled golden skin that looks as if she holds sunlight beneath it. Her silky sun-lightened hair cascades down her back in loose waves. I've never seen her angry or complain about anything, whereas I find darkness in just almost everything.

"Hey, Cora. Are you almost done with the carrots?" Raine asks, her voice soft and hushed. "It's almost time to give the harvest to Miss Astoria." She tosses her head back over her shoulder to direct my attention to the garden's overseer. Miss Astoria is a stout woman with a thinly-pointed nose, her curled black hair sits at the nape of her neck, and she wears a perpetual scowl. I nod in response, pushing myself up to stand. I dust the

soil from my dress as I pick up my watering tin, and close my eyes to focus as I fill it with water. My fingers tingle in response to my magic, as it floods through my veins. Once the tin is full, I pour it over the rows in the garden. The soil darkens as I dampen it with water.

I chew on the inside of my mouth as we start the trek to Astoria's workshop. The garden stretches the entire side of the castle. Groves of apples and oranges line the wall while the plots of vegetables, herbs, and assorted berries congest the middle of the land. Miss Astoria's workshop is just to the side of the castle, only slightly away from the garden. I stop and suck in a quick shaky breath before walking up the short stairs that lead into the building. Even after all these years working under Miss Astoria, my stomach still flips whenever I cross the threshold.

"Here's our harvest Miss Astoria," Raine says cheerfully, handing Astoria our baskets. Astoria's eyelids sag with age as she looks up through her lids and over the thin frames of her metal framed spectacles.

"I'm assuming you want your ration, girls," Astoria hisses as she counts the carrots and potatoes. "You're short, Corvina. You will not be getting your full ration," Astoria snarls, I stop myself from rolling my eyes and force a small smile to form on my lips.

"I'm sorry Miss Astoria, I can come early tomorrow and harvest extra. I can help with the squash. I know it's abundant this season." I say biting the inside of my cheek. Besides Raine and I, we also have three other mouths to feed, so not meeting the quota will take food from more than just me.

"Not acceptable. This isn't the first time and I'm sure it won't be the last," she says, her voice full of annoyance. "Leave me." She hands Raine a thin blue mesh satchel with our ration.

Raine and I turn to begin our walk home, our arms linked, her tanned skin warm against mine. She looks at me, the smile on her lips reaching her ocean blue eyes. I don't think she has a

bone in her body that's unforgiving. "Miss Astoria is just a grumpy old lady. We'll make due with what we have."

We walk away from the kingdom's garden, through the marketplace, and to the village. Even though the walk itself isn't long, my feet are burning as we near our cottage. When we open the dark wooden door to enter, Marigold is walking down the staircase. I place my flats in the shoe bin and begin walking towards the kitchen's threshold. I smile in Marigold's direction as we pass one another at the foot of the stairs.

"Hey sisters, how was your day at the gardens?" She doesn't wait for our reply as she puts on her shoes and continues. "I won't be home for dinner. I have to go back to the apothecary to finish my tinctures and salves from earlier in the day. We were so busy that it's easier for me to go back after closing." She sighs.

"Do you need someone to help you?" I ask.

She shakes her head no, "It'll be faster if I do it alone. I appreciate you asking me though! Save me some dinner and I'll eat when I get home," she says as she brings me into an embrace and places a quick kiss on my cheek. I nod my head in response as she grabs her satchel and walks out the front door.

Marigold is my sister by marriage, being my brother-in-law Ardin's younger sister. They both have rich tan skin, chestnut brown hair that curls, and amber eyes. But Ardin is tall, towering over all of us, and Marigold is petite. As an earth elemental, she works in the kingdom's apothecary making salves, tinctures, and dried herbs. My sister saunters into the kitchen and places the harvest onto the table so we can examine what we were given.

"We have potatoes, squash, and a couple carrots," she says while tapping her finger on her chin. "I believe we have some leftover lamb from dinner last night. I'll make a stew!" She dances over to the stove and places a pot onto the burner while I begin washing and cutting the vegetables. The door across the house opens and shuts loudly, signaling the arrival of Ardin. His

presence is immediately made known as we hear the thudding of his boots move from one side of the house to the other.

“Hmm,” he hums as he walks over to where I’m cutting the vegetables and takes a carrot. “Is Thatch home? He needs to tend to the animals before beginning his daily pamphlet from the school house.” Thatch is my nephew and will be thirteen years old in two days’ time. Raine was nineteen when she had him, meeting Ardin only a year before, but their souls were bound, or so she claims. According to the story, my sister felt a pull towards the other side of the marketplace. Lifting her gaze, she saw Ardin across the way. Once they made eye contact they both say that’s when they just knew they were made for one another. I didn’t know if I believed in soul bounds, but the love my sister and Ardin share makes me want to believe. My thought is broken by the sound of Thatch’s footsteps above us as he makes his way down the wooden staircase.

“Hi Papa!” he beams as he hugs his father. He looks so tiny under the weight of my brother-in-law’s arms. “I heard you talking to Mama and I tended to the animals earlier this morning before I left for instruction and ensured they were fed and watered,” he says. I give him a wink as I nudge him with my shoulder. He gives his dad a smile that shows off the dimple in his left cheek. Ardin walks out of the room and into the room he and Raine share to get out of his armor. At the same time Ardin walks out of the room, Thatch gets up and exits the room as well.

Thatch has the best physical attributes of both his parents. He has the same amber eyes and tanned skin as Ardin, but has the beautiful golden hair of my sister. But the strong jawline and chin are that of my father. Everytime he smiles it tugs on my heart a little. Even though it’s almost his thirteenth birthday, I still look at him and think of him as a brand new baby.

I walk the chopped vegetables over to where Raine stands at the stove. She takes the wooden cutting board from me and tosses the vegetables into the simmering broth, placing the lid on it and making her way to the cupboard with the dishes. Raine

hands me a few porcelain bowls, nodding towards the table. The tension in the room is thick as I place the bowls and spoons in front of the wooden chairs. I know there's an unwavering fear deep inside her about the fate of Thatch. Raine is typically very outspoken, but with Thatch's manifestation happening so soon, she's been relatively quiet.

Raine goes over to the bread bin, pulling up the curved front edge and pulling out a loaf of sourdough bread. She squeezes it and her shoulders sag. "The bread is stale, but if you soak up the broth in the stew with it... Maybe it will be okay?" She turns to look at me, her eyes begging for me to agree. I don't remember a lot about our life before our father passed, but Raine has told me stories of how different things were before the wall went up. One of the things that have changed drastically is the quality and price of food.

"I'm sure it'll be delicious, sister. You always make the best stew." I smile at her, placing my hand on her shoulder. She places the bread on a cutting board, slicing it into pieces before putting it onto a large serving plate and placing the plate in the middle of the table. She saunters back over to the stew, stirs it, and then turns off the burner.

"Will you call Thatch and let him know the stew is ready? I'll get Ardin." She turns and walks into their shared room. I open the door that leads to the small grassy area behind our cottage, the coolness from the wind suddenly sucking my breath away.

"Thatch! Stew's ready!" I yell in the direction of the large oak that sits behind our cottage, his typical climbing tree. I see his feet dangle beneath the leaves first, then he drops to the ground, smiles, and starts to walk in my direction. "You better wash your hands first. Your mom will make you anyway," I say as I ruffle his shaggy brown hair. Raine is laddling the stew into the dishes as we walk back into the cottage.

"Wash up, Thatch baby. I bet your hands are just filthy from climbing that tree," she says in his direction without looking

away from her current task. I cough to cover up my laugh, taking my seat at the table.

Once we are finished with the very quiet dinner, I help my sister clean up the kitchen. She stands at the sink and washes dishes, watching out the window that's above the sink. Ardin has gone back out to chop wood for the fire and Thatch has gone out to help him carry in the pieces. My sister is silent as we clean, the air thick around us, but I know why she is so quiet so I try to break the silence. "I hope we get some fruit from the harvest tomorrow, I bet Thatch would love one of your apple pies for his birthday," I say hoping my voice doesn't sound as shaky as it feels. "I think the apple grove is producing enough. You know how much we all love your apple pie."

She responds, not meeting my eyes, "That would be nice, sister." Her voice is laced with apprehension. It is likely Thatch will manifest elemental, as it is the most common of the abilities, but we have no way of knowing prior to the manifestation so the day always holds a level of uncertainty. After the kitchen and table are cleaned, we all sit in the living room around the fire. My knees and shoulders ache from leaning in the garden all day as I sit against the cushions of the Couch. Thatch sits closest to me, leaning against my shoulder. My head begins to nod as I struggle to keep my eyes open so I excuse myself to my chambers for the night, kissing Thatch on the top of his head as I stand to leave the room.

"Good night, bubba. I love you." I ruffle his shaggy hair with my hands, leaving the room and beginning my descent up the stairs.

The morning air is crisp as Raine and I walk through the marketplace to the garden to start our work day. We wave good morning to all of the other townspeople setting up the front of their shops in the buildings that line the marketplace. All of the buildings are darkened with age and the moisture from the sea outside of the walls. The smell of freshly cooked breads and

bouquets of colorful wildflowers play with my senses as they come in alternating waves. The cobblestone is slick with moisture from the sea air as we walk through the streets.

We come to the end of the marketplace's main square, rounding the corner to the slightly uphill path that leads to the garden. The view of the morning sun on the horizon, peeking through the clouds above the water, is one of my favorite sights. I've been called the water for as long as I can remember, but mourn that I have never felt the sea on my skin or the white sand running through my fingers. The clouds are sparse, mingling with the pastel shades of yellow and blue of the sunrise over the water.

"Corvina!" I turn upon hearing my name to see Kane, in full king's guard armor, walking towards me. As one of the strongest somatics, he had jumped up the ranks of the guard quickly and recently became one of three generals. Specifically, he is the general of Ardin's unit.

"Good morning, Kane," I say stiffly, moving my hands to block the radiating sun from my eyes. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" My voice is lined with sarcasm.

"I'll be at the tavern tonight. Will I see you?" He reaches out to run his hands down my arm, causing goosebumps to pebble along my skin.

"I'm sure Marigold and I will be there." I turn to look over my shoulder at Raine, who is bouncing with impatience. "I have to go to the garden. I'll be there tonight." I begin to walk away and he grabs onto my wrist. As much as I'd like to say that the force he grabbed me with wasn't intended, I think it was.

"Why do you fight this so much, Pet? You know I want you to be mine. As a general's wife, you'd have privileges. You wouldn't have to live in such a small cottage and you'd never be forced to degrade yourself by working in the... garden." he spits the last word.

“Kane, I’ve told you I’m not interested in being a general’s wife.” In reality, that isn’t what deters me.

“You will one day. When you realize I can offer you more.” He tightens his grip on my wrist, my hand is beginning to tingle at the loss of circulation. “You know I can make your brother’s life harder than it has to be, right?”

“You’re hurting me,” I whisper, but the darkness now taking over his eyes makes me realize he knows. He squeezes tightly before letting go of my wrist, now a mixture of red and purple.

“I’ll see you tonight, Corvina. I’m looking forward to it.” He pulls me into him and takes a kiss before I can protest. When I turn to face Raine I can see the irritation brewing under her skin, the desire to say something to him eating her alive. I know he’d retaliate against Ardin, and I can’t let that happen.

The castle is to our side as we walk down the hill, radiating brightly as the sunrise reflects off the ivory limestones that make up the castle. The castle rests close to the cliffside on the northeastern side of the kingdom with only the vast gardens separating the castle and the wall.

At the base of the steps are members of the king’s guard keeping anyone from getting too close to the castle. They wear their armor embossed with Oberon’s emblem, a midnight blue crest with a white owl.

We curve to the side of the castle where Miss Astoria’s workshop sits. The small steps that lead into the building are smooth under our feet, matching the limestone of the castle. Miss Astoria gives me an uncomfortable side eye as my sister and I stride by her.

“Good morning, Miss Astoria. Are we at the same locations in the garden as yesterday?” Raine smiles.

“Yes,” She replies sharply. “Corvina, you ARE expected to make up for what you failed to harvest yesterday.”

“Of course, Miss Astoria,” I reply, bowing my head as I shove down the urge to roll my eyes. My sister and I grab our woven baskets and begin to walk out of the building and into the garden, Raine giving me a smile and a small nod as we go our separate ways to work in the different fields. Thankfully I remember one of the gardening aprons today. I’m wearing my favorite sage green dress and I’d be distraught if I stained it with mud. Picking up the hem of my dress, I bundle it up above my knees before I begin to pick carrots out of the soil.

Raine has been doing the same thing a few years longer than I have, but I’ve been working in the garden since I turned sixteen. It’s been ten years of the same mundane routine. My days are filled with waking up, eating, working, walking home, eating, and sleeping. The only exception is the sixth day. On the sixth day we are allotted a day break. I do enjoy the routine though, so on the fifth day when I leave work, I walk home with Raine, bathe, and change into clean clothing, then go to the tavern with Marigold. The sixth day I enjoy sleeping in past sunrise, helping Thatch with the animals, and reading books I acquire from the town book store. I read books of adventure and romance, anything to get me out of the darkness that grows in my mind when it’s too quiet.

Raine and I practically race through the marketplace after we complete our daily harvest. I can only imagine the smug smile that must have been on my face when I surprised Miss Astoria with a few extra carrots in my harvest basket. When we looked into our ration bag, Raine was overjoyed when she discovered we had enough apples from the harvest to make a pie for Thatch. It was one of the traditions from our life before the war we carried into the life we created. Our mother baked one for us every year on our birthdays and special holidays.

Once we’re home I practically race up the stairs to my bedroom. Thatch, Marigold, and I all share the top floor while my sister and Ardin have the main bedroom downstairs. I fill the

clawfoot tub. adding my favorite lavender and vanilla oil before I begin to undress. I place my long dark hair into a messy updo, just to get it out of my face and above the water. My breasts seem to sigh in relief as I undo the front of my corset, releasing them before I begin sliding my dress down. The top of it gets stuck once it meets my hips, so I have to maneuver the dress back and forth to allow it to pass over my curves. I step into the bathtub and submerge my body fully. I run a rag over my shoulders and across my chest before continuing down.

I let my mind drift elsewhere. I think about my readings, and the lovers within the pages of my books. My mind drifts to Kane, who I'm sure will be at the tavern tonight as well. I would not call us lovers, as I have never taken anyone to bed. But we have been stealing moments of passion for the last few months. Aside from heavy kissing, I've only ever pleased him and he always leaves once he is... finished. He's asked me on more than one occasion to wed him and I've denied him every time, but he's getting more demanding and lately I've noticed a slight aggression in his touch. A nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach presents itself everytime I think about marrying Kane. I don't know if it's nerves, anticipation, or a warning.

I grab the body towel I have hanging up and dry off as I exit the bath. I step into my midnight blue slip dress, sliding my hands over my body to smooth it out. I release my hair from the updo and pin the majority of it back, leaving a few strands to frame my face. I grab my satchel, trying again to steady my breathing and calm my nerves, and head down to meet Marigold.

2

Corvina

Our shoes click rhythmically as we walk through the cobblestone-lined pathways. The stores along the marketplace are lit up with lanterns and candles. We make our way to the tavern, passing the floral shop and apothecary on our way. Marigold links her arm in mine before opening the heavy wooden tavern door. The smell of stale ale and pipe smoke are heavy in the air as we enter. The barkeep, Lyle, smiles at us and waves as we enter. He and Marigold have been friendly the last few visits. She doesn't believe in the idea of soul bounds anymore than I do, but I think she's secretly waiting for the feeling of the tug too.

"Evening, Lyle." Marigold smiles and looks up through her thick eyelashes. "Cora and I will each have an ale please!" I feel a hard chest press against my back as Lyle smiles and nods. I look up, knowing who to expect but not turning my head to see Kane standing behind me, his scent of ash and tobacco is heavy as it comes down from him in waves. I roll my eyes when his hands touch my shoulders and begin to glide their way down. Lyle places our mugs upon the ale soaked bartop, looking up at Kane and then down at me, almost as if he's pleading with me to express my comfort. I nod at him to signal I'm okay and in no need of rescuing, he turns and tends to more patrons. Marigold

looks over to Kane, winks at me, and makes her way to some friends she's spotted at the opposite side of the room.

"You know what that dress does to me, Corvina," he hisses in my ear, nipping at my earlobe. His breath is hot as he presses even closer to me. Chills run down my spine and I can't decide if they're out of excitement or not. His hand makes its way to grab my hip, harder than I anticipated, I let out a squeak in response.

He trails the nape of my neck with his lips, leaving hot kisses as he makes his way to my shoulder. He grabs me before I even register what is happening, pulling me toward the stairs so quickly I feel like I'm going to fall on my face. The hallway to the tavern's rooms is grungy, the red shaggy fabric flooring is stained and smells of urine and tobacco. The poorly-lit hallway makes it difficult to read the numbers placed above each door, but Kane finds the room easily enough. He slips the key into the lock, the locking mechanism of the door clicks as it turns. Kane swings open the door and pulls me inside before shutting the door. I turn to face him and he picks me up, wrapping my legs around his waist and pressing my back up against the door. His mouth is on mine in an instant, the kiss is frenzied like this moment is all he's thought about since our last encounter. I allow myself to get lost in this moment, parting my lips just slightly. He takes that as an invitation, enticing my tongue through the small part before he pushes his tongue into my mouth. I bury my fingers through his short golden brown hair as he begins walking from the door to the bed, still kissing me as he lays me down. He pulls down the top of my dress nibbling at my collarbone as the cool air hits my now exposed breasts.

He looks up at me through hooded eyelids, and the stale cool air of the room causes goosebumps to rush over my body, causing my nipples to pebble. I let out a moan as he takes one into his mouth and begins to suck and nip at it. He kneads my breasts and rasps hungrily, "Gods," before taking the other nipple between his teeth and tugging on it gently. I yelp in response. My breasts ache with need as he places kisses between them before he reaches my collar bone and begins to trail up my neck. His

mouth crashes on mine once more, and he takes my hand and guides me down to the waistband of his trousers, unbuttoning them. Grabbing his length, my movements are slow at first, as I glide my hand up and down.

Kane groans in approval and removes himself from our kiss. He pulls my hand away, shifting to his feet as runs his hand through my hair, gripping tightly as he pushes me to my knees. I look up at him as I run my tongue over the tip before taking him into my mouth, my hand gripping his base as I take him deeper little by little. Breaking our eye contact, he throws his head back as he grabs the handful of my hair tighter. I slide my tongue along the underside of his shaft, pulling back just enough to run my tongue along his tip before he drives himself deep into my mouth, slamming into the back of my throat. My eyes water as I gag upon the impact, his groans filling the room. The move becomes eager and frenzied. I hollow my cheeks as I continue to move my hand and my mouth in unison to bring him to his climax.

I look up at him, tears streaming down my face, his eyes darkening as he brings himself deeper, and I know he's close.

Seconds later, I feel the warmth of his release slide down my throat as Kane shudders with a long groan. I pull back to sit on the heels of my feet as he grabs my chin with a finger.

"I love what you do with that mouth, Pet." He says through hooded eyes. I bring myself to a standing position. He grabs me by the chin before kissing me on the forehead, turning to adjust his trousers before opening the door and exiting back out to the tavern. Kane shuts the door behind him and I am left in the room alone. There's a hollowness in my chest that is always there, but it darkens in moments like this. Moments where I want to be wanted, to be loved.

I saunter down the stairs and find Marigold at the bar. I put up my hand to signal for Lyle as I find a stool against the bartop, he nods and begins to pour me another ale. Marigold looks at me with concern in her eyes, but this is how our encounters happen

more often than not. I look around for Kane, not finding him in the crowd. He most likely stepped out into the cool night to have a cigar or pipe with his comrades from the King's guard.

Marigold and I sit in silence and have a couple more mugs of ale before we decide it's time to retire for the evening. Waving our goodbyes to Lyle, we exit the tavern to start our decent home. We walk out into the cold night with our arms interlaced, but I'm jolted back by a hand grabbing the upper part of my arm. Pulling me around, I see Kane's face. His eyes are empty as he looks at me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he snarls. Fear causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand up.

"What do you mean, Kane? Marigold and I were walking back to our cottage. It's late, we're tired, and tomorrow is Thatch's birthday. Raine would have my head if we were home too late," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady while trying to pull my arm from his grasp. His breath is thick with the smell of tobacco and whiskey. He pulls my arm tighter and I turn in a panic to see if Marigold is still here, but I don't see her. Now, I'm definitely feeling frantic. I try to remove his hand from my arm only causing his grip to tighten. Since he's somatic, I know trying to escape his grasp is of no use.

"You're going to fuck someone, aren't you. Do NOT even try to lie to me, Corvina. That's why you won't let me fuck you. Isn't it? You're already bedding someone else." He brings his face closer to mine. "All of this bullshit about us not being soul bound. You don't really give a shit about any of that. Do you? You're really just a whore!" He spits as the palm of his hand meets my cheek, causing me to stumble back slightly. My hand instinctively raises to the now burning skin of my cheek.

"I... I..." The words are frozen on my tongue, panic builds in my throat as the words fail to come out. He grabs a hold of me by the back of the neck and throws me against the wall, maintaining his hold on me as he pushes me hard against the stone. My blood runs cold as I hear Kane grunts behind me and realize he's

struggling with the button of his trousers. I try to think of anything to say, but the darkness in my mind begins to swirl, dulling my vision. His hard body pushes against my back and I feel the coldness of the brick in the alleyway against my cheek and my chest, I focus on that as Kane begins to raise the hem of my dress. My body freezes and I can't move as my mind breaks out of its stupor, and begins to register what is about to happen. Kane's hands begin to glide the line of my undergarments before pulling them to the side. The overwhelming mixing of the smells of whiskey and mold dulls my senses and I try to steady my breathing as I focus on my heartbeat. Silent tears stream down my face as Kane's fingers find their way to my entrance.

"HEY!" I hear from behind me, the brawny voice is familiar, but my mind can't fully comprehend who it is. Kane jumps back, causing me to fall as he releases me from his hold. "Get the fuck away from her you piece of shit. If you EVER even look in my sister's direction again. I. Will. Kill. You," Ardin says, pushing Kane.

Kane turns and runs the other direction, tripping on the cobblestones as he goes. Ardin holds out a hand and helps me to my feet. Ardin is a man of few words, so as we walk home, it's quiet for a moment. But, I've never been more grateful to have him in my life as I am in that moment. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold back the sob that's sitting in my throat. I try to steady my breath, feeling the darkness in my mind trying to snake its way out.

One.

Two. I'm okay.

Three.

Four. Ardin stopped him in time.

Five.

"Are you okay?" Ardin breaks the silence. My chin begins to shake, I bite my lower lip and nod. "You sure? I can go back and kill the fucker."

“No. It’s fine. I mean it’s not fine...” I let out a long sigh. “Let’s just not talk about it right now. I know Raine’s going to ask questions, but I can’t talk about it yet.”

We enter the door of the cottage and I look up to see Raine’s face full of worry. Immediately she begins to run over to hug me, but Ardin shakes his head in warning and she stops before getting too close. Raine looks at him confused, but lets me walk past and up the stairs. I walk into my bedroom and change into my night clothes, tossing my dress on the chair in the corner of my dark room. Kane had been too tight with his grip before, but he’d never hit me. Not like he did tonight. I bring my hand back up to my cheek, it’s still hot and searing with pain. I sit on my bed to undo the last of the pins that were in my hair and braid my hair back before laying down. I pull my wool covers over my shoulders and curl into a ball. The hole in my chest radiates, letting me know it’s never too far. It’s accompanied by the darkness that lurks in the deepest corners of my mind.

In the silence of my room, I let my tears escape my eyes.

The sunlight beams through the wooden slits in front of my bedroom window. I open my eyes slowly, blinking to allow them to focus. I bite the inside of my cheek as I remember the darkness in Kane’s eyes and the disgust in his voice. The hollowness in my chest threatens me with the onset of tears. I force myself out of bed, and the hardwood floor is cold beneath my feet as I walk over to my armoire. I decide to wear a deep burgundy cotton dress today. It’s casual, but comfortable enough to lounge around the house.

The house is still, the *creeeek* of my door opening echoing against the silent halls. I’m not ready to face anyone, but I know it’s inevitable, so I hold onto the railing as I descend down the stairs. My sister is sitting in the main room of our cottage wrapped in a quilt my mom made before I was born. She sits up quickly when she sees me.

“Good morning! I expected you’d want to sleep a little more.” The concern in her voice is heavy. “I was going to cook some hotcakes?” Her statement came out as more of a question, but it’s no surprise she wants to cook. Raine’s way to comfort people is by feeding them or serving them tea.

“That would be great, actually. I can help if you’d like the company?” Weariness is thick in my response. I’m unsure of what Ardin told her, so I don’t know how to act. “Or I can place the kettle on the stove to make us some tea?”

“Tea would be lovely,” she says as she folds the blanket on the back of the loveseat and walks through the threshold into the kitchen. I fill up the kettle before placing it upon the stove, the tension is palpable in the room as I get two teacups out of the cabinet and place them on the round wooden table. I pick at the skin around the bed of my fingernails before I decide to break the silence.

“Is Thatch excited about his manifestation today?” I know the anxiety I felt on my own manifestation day, but for an unknown reason there’s so much tension in the air at the thought of his.

“We haven’t talked about it too much.” My sister sighs. “I think he’s probably going to be an elemental like you and I are. I just don’t think he’s big enough to be somatic. Though, I know that doesn’t really matter. I think I just don’t want him to go into the king’s guard like Ardin.” As if he was summoned, Thatch walks into the kitchen.

“My boy! Good morning, love. Happy birthday!” My sister grabs my nephew, wrapping him in a warm embrace. “I’m making hotcakes for breakfast. Come sit down!” She kisses his forehead before releasing him. He turns and smiles at me as my sister guides him to his seat with both hands on his shoulders. Ardin emerges from the door that leads to the small yard behind our house. Silently, he pulls out the wooden chair and sits at the table. We eat breakfast in silence. I wonder if Ardin feels as uncomfortable as I do. Raine clears her throat, if only to break the sound of metal scraping against the porcelain, before

standing up to clear her plate. I follow behind her to help her clean the kitchen as Ardin and Thatch go to the main room.

“How are you?” My sister asks with concern, thickening her voice. “I don’t mean how are you, either. I mean how ARE you.” I refuse to lift my gaze to meet hers knowing there are tears threatening to fall.

“I’m confused. I’m angry. I’m hurt. I know he wasn’t my bound, but I just can’t wrap my head around his level of aggression. I don’t know how this is going to affect Ardin at work,” I say shakily. I release the tension in my shoulders, and allow them to sag. My sister drops the dishes onto the wooden countertop and pulls me into her embrace. My tears begin to escape down my cheeks. I breathe in her scent of cinnamon, comforted by the sense of familiarity. I pull myself back, but she holds on tighter, refusing to let me out of her embrace.

“Don’t worry about Ardin, Cora. He’ll be fine. You know he would do whatever it takes to protect you.” She says in a low voice.

I hear light footsteps and I look up to see Marigold walking through the threshold between rooms. Her bottom lip quivers as she shoots across the room to wrap her arms around us. We stand there for a minute and just let the tears fall. Once we release each other, I walk through the threshold into the main room.

I spend the rest of the day wrapped in a blanket on the couch, reading to escape. I decided I’d give myself one day. Just one day to feel sorry for myself. One day to feel the heaviness of his handprints on my arm, and the ones I can feel, but not see, on my back. I can’t focus on it for longer than that or the darkness in the corners of my mind will eat me from the inside out.

The smell of roasted beef, carrots, and potatoes fills the cottage and wakes me from my nap. I know there is also a freshly baked apple pie for after dinner, allowing myself to hope my sister made cold cream to go atop it. We sit down at the table and

take turns placing food on our plates from the serving dishes. I fail to meet Ardin's eyes as I pass him the gravy bowl for his potatoes.

I reach my hand out to get the bowl of carrots from Thatch, but it slips from his grasp and shatters on the floor. His eyes become black as onyx and even the whites seem to be coated in what looks like a slick oil.

He speaks in a voice that is his own, but also someone else's. It somehow sounds like multiple people who are all old, young, feminine, and masculine in unison. "Death will sever what was once bound." The voices cause everyone's hair to stand up as he continues to speak, a chill spreads across the room. "The dire wolf will seek revenge to protect what is his." Tears of the thick oil begin to cascade from his eyes.

My sister lets out a whimper, lifting her hand to cover her mouth.

Ardin and my sister make eye contact. Ardin nods as if he knows what my sister is thinking, her eyes shut as tears begin to stream down her face at whatever he just confirmed. His eyes begin to lose the slickness of the black, revealing his amber eyes once more. My sister pushes the chair out of her way as she grabs a cloth to wipe the oil from her son's eyes and face. The fear radiates off everyone in the room. I wrap my arms around myself with the understanding of what this means for our family. What this could mean for Thatch. In that moment realization comes over me.... Thatch's power has manifested. He isn't Elemental like Raine, or Somatic like Ardin. Thatch has the ability of a seer. Thatch has dark magic.

I can hear Raine and Ardin's hushed conversation by the counters across the room. I try to listen, but I can't make out what they're saying before they ask everyone in the kitchen to go to the main room. They stay behind to continue their hushed conversation. I'm holding a shaking Thatch on the loveseat. Even though I know he's not shaking from the temperature, I wrap him up in a quilt. I fidget with the frayed edge of the blanket,

stifling the urge to bite my fingernails. Marigold disappeared to her room in the wake of the chaos at dinner.

Ardin is the first to come out of the kitchen, and I jump to my feet. My sister trails behind him, her eyes swollen and red. She'd been crying. Ardin lets out a shaky breath. My stomach drops at the action and my pulse quickens. Being a soldier, he is never shaky. His life depends on him not losing his steadiness.

"We have to find a way to escape Elornia," he breaths. My mouth drops open. "We have a few days before we have to register him with the lister." He turns his attention to me and my sister. "Cora, I need you to look along the wall for any path that may keep us hidden. Raine I need you to collect as much harvest as you can so we can have food until we find somewhere to start anew. I will find out the schedule of the night guards. We will have to be quick with this. We can not get caught or they'll sentence us to prison."

The hollowness in my chest aches as I nod in response. My sister turns with a sniffle as she wipes at her face. She makes her way to the door to their bedroom and closes the door behind her. I don't know how to be here right now or how to act with all of the thoughts that are racing in my mind, so I kiss Thatch's forehead and make my way to the bathroom. I've always felt at ease in the water, finding refuge in the weightlessness of being submerged. I fill the tub and sink myself into its warmth. I close my eyes and fully submerge every part of my body.

I let out a scream while my head's under water, releasing the anger I have felt for the entire day with it.

The morning is crisp and Raine and I walk arm in arm as we make our way to the gardens. Kane and I make eye contact as he walks by in his armor. He turns his head quickly, refusing to hold my gaze. We make our way past the castle and to Miss Astoria's workshop. She scoffs at us as we enter.

“Good morning, Miss Astoria.” I force my voice to sound as cheerful as I can, but it falls flat. “I was just wondering if there was any way I could be placed in the squash field today.” It’s closest to the southern wall, giving me the best view of the wall behind the castle.

“Personal requests? Do you think you’re special, girl?” Her voice thick with distaste. “Normally I’d laugh and send you on your way. But the squash production was high this season and we need a couple more workers to harvest it. So, today, I will grant that. But, don’t make it a habit. Requests won’t be granted going forward.” I grab my woven basket and exit quickly, before she can change her mind.

I use a small knife to cut the vegetables from their vines and place them into my basket. After every other squash, I look along the wall and behind the castle. I breathe out a long sigh of frustration for what lies ahead for my family, the lines of my brow furrowing. The sun is setting as I finish my harvest and walk over to the potatoes, where Raine is. I touch her shoulder to signal the end of our day. We enter the workshop and hand in our baskets filled with harvest to get our ration in return. I give Miss Astoria a partial smile as I take the mesh ration bag.

We’re quiet as we walk by the castle, the light colored limestone illuminated by the setting sun. We walk through the marketplace and fear fills my chest. I will do whatever I have to do to protect my family, but I’ve never lived anywhere but Elornia. We don’t even know what awaits us outside the walls. As if she senses my anxiety, my sister intertwines her arm with mine and squeezes the top of my hand.

Thatch is in the main room with Ardin when we walk into the cottage. The air is uneasy as we all look at one another.

“Close the door,” Ardin says sharply. Quickly, Raine turns to close the front door to the cottage, concern pooling in her eyes as she looks at her husband. “We have to leave tonight. They are opening the gate to release new dark manifestations out of

Elornia and into Avaron. It may be our only chance to make it out.”

Raine places her satchel on the table, hurriedly packing bread and a variety of fruit and vegetables. She slouches down into the wooden chair, placing her elbows on the top of the table and letting out a long sigh as she rests her face in the palms of her hands. A sob breaks from her as tears stream down her cheeks. I walk over to her and put my arms around her.

“We’ve lived in this house since mom left, ya know.” I nod in my response. “Every decoration adorning the walls, the quilted blankets, and the furniture was everything we accumulated in the past fifteen years. This is the life we’ve built, you and I. It’s hard to know we will never see it again,” she says while wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Ardin walks into the room and studies Raine’s face. They hold eye contact for a moment before he walks over and kisses her forehead, whispering “I know.” I look between them, confused. My sister looks at me and shakes her head, waving her hand to dismiss my questioning gaze. The stairs groan as Marigold and Thatch come down them.

“I will not be traveling with you.” The skin around her eyes are red and puffy as she whispers. Ardin opens his mouth to respond, Marigold holds her hand up signaling him to stop. “I can’t go with you. I will only hold you guys back. I’m not fast like Corvina or strong like you, brother. You guys MUST go without me. It won’t be safe for you guys if I come with you.” She runs into her brother’s arms. Ardin’s eyes squeeze shut as he kisses the top of his sister’s head.

“I love you, sister. We don’t know what dangers lie behind the walls of the kingdom. We will miss you, but I hope we will be able to see each other again.” He releases her from his embrace.

Marigold hugs Raine before hugging me and ending with Thatch. She runs up the staircase as we hear her door slam. My

heart is heavy knowing we won't all be together again for a long time, if we ever will be again. We're all dressed in dark clothing as we exit the cottage, and Raine turns and admires it one last time before she slowly closes the door. We lift the hoods to our cloaks as we stalk towards the edge of the kingdom. I say a quiet plea to Senka that the darkness from her evening sky shields us from being seen.

The portcullis is on the northwestern side of the kingdom. We do our best to stay close to the wall, to remain in the darkness and the shadows. I chew on the inside of my cheek, my chest is tight as my heart beats like the wings of a hummingbird. The closer we get, the more my stomach twists and turns. I hold on to Thatch's hand as we walk behind Raine and Ardin, who are walking with entwined fingers. The guards yell something back and forth, it's too far for me to make it out. Ardin holds his free hand up to signal us to stop, and the abrupt stop causes me to fall into Raine.

I can see children being ripped away from their families over Ardin's back. The girl's white hair shines in the moonlight as the guards grab her wrists, pulling her out of her mother's grasp. The boy pushes the guard off the girl and places himself in front of her, protecting her from the guard. One of the mothers begins to sob as the portcullis begins to open. This could have been us. This could have been Thatch being banished and forced to fend for himself out beyond the wall.

Ardin turns and whispers "Cora, I need you and Thatch to move in front of us. When I say run, you run. Whatever you do, you do NOT let go of his hand and do NOT look back if we're separated. Just. Keep. Running. Do you understand?" He looks at me with such fierceness I'd be afraid to question anything he says at this moment. I nod, my voice stuck in the lump that has formed within my throat.

My sister turns to me with tear filled eyes.

"If for some reason we do get separated... Keep my son safe like I've kept you safe. I love you so much, Cora. You are strong

and I need you to continue to stay strong no matter what happens. Please just protect my son.” Their uncertainty is causing the twisting of my stomach to get tighter, sending bile into my throat. I don’t know what else to do but nod. Thatch and I move past my sister and brother, Ardin squeezing my shoulder as I move in front of him. Ardin pulls my sister and Thatch into a hug, they disappear beneath his thick arms. Ardin squeezes his eyes closed tightly and kisses Thatch’s forehead. The emptiness spreads further in my chest at their exchange. We watch the guards drop the portcullis, as they toss children out the opening. They bang their hands on an invisible shield begging to be let back in, their families sobbing in horror.

“RUN!” Ardin yells suddenly. I hold tightly onto Thatch’s hand as we run at the fastest speed physically possible at this moment. The wet dirt squishes beneath my feet, the cool night air nips at my nose causing it to burn with each breath. I turn to look at the sound of my sister’s scream, knowing I shouldn’t, to see Ardin shot in the heart with an arrow. My sister collapses to the ground holding her heart as if she was hurt too before letting out a loud scream of pain. My instincts tell me I need to turn and go back to her. The guards are yelling commands and orders to one another, but my brain is in a haze and I can’t make out anything they’re saying.

“GO! FASTER!” She yells breathlessly, gasping as the words escape her chest. There’s a guard running directly at me as I practically drag Thatch to the opening. I dodge to the guard’s side barely missing his reach. They are beginning to close the portcullis so I force myself to pick up speed, causing my muscles to burn with each step. My arm is heavy with the weight of holding on to Thatch, it takes everything I have but I manage to swing Thatch around and push him out of the opening to the gate, through the invisible barrier. Relief makes my body instinctively want to relax when he makes it out and I see he’s safe, but I shake and push the instinct away as I throw myself through the small section of the now almost closed gate. I can

feel it graze over my shin as I push myself further through the gate, out of the barrier, and into the unknown of Avaron.

I grab Thatch's hand, forcing us up to run again. There is a lush forest just beyond the boundaries of the kingdom, the Nefeli Woods. I pull Thatch behind me as I charge, not daring to look behind me as arrows from along the wall are shot towards us. The arrows surround us as they descend from the sky onto the meadow around us, landing with *whooshes* as they glide by my ears. Pain seethes up my leg as one penetrates my calf. I fall to the ground and scream in pain.

"Aunty, please get up. PLEASE!" Thatch begs with tears streaming down his cheeks. "You're all I have left. I need you to get up so we can at least get into the forest." He's pulling me as sobs escape his mouth. *Keep my son safe like I kept you safe.* My heart sinks as I hear my sister's voice float through my mind, through the darkness in the corners trying to take over, making my limbs heavy. I force myself up, taking Thatch's hand within mine, limping as we run into the edge of the forest. Something draws me and I look towards the east, but I see nothing, so I discount it and force myself to turn back around towards the forest.

The ground quickly changes from grass to mud as we pass through the tree line. Once we're deeper into the forest and out of sight, I sit against the thick trunk of a tree. The pain from the arrow radiates with every movement and I know I'm going to need a tincture or salve to ward off infection, but first I need to get this arrow out of my leg. I look at Thatch, who's sobbing with arms wrapped around his knees, pulling them tightly towards his chest.

"Thatch, honey. I need you to do something for me. Inside my satchel there's a change of clothes and a small gardening knife. I need you to cut a long piece off of the hem of the dress." He nods in response, turning to get into my satchel. "Once you're done with that, I need you to hand me the knife and look away." I

hear the fabric rip as he separates the strip from the dress. He turns, and with a shaking hand, passes me the knife.

I cut close to the fletching of the arrow. The shape of the wooden fins on the end of the arrow wouldn't be able to fit through my wound without inflicting more pain. The wood is thick so I have to chip pieces away before it cuts through. Each time the knife causes the arrow to jolt, I wince as pain ripples through my calf. Once I've stripped enough away, I pull the remaining bit of the arrow from the wound, and p sears through my leg. Once it's out completely, I wrap the wound with the strip from the dress, applying pressure as I knot it along my shin. I don't know how long I'll be able to go on with the wound not being mended, I send up a silent prayer that we find a town or at least some people along the journey that have healers or something to properly clean it.

"Let's get some rest. You sleep first. I'll take watch the first half of the night," I say as I try to force a smile. Thatch rests his head on my shoulder and I lean down to rest my head on his, trying to hold back my tears and look around at the forest.

"I don't think I can sleep. Mama would tell me stories when I was younger, and I think I could use a story now." His voice hitches at the mention of his mom. I bite back my pain and try to steady my shaking voice before I begin.

"The woods that surround us are named after our Goddess Nefeli, the goddess of the earth. They say she was beautiful. That her skin was tanned by the sun, her jet black hair pushed out of her face exposing her angled cheeks and jade eyes, and atop her head were horns that were long like the addax, but swirled like the markhor. Her horns were adorned with greenery and flowers that grow on the forest floor. She wore a dress of forest moss that cascaded down behind the heels of her feet. She was said to be kind and joyful. She and her sister Senka, the Goddess of the stars and sky, were at odds with one another. Senka had alabaster skin and snow white hair that cascaded down her back. Unlike her sister, she didn't have horns, but she wore a crown of stars. It

is believed their rift was caused by the love they both had for the god of sea, Garren; however, he wanted neither of them as he loved another. The sisters lived separately for lifetimes while Senka always looked down upon the earth and Nefeli looked up to the skies.”

I look down to see that Thatch had fallen asleep. I sigh as I throw my head back and look up to the stars through the breaks in the treetops, breathing in the smell of moss and damp dirt. The Nefeli Woods are lush and green, the forest floor is lined with thick, dark green moss that spreads up the trunks of the trees that fill the forest. I allow myself a moment to think back to my sister and Ardin. I replay the image of the arrow going through Ardin’s heart and my sister falling to her knees holding onto her heart as if she herself had been shot. Tears begin to stream down my face at the same time I feel rain begin to fall from the sky.

3

Atticus

The tendrils of my shadows surround me as I stay close to the cliffside, careful to stay hidden this close to Elornia. As I walk the road from Berk, I can hear the sound of waves crashing against the cliffside, and the smell of the ocean tangles in the wind. Every few nights I come here to watch as they open the gate to throw children out of Oberon's stolen kingdom. Children. Sometimes I'm accompanied by other shifters from the surrounding villages, but tonight I'm alone.

The anger ripples through my bones, demanding I shift into wolf form. I shove the thought down as I wait for the guards to close the gate before walking towards the children. There's an uneasiness in their winds tonight. I can feel that something is wrong. I hear more commotion than normal as guards shout at one another and then a loud painful scream. The guards along the top of the wall are armed and ready to fire their arrows. I typically try to remain calm during the collection, but tonight I am on edge. My palms are sweaty and I feel overwhelmingly shaky, which is anything but normal.

I watch the children they've cast out beg to get back through the kingdom's barriers, back to their families. The guards begin to close the opening, as I watch a boy fly through the narrow gap.

What the hell is happening? He's followed through the opening by a woman who stumbles to get back on her feet. Her long black hair flies in the wind behind her as she grabs his hand and pulls him towards the Nefeli Woods. The guards shoot arrows at her and the boy, and I have an overwhelming urge to rip each of the guards' throats. She ducks and covers her head as the arrows fly past her, scattering in the meadow around them. I feel pulled in her direction. I want, no need, to be near her. Pain shoots into my leg causing my knees to buckle.

She falls to the ground, the boy grabbing her arm. I'm too far to hear what he's saying but by the tears streaming down his cheeks I know he's pleading with her. She stands shakily, grabbing the boy's hand and making her way towards the forest. She slows and turns back, her searching gaze directed exactly to where I stand on the cliffside wrapped in my shadows. Can she sense me? I can see an arrow protruding out of her calf in the moonlight, my ability to feel it too can only mean one thing.

Shit.

I snarl in response. My inner wolf beckons me to let him out. Nobody hurts what is mine. I shake him off once again as I expose myself out of my shadows, cautiously walking up to the crying children as I try to maintain my composure. I'm still slightly limping as I walk towards the two outcasts tonight. One is a small girl with white hair and silver eyes. By her scent I know she is a shifter, like me, but most likely a snow owl. The other, a boy who is a shadow walker, is taller. He has his arm around her, almost as if he wants to protect or comfort her. Along with my shifting, I can also scent out the abilities of others after they've manifested.

"Hello, I am Prince Atticus. There is a town not far from here that my mother, Queen Kasaia, has established for people cast out by Oberon. It was named Berk, after my father. If it's okay with you, I would like to walk you there and get you placed with families that live there." I raise my hands when I approach them to show that I'm no threat. They don't say anything as they look

at one another and nod in unison. They begin walking in the direction I pointed, and I turn my head back towards the forest. Something is calling me to go there. To go to her. To protect her. At that moment I decide I'm going to take the kids to Berk and then go back to the forest to watch over them for the night. It would be too dangerous to try to travel with horse and carriage with the guards along the wall on high alert tonight.

"You are free to come and go as you please. You will not be forced to live in the town if you do not want to. There's two towns outside of Elornia, aside from my mother's kingdom of Kyrell, and they are Berk and Ripam. Berk is the one we're going to right now and Ripam is a seaside town. It's mostly a port used for sea travelers, but there's some housing," I say smoothly. We walk along the pathway that hugs the edges of land, the moon and stars reflecting on the still ocean. We walk a short distance before I can see the lanterns that illuminate the cottages in the distance. As we enter Berk, the children and I are greeted by members of the community. The cottages that we've built are huddled together surrounding the town square. Everyone contributes to the community in some way; sharing their harvest or hunt, helping with the building of the cottages, or any other way they can. Both of the children are taken by one of the elders who looks at me and smiles, sorrow filling in her eyes. She lost both of her sons in the First War, so the collection is bittersweet for her. She loves being able to help displaced children, but she feels the sorrow of the families for losing their loved ones tonight.

"I have something to handle, so I will probably be back in the morning. If you need anything, Lisbeth should be around here somewhere. Find her and she can help you with whatever you need." I place my hand within hers and she bows her head slightly in my direction, a show of respect, and I do it back.

I move around the cottages and into the field on the side of the town. I remove my clothing and then take a deep breath as I focus my heart rate and breathing. My jaw cracks and burns as my human teeth are replaced with elongated canines. My jaw

bone continues to break as it changes shape for the new teeth. I groan in pain as my spine begins to curve and lengthen. My shoulder blades snap and grow to accommodate my wider form, my back tripling in size as my skin goosebumps and my hair follicles expand across my body to fit my thick jet black fur coat. I blink as my eyesight sharpens in my wolf form. I brace my hind legs onto the dirt.

I look up at the cloudless sky as rain begins to pour down as I push off on my back left paw and race back to the forest. I cover myself in shadow as I enter the forest, bending my shadows to shield me. I can smell her through the rain and the wind, vanilla and lavender flood my senses. I can also smell her blood, causing anger to come in ripples through my body. I can feel a sense of mourning and anxiety coming in strides, a hollowness forms in my chest that I'm all too familiar with. I know those feelings are not my own, yet I feel them as if they were.

I keep my distance because I don't want to scare either of them in my wolf form, and I can't exactly walk up to her naked if I were to shift back into human form. I curl up next to a tree far enough that she can't see me, though close enough I can see her. The boy is resting his head on her shoulder as she tells him a story, her voice is smooth and steady but there's an underlying sadness in her tone.

I stay awake until the light from the sunrise begins to peek from between the trees. I look towards the woman and boy. *Shit.* I can see that her face has paled more during the night as sweat beads along her brow, the color of her lips have lightened with a tinge of blue. We have healers in town that can help her. That can heal her. I rise to my paws and push off to run back to town.

The large meadow between Berk and the woods is slick with dew from the morning mist. I see members of the community are already out as I make my way back into town. There are people with fishing rods to go into the lake that sits between Berk and the mountain range, and some are tending to the

livestock, while others are beginning to cook various forms of breads and pastry.

I dress in my everyday attire, a black tunic with black trousers, and head towards the stables to collect my mare, Midnight. My mother gifted her to me some birthdays ago when her mare, Luna, had her. She is salt and pepper with a long black mane. I place her saddle atop the riding blanket before buckling the leather. I connect a small carriage behind her. I mount her and wait until we get to the edge of the town before I grip her tight with my legs to cue her to go faster. The wind from the ocean dies down as I get more inland, the smell of salt is replaced by the smell of moss and wet dirt as I near the edge of the woods. I jump off of Midnight, pulling the reins to get her to follow me. The boy is startled and jumps to his feet, I see a small knife in his hands as he holds the blade in my direction. I hold up my free hand to show I'm no threat, dropping Midnight's reins and raising the other one to calm his uncertainty.

"My name is Atticus. I saw your mother get shot by the arrow of one of Oberon's soldiers in the meadow. I'm only here to help and I mean no harm. You have my word," I say calmly, still with my hands raised. I look in the direction of where the woman is sitting against a tree, her eyes heavy and surrounded by darkness. My heart sinks as I see her breathing has become ragged.

"She's my aunt. Not my mother. King Oberon's armies killed both of my parents last night." He says with tears escaping his eyes and a hitch in his throat.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. He killed my father a long time ago. I know you're angry and hurting; however, I need you and your aunt to come to Berk, a town just across the meadow, so I can get her to a healer," I say cautiously, still raising my hand. "I promise I will protect you and your aunt. Can I have your name?" He looks down at her. Her face is very pale, the darkness under her eyes being the only other shade of color, and sweat beads along her forehead. He is reluctant, but shakes his head yes.

“My name’s Thatch. My aunt is Corvina, but everyone just calls her Cora.” *Corvina*. I move slowly and easy, scooping Corvina into my arms. Thatch begins to walk towards Midnight, she nickers in his direction. Corvina is limp as I pick her up and place her in the carriage next to Thatch. I cover them both in a wool blanket that I made sure to bring. I mount midnight and cue her to begin traveling back to the town.

Thankfully, the island isn’t very large so we arrive in town fairly quickly and without incident, not that I wasn’t armed and ready. I dismount Midnight, my knees are a little shaky after riding her back and forth after shifting, but I easily regain my footing as I help Thatch out of the carriage and then bring Corvina into my arms. I knock on the door to the healer’s cottage. Cordelia’s door squeaks open and I take in the cinnamon smell of her cottage. Her dark hair streaked with gray falls in front of her weathered face.

“Good morning, Cordelia. I’m so sorry to bother you so early this morning. Yesterday during collection, I witnessed this woman and her nephew escape the gate and she was shot in the leg with an arrow.” I can hear the panic inside my own voice as I recall the scene. “I’m pretty sure it’s infected. She looks like she’s running a fever.” I turn Corvina away from my chest so that Cordelia can look at her.

“Of course, Prince Atticus! Please don’t ever apologize.” She steps out of her cottage and looks up at me with a smile. “Let me see what I’m...” her voice fades and her eyes widen as recognition floods them, her mouth opening slightly.

“Cordelia, this is Thatch and...” I begin to reply.

“Corvina.” Her voice is shaky and tears fill her eyes as she runs her hand over Corvina’s face, caressing her cheek lovingly. “Thatch, is it? You’re Raine’s child, aren’t you? You look so much like your mother.” She looks at me and I know she can see the confusion that pools behind my eyes. “A mother never forgets her child, Prince.”

“I didn’t know you had a daughter,” I say questionably.

“Daughters, prince. I have daughters. My husband and I had two daughters before he was killed in the First War.” I can see the pain behind her empty gaze as she continues. I lift Corvina from the carriage, making sure to keep the wool blanket covering her. “I left to protect them after their father’s passing. Oberon did unspeakable things and killed too many people to create his kingdom of Elornia.” I walk through the threshold of Cordelia’s cottage and into the main room.

“He killed my father, Cordelia. The anger I have towards him is the same.” I hold her hand. “We will get our revenge one day, I can assure you of that.” She nods as she looks towards Corvina, now laying on the couch. Her skin is flushed as sweat continues to bead at her brows and has now soaked through her dress. Her full lips are a more apparent shade of blue now. Anger builds up in my chest at the sight of her like this. I look at Thatch who’s sitting opposite of his aunt, he’s shaking in fear so I walk over and touch his shoulder.

“Do you want to take a walk? We can let your grandma work and I can show you around the town.” He looks up to me, his gaze not meeting mine. “There’s a lot of kids here. My mother discovered ruins of an abandoned town and transformed it into what it is today. Now it serves as a home for those who have been cast out by Oberon. Come on, let’s get you some food, and I’ll introduce you to my sister.” He stands.

“She’s all I have now. I need her to be okay,” he says looking up to me with tear filled eyes, looking back towards Corvina, before walking out of the cottage and onto the dirt street.

I see red hair bouncing in the distance and I know immediately it’s my sister, Lisbeth. She has a mane of curly copper hair and the deepest mossy green eyes. Her personality is just as fiery as her hair, and she is as clever as the red fox she can shift into. Without the limitation spell Oberon cast, almost everyone outside of the walls has a secondary ability. My shifting into a direwolf is my primary ability and my secondary is the

ability to manipulate and control shadows at my discretion. My ability to determine the abilities of others, however, is unique to me. My sister discovered not long after her shifting ability manifested that she can embody fire, but that specific elemental ability is hard on the fire wielder so she doesn't do it often.

"Brother!" She says, wrapping her arms around my abdomen. I'm taller than most but at only sixteen, Lis is very petite for her age and I tower over her. She is too young to remember The First War or our father and I have shielded her from as much pain as I possibly can. I'm almost double her age and I remember everything. *Everything.*

"Hi Lis, this is Thatch. He and his aunt escaped from Elornia yesterday. I witnessed them run into Nefeli Woods and went to bring them here. His aunt is with Cordelia now being healed." I look at Thatch. His eyelids are heavy as he looks at my sister.

"Hi, Thatch. I'm Lisbeth, but you can call me Lis if you'd like!" She gives him a radiant smile. "Are you hungry? We have a tavern just over there that makes the best beef stew." She points to the tavern across the way and then turns to extend her hand to Thatch. He looks back at me. I nod in approval as he takes her hand. My sister turns to me and I mouth *thank you* to her before turning to go back to Cordelia's cottage.

I knock on her rounded wooden door before I open it. I look towards the kitchen where I see Cordelia still working on Corvina's leg. Then, I get the scent of something musty. I look to the side and see a sliver of the arrow.

"Hello again, Prince," she says without lifting her gaze from Corvina's leg. "She is going to heal quickly. I'd say within a day or two. There may be a slight ache, but there should be no pain after the second day. I'm coating her injury with a salve I made to speed up healing." she points to the tray, "I found that still in the wound. It must have been what was causing the leg to fester. Did they say why they escaped the wall?"

“I scented the boy’s ability in the woods. He’s a powerful seer. His ability will most likely mirror that of Macoy’s. So I’m assuming that they discovered his ability and didn’t want him to be cast out alone or used within Oberon’s castle walls,” I say, looking in her direction. “I’m not sure of the second ability he holds, if he holds one at all. It may take some time to manifest since he spent his life under the casting of the wall.”

“I’m not sure either, Prince. My husband was a strong water elemental with no secondary. He may not have a secondary at all.” Her eyes were full of sorrow at the mention of her husband. “I am a mage, and like most mages, I have a secondary of earth magic.”

“Do you think she’ll be ready for travel soon?” I look towards Corvina as she lays still on the loveseat.

“Potentially in two days. Why?” She looks at me with a raised brow.

“I think bringing them both to Kyrell would be ideal. Thatch can learn from Macoy and I doubt Corvina will allow him to leave without her,” I respond.

“I think you’re right. I don’t believe she would.” She sighed. “Selfishly, I’d love for them to stay. It’s been fifteen long years since I’ve seen my girls, but I know Thatch must learn to harness his abilities, and I’m sure Corvina made some promise to Raine that she will not break. They were always so incredibly close.” Her eyes are filled with sorrow once again.

“I’ll be back in the morning, Cordelia. Lisbeth will bring Thatch back shortly. I have to go to see if there will be a collection tonight. It’s already later than I like to leave and I don’t want the children to wander anywhere else.” I get up from the ottoman I’ve been sitting on and walk out of the cottage.

The smell of salt glides off the waves with the wind and makes its way up the cliff. The moonlight and stars illuminate my walk to the castle. As I near the walls, I call to my shadows. They coil out of my fingers, engulfing me in them, and

concealing me from the outside world. I watch the portcullis and scan the guards atop the wall. I wonder which of them shot Corvina, the thought causing my pulse to quicken and anger to fill my blood. The gate begins to lower as an iridescent light begins to swirl around the entire wall. My inner wolf is demanding I shift as he senses an impending fight. Similarly to last night, I can sense that something is wrong. But unlike last night, I think it's dangerous.

I quickly remove my clothes, not caring to fold them like I normally do. I take in a deep breath as I feel my bones shift and my teeth change. I shake as I feel my thick fur emerge. Now in direwolf form I can see more clearly. Still contained within my shadows, I creep closer to the kingdom, but still not close enough where they can sense me. The limestone bricks within the wall begin to illuminate one by one until they are all lit up. In all the years I've watched and collected those that were thrown out of the kingdom, I've never seen anything like it.

As the gate slams open I see someone, a soldier, step through the threshold. I raise my ears up straight to listen, but I don't hear anything. I'm surprised when the soldier turns back and is able to walk right back into the kingdom effortlessly. A few moments later soldiers begin to leave the kingdom, heading straight for Berk.

4

Atticus

The ocean and the meadow are a blur on my sides as I run to Berk, the feeling of dirt and pebbles flying beneath my paws. As I near town, I find the clothes that I have hidden in case of emergencies. I'd classify this as an emergency. I run through town and warn everyone of the impending threat, demanding they get on their horses and ride to Kyrell. I have to warn Lis and then get to Corvina. Luckily, I can see my sister's red hair running through the now overwhelming sea of people.

"Lis! LIS!" I yell while pushing people out of my way. "Where's Thatch? Did you take him back to Cordelia's cottage?"

"Yeah I did," She says, trying not to fall as the swarm of people continues to frenzy. "What is going on? I hear people yelling to ride to Kyrell?"

"Oberon sent out a small army in our direction. I was checking for more cast outs and I saw an iridescent light form around the wall. It was unlike anything I've ever seen before and then the next thing I know soldiers just began to march out of the kingdom. They're heading here, sister. They're heading to Berk and we must get everyone out." My sister nods.

"I will see you in Kyrell, brother. I'll lead our people home." She wraps her arms around my abdomen, and I kiss the top of

her head before turning and running towards Cordelia's cottage. I don't bother to knock as I push my way into the door. Cordelia jolts to a standing up position.

"Prince!" She bows her head slightly, her brows furrowed. "What is it? You look frazzled."

"I need you to pack some belongings. We have to go back to Kyrell immediately," I say breathlessly. Without hesitation, Cordelia grabs her woven satchel and begins to pack it full of vials of tinctures, bundles of dry herbs wrapped in parchment, and a handful of her crystals.

An icy tension fills the room and I look over at Thatch as his eyes go pitch black. His eerie voice sends chills down my spine as slick oil falls from his eyes. "The raven will emerge within their own darkness."

His eyes clear from the darkness that had just coated them, and search the two of us with streams of black staining his cheeks. With a voice that is once again his own, he whimpers "When will I be able to understand what they mean?"

"My sister is going to lead you all to Kyrell. I will follow. When you get to Kyrell, ask Lisbeth to introduce you to Macoy. She's a seer and she'll help you understand. She will train you to decipher your visions." I look at Cordelia. "Thatch can take Midnight and ride her. But can YOU ride with Corvina?" I look towards Corvina, my heart aches at the sight of her sleeping peacefully. My attention turns back to Cordelia as she shoves the last of her tinctures into her satchel and takes a sharp inhale.

"I.. I can try," Cordelia says shakingly as she closes her satchel.

"Trying isn't good enough, Cordelia. You either can or you can't," I say, more sternly than I mean to.

"Trying is the best I can offer, Prince. I haven't ridden in years. Let alone holding onto someone who's asleep and healing from an injury," She says with a choked sob.

“You take Thatch with you on your horse then. I’ll ride with Corvina and we will follow on Midnight when we can,” I say looking at her. This need I have to protect her is all consuming and I can’t take any chances with someone who’s unsure. Cordelia nods at me as she and Thatch move to depart the cottage to leave with the others. Thatch stops and walks back towards Corvina, placing a kiss on her forehead before turning and leaving the cottage with Cordelia. The yelling from outside the cottage breaks the emptiness within it.

“I will rip the head from anyone who threatens harm to you,” I whisper to her in the empty room, brushing a hair out of her face. The moonlight shines in through the window and illuminates Corvina’s porcelain skin.

I know what I have to do to keep her safe and I’m prepared to do whatever it takes to keep the danger from coming to her. I walk out of the cottage and see some of the townspeople have stayed behind to protect the village with me. My shoulders sag in relief that I won’t be fighting alone. I bow my head in appreciation as they stand in the town’s square waiting for my instruction.

“We do not let them step foot in Berk. No matter what, they do not make it in. Protect what is ours with all and any means necessary. Be prepared because there will be blood tonight, but we will ensure it’s not ours.” I command, my direwolf is begging to be let out of his cage as I search the crowd. I turn to face away from the people who are standing with me. I take off in the fastest run humanly possible before leaping and transforming midair, my clothes shredding and falling to the ground behind me.. I release a guttural snarl as I expose my sharp teeth, giving the soldiers warning that there will be death. The company is at a halt, I hear their command sound and they begin to charge forward with their swords in the air.

With a loud howl, my small army moves forward and I crash into the first of my victims. My yellow eyes glowing in the reflection of his as I bite him on the neck, pulling with so much

force his head rolls on the ground away from his body. With blood dripping from my teeth, I snarl at the other soldiers who surround me. I command my shadows to wrap around their necks. They fill the air as they escape from me like tendrils. I make eye contact with one soldier, and the fear in his eyes is palpable as my shadows constrict, the blood vessels in and around his eyes begin to pop, and the oxygen begins to leave his lungs. I can feel his heart rate slow through my shadows. These men threaten what is mine and I will stop at nothing to protect her. One by one the five soldiers who were once surrounding me drop in the same way as the soldier I am holding. I let out a growl of satisfaction when I investigate each of their hearts to find none beating.

Around me I hear swords clinking, people shouting, and bodies falling to the ground. Some soldiers are retreating while the bodies of other litter the ground as the battle settles around me. This battle was quick and bloody, but it's over for the time being. Now that we know they're able to escape the enchantment, I need to warn my mother of the war that I'm sure will be brought to Kyrell soon. I quickly retreat to behind the buildings to shift back into human form before going back to the people I have remaining.

"The battle is over, for now. We need to round up the bodies of the fallen and send them on their descent to the stars so they can rest with Senka. Afterwards, return to your cottages or ride to find your families. You can go as you please, as you always have been able to do in Berk. Once we get to Kyrell, we will begin to extend the village. I have hopes one day we will be able to return to Berk without threat, but for now I believe the safest place for everyone is Kyrell." My voice echoes as I command the people in front of me. We all begin the retreat towards the deceased that lie around the field. I notice the wild flowers that once covered the grassy area are trampled and covered with blood as I pick up the first of many soldiers. We take every soldier, both ours and Oberon's, to their resting place. Several

fire elementals stand along the sides of the site, forming balls of fire in their hands and lighting flame to the pyre.

We didn't lose many of our own, but every loss weighs heavy on my soul. Everyone stands there for a moment to watch the ceremony. Some of us are sending pleas to Senka to accept their loved one into her kingdom of stars, while others are bowing their heads in respect. One by one we all begin to turn and walk back towards Berk.

I enter the cottage to see Corvina is still sleeping, blissfully unaware of everything that was just happening outside the protective walls. I go into the bathroom to rinse the stench of blood and decay off my skin and mouth before putting on only sleeping trousers. I leave the bathroom and creep my way into the main room, sitting next to Corvina on the love seat. I let my head fall back onto the cushions and close my eyes, my body aches as my bones settle and begin to drift off into a restless sleep. I'd be no use to anyone right now without some rest. Shifting takes a lot out of me, both mentally and physically.

"Uh..." I feel a poke on my chest that causes me to jump, snarling by habit as I take a fighting stance. I look up to see Corvina sitting upright with a very confused look on her face. My gods she's beautiful. Her skin is porcelain, with long hair the color of a raven's wing framing her thin face. But her silver blue eyes and full rosy lips command all of my attention. We share eye contact that causes my stomach to drop as my mind trails off with wondering what her lips would feel like against mine. My body tightens and I shake my head as if the physical movement would erase the thought from my mind.

"Hello, Corvina. I am Prince Atticus of Kyrell." I extend my hand to her. She returns the gesture with a scrunch of her nose. "Your nephew rode to my home kingdom with the others and they'll wait for us there. We'll leave in the morning. So, rest up, little bird." Her eyes are full of both curiosity and concern, but she gives me a shallow nod. I smirk as I lay my head back down.

I awake to find Corvina in the kitchen. She's limping, but otherwise looks like she's healing. She's cooking, and it smells like bacon. I stretch before I stand and cross the threshold into the kitchen. There's an open satchel with breads, cheese, and fruit within on the countertop along with two canteens. I move towards one of the four chairs that surround the dining table.

"Good morning. How's your leg?" I put on my most charming smile and pull out a chair. She just looks at me, but doesn't say anything. I'm surprised at the gesture as she slides a plate of eggs and sausage on the wooden table, followed by the tossing of a metal fork.

"Eat so we can leave. I need to get to Thatch as soon as possible," She says flatly. The emotions on her face are unreadable, but I can feel anxiety that's radiating in her chest.

"We only have one horse left. So we'll have to share. Do you have everything you need packed into a satchel? Are the canteens full of water?" I say as I put egg into my mouth.

"I can manifest water, but yes the canteens are full. Hold on... I'm sorry. Did you say ONE HORSE? I don't want to ride with you." The last word comes out as a hiss, her eyebrow raised with her hand on her hip. My gods... I'm a goner.

"Yup. Only one horse. Everyone else fled last night, and all the horses went with them," I respond with a smirk, not looking up at her. She huffs out of the room and begins packing her satchel, mumbling something as she's banging around. I walk out the front door of the cottage and go around the back to find Midnight. I saddle her up then pull her reins to the front to find Corvina waiting with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face.

"This is going to be a long couple of days of travel if you are going to be mad at me the entire time." I smirk and let out a husky laugh.

"I'm not mad. I'm just not sure how I feel about you right now. You're sitting next to me as I wake up in a strange cottage and expect me to just... trust you?" I grab her hand tenderly,

pulling her closer to Midnight. I flex my hand as she drops hers from my grasp, my skin craving to touch hers again.

I place my hands on both sides of her ample waist before I say in her ear, “Oh little bird. I think, and hope, you’ll come to like me VERY much.” I lift her and help her onto the saddle. She scoffs and rolls her eyes in reply as I mount Midnight. My heartbeat quickens as I feel Cora’s body pressing against mine. I’m fighting the urge to run my fingers through her silky hair as her scent erupts in my senses.

Corvina remains silent as we ride for a short time before passing the lake. We hug the edge of the flowing water, leaving the lake and Berk behind us. It would take one full day to ride from Berk to Kyrell without stopping. Due to the river and mountain range, we would have to head closer to Ripam before crossing the river anyways, so we will stay there tonight. It will also allow Corvina to rest her leg and give us a place to sleep and eat.

“Are you going to stay silent the entire time we travel?” I smirk. “We won’t arrive in Ripam until later today, and Kyrell will be soon the day after that. It’s not a long ride, but you’re still healing and we’ll need to break often to allow you to stretch. There’s a stream that flows into this lake just up ahead. We can follow that to Ripam. We’re passing the tree line, so let’s stop for a moment and let you rest.”

She nods in agreement, but doesn’t say anything further as we dismount Midnight. My knees are shaky, so I know hers will be too. I carefully grab her waist and pull her off of Midnight. The sleeve of her dress rises enough for me to see a bruise in the shape of a large handprint on her arm. Without thinking, I grab on her wrist and pull her sleeve up.

“What is that? Who did this?” I growl. She responds by pulling her sleeve down and walking away. Anger festers inside of my chest. Anger for the people who hurt her in the meadow and now for whoever hurt her before she left the kingdom. I watch as she stomps in the opposite direction.

Corvina

My mind is spinning with the questions I have for him. *Atticus*. His amber eyes make me want to disclose every hidden truth. I want to run my fingers through his thick shoulder-length hair. The color is almost the same darkness as mine, but it has a bit of brown when the sunlight hits it just right. His hair meets the stubble along his angled jawline. I want to feel what that stubble feels like... no. I can't think like that. I don't even know him. But yet... I want to lose myself in him completely. His scent of sandalwood makes me feel like I'm home.

"Are you okay?" His question wakes me from my thoughts. I nod my head quickly as I walk past him. I'm jolted as he grabs onto my waist to hoist me on top of Midnight. He uses the stirrups to get up onto the saddle, and the warmth of his body sends a ripple of heat through me as he sits behind me. His calloused and rough hands gain my attention as he grabs ahold of the reins. My mind wonders once again, as I think about how his rough hands would feel around my breasts. How they would feel as they slid their way to my... *NO! Oh my gods. Why am I thinking this way?* I need something to distract me to rid my mind of these thoughts.

He breaks the silence as if feeling my need to break me from my thoughts. "I hope you know how highly Thatch thinks of you. I practically had to drag him out of the healer's house when you were being mended," He huffs a laugh. "He's going to be a very powerful seer with the right training. Macoy will train him well. You should be proud."

"Macoy?" I ask. I can feel the pride he feels for this person booming in my own chest.

"Yes. She is a good friend and part of my mother's high court in Kyrell. Between you and me, I don't like many people, but she's one of the ones I do like. At only twenty-four, she is one of the most powerful seers we've seen. But the ability is among the rarest, Thatch only making the third to be produced in this lifetime."

"What about everyone else in Kyrell?" Now I was curious. "What are their jobs?" He lets out a laugh.

"Whatever they want to do or whatever they decide. Nobody dictates their duties," he replies, with amusement in his tone. "What was your job in Elornia?"

"Well, because my sister and I were both elementals, we were expected to work in the garden. It was best suited for us because we can conjure the water for the plants," I respond. "But others who have a stronger affinity for earth work in the apothecaries, or if they had a strong affinity for fire they often work in forges. Then the somatics work in King Oberon's army. The mages and healers work within the castle and aren't seen often, if at all."

"So because of your abilities, you would be forced to work somewhere even if you didn't like it?" he asks. I shrug in return, unsure of what to say. I had never thought of it in that way.

I take in the view around us as we travel along the river. The river mirrors the sky above as it cascades down the hill, framed by rocks and boulders. We're passing through a lush meadow full of wildflowers and I can see the Forest of Senka on the opposite side of the river. This forest is the other of the two on our island.

Named after the goddess of stars and sky. Even before the rising of the wall, I've never been outside of Elornia. I didn't even know of the villages beyond the wall, let alone a second kingdom.

I feel Atticus tense as he lets out a snarl, pulling me away from my thoughts. A sense of protectiveness builds in my chest. I look around, but I don't see anything. He gets off Midnight, but keeps his hands on her reins, pulling her slowly back towards the river. The sun is almost gone now, making it hard for me to see what is causing him to become so on edge. In a movement so quick I hardly had time to register it, Atticus grabs me off of the horse and places me on the ground next to a boulder almost twice my size.

"I need you to stay here." His voice is thick and commanding. "Nobody will know you're here so you'll stay safe. Just don't move from behind this stone." I nod in response as he turns and runs in the opposite direction.

I hear cracking followed by a guttural snarl. I peak my head around the side of the boulder to see a wolf where Atticus once stood. Its paws are three times as large as my hands, and its thick black fur is as dark as the color of Atticus's hair. Greeting me with a scoff, he turns back to look at me with glowing amber eyes. Shock radiates through my body as I take him in. His head snaps back towards the forest, and two large men have emerged from the tree line. I jump back behind the boulder with my hand atop my heart. My chest is tight as I close my eyes and try to count my breaths to steady my racing heart.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

I sneak my head around to watch him again. The men are closer now, Atticus lowers his head and shows his elongated

teeth in warning. He moves in one fluid motion, leaning his weight onto his back leg and pushing off into a frenzied sprint. An echoing growl sounds as he jumps into the air. He knocks one of the men to the ground as I hear a scream. Unable to look away now, I see Atticus shaking his head back and forth. I continue to watch as he relieves the man of his head and tosses it aside. The other man begins to run away from Atticus, but he follows him and I lose sight of them as they run into the trees.

A short time passes and my stomach is flipping when I see the shadow of Atticus, in wolf form, sauntering back to me. His snout is covered in both mens' blood as he bows his head to me. He shakes his head back and forth and his fur begins to disappear, revealing his golden skin once again. The sounds of his bones cracking reverberate off the boulder as he shifts back into a man. I look him over as he begins to stand, his face and chest still covered in blood. My chin drops in realization that he is naked as I look over his thick body. Still on my knees, heat radiates up my neck and onto my cheeks as I stare at his cock longer than I should. He reaches out his hand and places it under my chin, closing my gaping mouth.

"It's rude to stare, little bird." He winks at me as he turns and steps into the water. My eyes follow him as I look over his backside and the dark inked markings that cover his shoulders and trail their way down his arms. His muscles tense as he enters the water. I can't pull my gaze away as I watch him bathe, the river water around him briefly turns crimson as he washes off the blood. I become highly aware of the heat now forming between my legs and he turns to me and smirks as if he is aware too. Atticus maintains my gaze as he walks out of the river and over to Midnight, and my cheeks heat. He begins going through one of the satchels and removes a pair of black trousers and gray tunic.

"Are you ready? We should be in Ripam before the moon gets too high." I just nod in response as he dresses. As I begin to put my foot in the stirrups, he puts his hand on my hips to help me

into the saddle. My body groans in protest as he removes his hand from my hip, craving the sensation of his grasp.

We follow the river along the edge of the forest. The archway that leads into the town is curved to a point, with plants that hug the stone. The dirt pathway leads us between a series of two-story buildings. In the center of a fork in the road, we came up to a building that had a rounded threshold with hundreds of candles lighting its windows.

“Stay close to me once we enter here. The sailors that come through the Garren port aren’t known for being gentlemen,” he says as he puts his hand on my lower back to usher me forward. Similarly to the tavern back in Elornia, the smell of stale ale and body odor is thick in the air. The images of Kane’s hands on me drift into my mind as I inhale the scent.

“Hi Tabitha, we need two rooms please.” He says to the middle-aged inn keeper. Her dark shoulder length hair is woven with gray strands.

“Hiya Prince. We only gots the one room tonight,” she answers as she spins the key ring around her pointer finger, smirking at me. He sighs in frustration, but takes the key. Tabitha gives me a quick wink as he turns around.

“Can you send up whatever is on the menu, please?” He says, looking over his shoulder. He turns and reaches for me, taking me by the hand and leading me up the stairs. My stomach flutters in response. We round the candle-lined staircase before getting up to the second floor, walking down to the end of the hallway. Atticus opens the door to our room. It’s a modest size room with a fireplace, opposite to a four poster bed and a small square table with two chairs. For one night, it’ll do.

“I’m going to take a bath.” My breasts brush up against his abdomen as I walk past him, making me realize how tall he really is. I quicken my pace and shut the door louder than I anticipated. My back pressed against the door, I let out an audible sigh.

I finish my bath and begin to dress in my chiffon night dress. The gown hangs freely, but hugs tightly on my hips. I pull my dark hair back into a loose braid. Atticus is sitting at the table when I walk out of the bathroom.

“They brought some stew and bread if you’re hungry,” he says pointing to the meal before him. I sit across from him and he slides the bowl to me. I mumble my appreciation. I look up from my bowl to find him staring at me.

His eyes darken, as his gaze trails over the swell of my breasts and ends when our eyes meet. We stay like that for a moment, as if to see who can break from this magnetic pull first. Atticus slowly stands from the table, releasing us both from the building tension, and excuses himself through the door to the bathing suite.

Once I finish my food, he places a tray with our dishes outside the room door. We walk to our sides of the bed, his being closest to the door, and pull the maroon quilt back. I sit down on the edge of the bed, my back facing Atticus, and sneak a peak over my shoulder. I’ve never shared a room with a man, much less a bed. I lay down on my side and pull the blanket up above my shoulders. I’m exhausted, but I don’t think I can fall asleep. I can’t get comfortable, so I flip over to my favored side. I let out a sigh and open my eyes, only to see that Atticus is facing me and our noses are almost touching.

“Is there a problem, little bird?” he asks. The scent of mint fills the air between us as he speaks.

“A problem? No,” I whisper in response. *No, there’s no problem. My entire life has just crashed down around me.* Panic begins to fill my chest. I have to remind myself to breathe as my stomach turns, bile pooling at the base of my throat. I remind myself to breathe. In through my nose, out through my mouth.

One. My eyes sting as tears threaten to escape them.

Two.

Three.

Four. I lower my head so he can't see.

Five.

“What is it, Cora?” His casual use of my familial nickname pulls at my heart. “I can feel your heart beating as if it were in my own chest.” The sound in his voice makes me want to bury my head into his chest and let the tears fall.

“I just worry for Thatch. I know what it was like to grow up without a mother or father and...” My chin begins to quake as the tears blur my vision, and my chest aches. As if Senka herself shares in my pain, lightning lights up the sky and rain begins to fall. Atticus wraps his arm around my abdomen and pulls me in tight, our bodies molding together. I want to pull away, but my entire body is screaming in protest begging me not to.

“Allow yourself to feel it, Cora. You won't begin to heal unless you feel it all.” The constant emptiness in my chest dulls as he pulls me closer. “After my father was murdered, I was so angry. I still am. But I let it consume me. It ate at me until I was numb and I became someone who I didn't recognize.” Something inside of me begs to comfort him. He places a hand under my chin, lifting my face up to look at him. “It's okay to be angry, little bird. Just don't let it make you numb.” He's holding my gaze, his eyes searching for something within mine. The warmth that begins to spread through my body takes me by surprise. He lets go of my chin, lowering it before pressing his lips to my forehead.

“Sleep, little bird,” he whispers. “We'll finish our travels tomorrow. You'll be with Thatch again soon.” He doesn't drop me from his embrace as we both fall into sleep.

I wake up alone in the bed, the sun's rays are peering through the curtains in the room. Atticus appears out of the bathroom threshold with nothing but a towel covering his lower half. My cheeks heat in response, and I lift the quilt over my mouth and

just slightly over my nose in hopes to hide my now reddened cheeks.

“Oh. You’re awake,” he says as he runs his fingers through his hair, pushing it back and out of his eyes. “We should leave soon. I brought up some oats for us if you’re hungry.” He points to the small table by the window. I nod in response, pushing the quilt off of me before walking across the room to sit at the table. The oats are thick and are flavored with brown sugar and blueberries. My favorite.

“I wasn’t sure how you took your oats and you were asleep when I went down to the kitchen so I added what I like in mine. If you don’t like that combination I can go back downstairs and get you a fresh bowl,” Atticus says as he goes back into the bathroom with his clothing.

“No. Brown sugar and blueberries are great. Thank you.” I bite my lower lip to stifle my smile as I splash a little milk inside the bowl. The way *he* likes them.

After I finish the bowl of oats, I go into the bathroom to change for the day. I didn’t pack a lot of clothing, but I packed one of my lightest dresses. It’s moss green, made of cotton, and one of the easiest dresses to travel in. Atticus is sitting on the edge of the bed, he looks up and his lip curves at the corner. We exchange a look and he stands and opens the door to the room. He motions for me to exit before following me down the stairs.

The sun reflects off the light-colored sand that makes up the pathways, making me squint my eyes. We follow a thin path to the stables behind the inn. From where we are, I can see the wooden ships at the port and their large sails, with different crests and various dyed colors for different kingdoms. Atticus is by my side when suddenly his finger brushes against mine, causing my breath to hitch as the touch breaks me away from my thoughts. As if he feels the same way, he quickens his pace and is no longer beside me. The accidental interaction leaves me with a lingering sensation, my skin screaming to feel his again.

The stable hand is brushing Midnight and looks towards Atticus upon his arrival. Something is said back and forth between the two of them before Atticus is handed the reins, but I'm not close enough to hear and I've never been good at reading lips. Atticus turns and guides Midnight in my direction, looking at the ground and rubbing the bridge of his nose before running his hand through his hair. I am suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to comfort him, as if I can sense his need for it.

"Is..." My voice comes out hoarse. I clear my throat before beginning my question again. "Is everything okay?"

"Not right now, but it will be eventually." He forces a small smile, but begins again when I raise an eyebrow. "The stable hand is a shifter, like me, and helps me with the collections from time to time. He said the gate to Elornia hasn't opened since the night they stormed Berk." He sighs.

"And you're worried?" I respond, pretending like I'm not feeling the stress seep out of him.

"Yes, little bird. I'm very worried. We need to hurry to Kyrell to warn my mother. I fear they may be plotting for a war. I need to get you to safety, so we must ride now."

"Atticus..." He looks down at me. "Why am I such a concern of yours? You don't even know me." I tilt my head in his direction. A feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me I know the answer, but I push it aside. I didn't realize he was so close, but he presses his hand on my lower back as he pulls me in closer to him.

"Cora, I will protect you until my last breath escapes me. There is no limit on what I would do..." He takes a deep breath as if to steady himself. "Or who I would kill... to protect you. You do not understand, yet. But you will when you're ready."

His response sends shivers of anticipation down my spine as his gaze falls to my now parted lips, as if he commanded them. He runs the pad of his thumb along my bottom lip and I feel myself lean into him, his eyes traveling back up to mine, he holds

his gaze there briefly. I have an overwhelming desire to know every truth his eyes hold. As if this moment is too intimate for him, he releases me from his grasp.

We mount Midnight and ride in the opposite direction we came. Atticus says there is a smaller section of the river up ahead that will be easier for us to cross while mounted. That small passage will lead us directly into the Forest of Senka, and once we pass through the forest, we will arrive in Kyrell. My heartbeat races knowing I'll be with Thatch again soon.

6

Corvina

I'm trying not to think about how close his mouth was to mine just moments ago, or to think about how warm his body feels against mine as he rides behind me. I clear my throat to break the rising tension that's been building between us for two days.

"Do you travel to Kyrell often? Or do you reside in Berk?" I slightly look over my shoulder as I ask.

"Primarily I live in Berk, with Lisbeth, to help with the collection, making sure everyone finds a home and gets settled, but I try to go to Kyrell as often as I can."

"What is this high court you spoke of earlier in our travels? I'm curious to know about it. If you don't mind."

"My mother is Queen Kasaia. In her high court she has a high seer, mage, healer, and an army commander. I sit in the counsel meetings when I'm in Kyrell since I'm heir to her throne."

"I used to spend a lot of time in the King's Atheneum, and I never could find anything about your family, and I had never even heard of Kyrell," I say as I pull at the skin around my fingernails. I really don't know why I always say the first thing that comes to mind when I'm anxious. "I tried to ask my sister, but she knew as much as I did."

“What exactly do you want to know? Just ask.” His voice is quiet, but demanding. I suck in a breath and reply.

“How did you guys get out? I never understood how you guys managed to escape with so many townspeople,” I say quickly, before I change my mind.

“My father. He sacrificed himself for us. My father was a somatic. He had no secondary power, but the love he had for my mother, my sister, and I was stronger than any ability. He got us all out through a passageway in the castle walls before he was overpowered by Oberon’s army. There were just too many of them. My mom felt every pain he felt as the army took his life. I had to pull her out of the castle because she was unable to walk.” My hand took on a mind of its own as my fingers laced themselves with his. He squeezed in return.

“I watched my sister fall to her knees and hold her chest when her husband was killed.” I sigh. “The scream she let out was heart wrenching. I didn’t understand why she couldn’t get up.”

“When I was older, my mother explained to me that you can feel your bound’s pain as if it were happening to you. She said mated pairs can feel one another’s emotions, and some can mind speak to one another as well,” He explains. “She never remarried after my father. My mother claims there is no love like that of the one your soul is bound to.” He tightens his grip on me just slightly. If I hadn’t been so aware of his hand on my hip, I may not have noticed the change in pressure.

“Are there a lot of people who can turn into animals, like you?” My voice is so low it’s almost a whisper.

“I wouldn’t say a lot. There’s variations in the ability, like all other abilities. I’m the only direwolf shifter, but my sister Lisbeth and a few others can shift into foxes of different breeds. There’s also a few bird and rodent shifters.” He lets out a deep breath while he adjusts his shoulders and neck. “Then there are the partial shifters who can’t shift completely due to it being a

secondary manifestation and can only take on aspects of their animals like their talons, wings, or horns.” I only nod in response.

Atticus slows as we near the edge of the river. The water splashes as it flows over the rocks within the river’s current. I can see the edge of the Forest of Senka shortly after we begin to cross, and our bodies rock as Midnight trots through the quick moving current. Almost as if it were his instinct to protect me, Atticus wraps his free arm around my stomach and pulls me into him. My heart sings its approval when he doesn’t remove his hand upon Midnight stepping out of the water and back onto the solid ground.

The Forest of Senka is nothing like the Nefeli Woods. Dense white fog covers the floor and engulfs us as we enter the line of trees. These trees are dark and barren of any color or life, the long gnarled trunks seem to curve at their tops as we continue down the path. The ground squishes under Midnight’s hooves as she walks through the forest floor, and I look up to the sky to find the sun is now covered by eerie clouds as fear fills my chest. I don’t know what lies on the other side of these woods, and it terrifies me.

The fog begins to lift as we near the edge of the forest. I can hear the waves of the ocean before I can see it. The smell of salty air rides in on the wind. Atticus squeezes his legs together to urge the mare’s pace. I am immediately in awe of the beauty of Kyrell. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this breathtaking sight before me.

“Here we are. My home of Kyrell, my mother established it as a safe haven for those who escaped Elornia.” He beams with pride.

The castle is tall and has many windows that cover the whitewash brick. The dark green tops of all the buildings are sloped into a point. We are near the steps of the courtyard and I see the golden hair that belongs to Thatch. Atticus brings

Midnight to a halt and I am jumping down before he gets a chance to help me. My knees wobble, my still-healing injury in my calf sends a sharp pain up to my thigh, but I power through it as I start running towards Thatch. I wrap my arms around his neck and let out a sob.

“Are you okay?” I say as I pull him back. I place his face in my hands as I look into his eyes. “Of course you’re okay. You’re here aren’t you?” I giggle before pulling him back into my embrace. The steps up to the castle are behind him and I open my eyes to see Queen Kasaia with four others falling behind her, two on each side. Queen Kasaia is more beautiful than I could have expected. Her skin is deep gold, and she has dark hair like Atticus. Her hair is partially pulled back, adorned with a beautiful gold crown with an intricate design of swirls. I think flames bedazzled with three large emeralds and clusters of smaller citrine gems.

“Hello. You must be Corvina,” she says as Atticus approaches to place a kiss on her cheek. I bow my head out of respect, and as she walks to me, she bows hers in return. “You are welcome to stay as long as you’d like, as is Thatch. Let me introduce you to my court,” she says as she slowly extends her hand, directing my attention behind her.

“This is Macoy, she is my high seer.” A young woman with curly snow white hair that frames her slender face comes to Queen Kasaia’s side.

“This is Reid, my high mage.” An older man comes forward. His salt and pepper hair is messy as it meets his white beard along his jaw. He falls onto the opposite side.

“This is Fallon, my army commander. Don’t let her size fool you, she’s one of the strongest I’ve ever seen.” She lets out a giggle as a petite girl with fair skin walks up. Her sandy blonde hair rests just below her ear. She goes to Macoy’s side.

“And I was told you know my high healer.” The woman is walking with her head down as I try to see her face. She removes

her hood and my knees buckle and threaten to give way as my mother appears before me, standing next to Reid.

“Mother!?” I’m not sure if I’m yelling or if it comes out as a whisper. My head is spinning, everything around me becomes blurry.

“Hello, Cora.” Tears form in her eyes. She embraces me with a hug, but I’m still as I keep my arms by my side. I make eye contact with Atticus from over her shoulder.

“You two must have a lot of catching up to do. We’ll be in the great hall when you’re finished. Cordelia, before anything else, will you show Corvina to her room?” Queen Kasaia says, her voice soft. My mother just nods in response. Atticus seems hesitant to leave, but his mother places her hand on his arm and urges him to follow. He looks over his shoulder at me before walking up the stairs to the entrance of the castle.

My mom takes my elbow as she walks me towards a garden on the backside of the castle. The ocean is so close I can almost touch it. Unlike Elornia, Kyrell sits further down on the land and is closer to the shore. It’s also not surrounded by any kind of wall or fencing. My mother and I walk through rows and rows of flowers. We stop at a section of the garden with a mixture of deep red and black dahlias. One holds my attention as I focus on how the color deepens closer to the middle as I try to steady my heart.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions, Cora.” My blood boils. “Ask whatever you want. I will answer you honestly.”

“Why.” Was the only thing that I could say. It didn’t even come out as a sentence, but more of a flat one worded demand. It’s the only question I have that I would want answered. She sucks in a deep breath.

“If you’re asking why I left, it was for your own protection. If you’re asking why I didn’t take you and your sister with me, I don’t have an answer for you,” she responds. “King Oberon is a terrible man. His army killed your father in the war, but that was

just the beginning of it. He massacred hundreds of people that had abilities he couldn't control. I knew you and your sister were elementals like your father and I, but he wanted healers and mages to work in the castle. To serve him. He would've locked me away in the castle to do his bidding."

"So you left to protect yourself. Did you even think about us? Did you want to come back?" She looks stunned as I reply harsher than I expected to.

"No. I left to protect you both. He would have tortured you and your sister to get me to bend at his will. Oberon was, and still is, a tyrant. Raine was of age to care for you and you were close to working age... and yes, of course I missed you and your sister everyday for the last 15 years. I thought I did the right thing to keep you both safe from Oberon's wrath." She sighs. "Months after your father passed and we established Berk, a shipwreck washed up along the cliffside. I felt called to the wreckage, so I went to see if anyone was alive or in need of healing. That's when I met Reid, the high mage you met earlier. I knew immediately he was the one my soul was bound for. His being in my life helped me not feel alone. I knew you and Raine had one another, but that didn't stop the ache in my heart."

"Raine and I did have one another. But we could have used a mother. I'm glad you found someone to keep you from being lonely, but that doesn't excuse abandoning us," I say as I turn to walk away.

I turn the corner of the castle. Anger rages within my veins, and as if it were its own entity, it begs to come out. I refuse to let the tears that are forming in my eyes fall. The onset of the tears just make me angrier because I don't want her to have any more of my tears. The feeling of emptiness takes over my chest as I think about Raine, missing her. My heartbeat speeds up as my chest tightens. The air around me is suddenly thick, making it hard to breathe as I'm trying to steady my nerves.

One.

Two. The tears begin to fall.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Lightning illuminates the dark sky as rain begins to cascade from the clouds. Atticus rounds the corner, panic furrowing his brow, my shoulders sag in relief as I see him. He says nothing as he takes me into his arms. We stand there in silence for a few moments, both of us getting drenched by the rain as we stay in this embrace. I'm not even sure why this is the most comforting thing to me, but his arms feel like being home.

“Will you show me to my chambers? I don't want to see my mother right now and I don't know where I'm going.” My shoulders sag with relief when he nods and places his hand on the small of my back, directing me up the stairs that lead to the castle.

The vast doors to the castle are open, almost like they're inviting everyone inside. The hall is lined with black and gray marble flooring and illuminated by sconces along the walls. The domed ceiling has a beautiful crystal chandelier hanging in the center. Atticus leads me up the grand marble staircase to a hallway. The corridor is long and lined with a deep forest green runner with gorgeous gold detailing along the edges. The walls are covered in tall windows that show the gardens and a perfect view of the ocean behind the castle. I'm lost in my own thoughts as I run directly into Atticus, who's stopped in front of double doors.

“I figured you'd like a room with a view,” he smirks as he opens both doors. I'm immediately in awe at the sheer size of the room. There's a large bay window with a view of nothing but the ocean. In front of the window is a small white table with two chairs and a vase of black dahlias, I'm assuming from the garden. The bed is bigger than any bed I've ever slept in before, covered in pillows and a sage green canopy that's held up by four posts at

the corners of the bed. Opposite of the bed is a large wooden dresser that matches the painted wood of the table and bed frame. The cream colored walls are decorated with framed sketches of various floral designs. Atticus walks across the room to a closed door beside the dresser.

“This is your private bath suite. I made sure to stock it with vanilla and lavender oil for you... I saw them in the bathing suite in Ripam.” He turns and looks at me, my heart skips at the mention of my favorite oils. “My mother put a variety of clothes in the dresser and armoire for you. We’re having a formal dinner later this evening, so an elegant dress would be most ideal, but dress how you are most comfortable. I have to go to the village we are establishing for the displaced Berk villagers, but I will see you at dinner.” Atticus glides his fingertip across my cheek to tuck a loose piece of hair behind my ear before kissing my forehead and exiting the room.

I go to the armoire to look through the dresses Queen Kasaia placed within it. There are dresses in shades of gray, black, and red. The one that really catches my eye is forest green, the only green dress within the armoire. The sweetheart design of the top is intricately decorated with delicate lace that runs down to the waistline. I run my fingers over the chiffon bottom. This dress is exquisite, and somehow it’s mine. Deciding it will be the dress I wear tonight, I take it out of the armoire and lay it on my bed, crossing the threshold into the bathing suite.

Atticus

I close the doors to her room and turn down the hallway. I would've stayed in the room with her for the remainder of the day if she asked, but I know she needs a moment to be alone to take in everything from the day. The feeling of anxiety that filled my chest when I found her near the garden, filled my blood with anger. Immediately, I wanted to protect her from anyone that presented her with harm. It only took me a moment after seeing her to realize the feelings were forming because of the conversation she and her mother were having.

I walk down the staircase to the main floor and go to the meeting chamber. My mother is sitting at the head of the long table, Macoy and Fallon to her left, with Cordelia and Reid to her right. Knowing Lisbeth, she is already at the makeshift village. My mom looks at her court and nods in their directions. They all stand up and leave the chamber.

"Nobody had to leave, mother. I was just coming in to discuss strategy with you and find out what needs to be done." I kiss her on the cheek.

"I know, my son. But you stayed behind at Berk longer this time. I've missed you." Her voice is smooth as she rests her hand on mine. "Fallon and most of the army are going down to the

village now. Luckily, Cordelia's services are not needed since you got everyone out of the village in time."

"I will be going with them. Is Lisbeth already down there? I didn't see her in the castle."

"You know your sister. She's been there the entire time." She lets out a small laugh before shifting topics. "How did Thatch and Corvina adjust to their accommodations?"

"Thatch is enjoying the kitchen with Melany. I'm assuming Cora is in the bath right now. I showed her accommodations and informed her of dinner. I think there will be a lot of tension between Cordelia and Corvina."

"Oh, I'd imagine. Cordelia's been my high healer for almost thirteen years and she never once mentioned her daughters. I could understand why Corvina would be upset and hold anger towards her mother." One of my mother's eyebrows raised, along with the corner of her mouth. "But, are we going to talk about the other thing?"

"I know exactly what you're talking about, and I don't want anything mentioned until Corvina recognizes the signs herself. She's not ready to see it, yet. There's too much confusion with the lies Oberon instilled into the citizens of Elornia about those of us who hold dark magic, and now everything with her mother." My tone sounds more agitated than I mean it to. "I'm going to head to the village to see what needs to be done and how I can help." She nods in return, knowing not to push the subject.

I exit the chamber, walk down the corridor, and into the front room of the castle. The sun is bright as I exit the castle doors. They're building a refuge for the displaced citizens behind the castle, so I walk through the gardens. My mother planted rows and rows of variations and shades of dahlias to honor my father. *They represent an everlasting bond* she told me when the first one bloomed. There are people working to set up frames for canvas shelters. I dodge a set of three kids as they weave around

the tents. I feel a hand lightly touch my shoulder, and turn to see Lis standing behind me.

“Brother! How was the travel?” Her smile is bright as she sets a basket of apples down on a table, food scattered across it. Her eyebrow raises and she looks just like our mother. “Mother said she met the girl from Elornia.”

“The travel was fine. We encountered some hostiles alongside the river in between Berk and Ripam, but I handled it.” I try to hide my smile as I answer her question about Corvina. “Mother was quick to tell you. Her name is Corvina. She’s Thatch’s aunt, the one who was injured in the forest.”

“Ah. I see. Just Thatch’s aunt?” She smirks. I’m already exhausted with how excited my mother and sister are.

“I’ll tell you as I told mother, Lis, don’t mention anything to Cora until she has cleared the lies Oberon spewed from her mind.” My voice is stern, but still kind. I can never be too hard with Lisbeth.

“I promise brother. I won’t say a word!” Her voice is almost a squeal as she responds. “Now, let’s get to work! Mother says we both must be present for dinner and I’m excited to meet Corvina.” She takes my hand and guides me into the camp.

Lis and I did what we could within the camp until the sun began to set and went into our rooms and to get ready for dinner. I dress in black slacks and a forest green shirt to represent Kyrell. My mother and her court established forest green with a gold phoenix as our kingdom’s emblem. *Green for balance and the phoenix for rebirth*, was their reasoning for their choice. I exit my bed chambers and begin the walk to the dining room.

I can hear the musicians playing their stringed instruments even before I open the double doors. The table is illuminated by the crystal chandeliers hanging above it, and decorated in a white linen and gold cutlery. There are at least a dozen other places set,

but I only see my mother, her high court, Lis, and Thatch occupying the dark wooden chairs. I take my place next to my mother, Lisbeth on the opposite side of the table seated next to Thatch, Cordelia, and Reid. The seat next to me is empty, I'm assuming it was saved for Corvina, and Fallon and Macoy are seated next to the empty spot.

The doors open and the air immediately leaves the room. Everyone's heads turn in the direction of where Corvina is now standing. Her hair is pinned back into a low braid with loose strands around her face. The forest green dress, the same color as my kingdom's emblem, makes her light eyes shine. Time seems to stand still as our eyes meet and all I can hear is the beating of my own heart.

Corvina mutters an apology for being late to dinner, but I can't take my eyes off of her as she rushes to her spot next to me. I move to pull her chair out from under the table, causing her cheeks to redden as I push her and her chair in before returning to my own. The table is soon filled with roasted chicken, assorted vegetables, and wild rice.

"Was everything in your suite to your liking, Corvina?" My mother breaks the silence, taking Corvina by surprise. She hurriedly finishes chewing her food before responding.

"Oh my word, yes. It was beyond anything I've ever experienced, Queen Kasaia. I'm so grateful," she responds, still trying to rid her mouth of the remainder of her last bite. "Though, I hope housing Thatch and I isn't a burden. I heard others talking about a camp behind the castle. We would be just..." My mother raises her hand, immediately quieting Corvina.

"Atticus and the others are working quickly to build a village for the displaced. If the castle had more rooms we would house everyone we could, but the people employed within the castle, my high court, and family already reside in the additional rooms within." My mother breathes out a sigh. "It's not safe for anyone to return to Berk until Oberon is off the throne."

“Well, I’d love to help if I’m able to in any way I can. I worked in the gardens of Elornia so that is probably where I will be best suited...”

“That would be great, Corvina. If that’s what you’d like to do.” My mother smiles in her direction, and once Corvina looks down to her plate, she winks at me. “Thatch, what about you darling? Is there anything I can get you?”

“No, thank you, Queen Kasaia. I think I’m okay for now.” He looks at my mother and smiles. My mother smiles, then returns to her dinner.

“So, Corvina,” my sister chirps. “What was your life in Elornia like? Did you have a lot of friends?”

“I didn’t have many. My sisters, Raine and Marigold, and the tavern’s bar hand, Lyle. We worked from sunrise to sunset for five days so it didn’t leave a lot of time. The sixth day I would stay home and read a book or bake with my sister.” She gives a weak smile. I can tell she misses her sisters. Her eyes glisten everytime she talks about them. Anger pulses through my blood, my inner wolf begging to get the revenge we both want.

“Brother, you should show Corvina our atheneum.” I feel the excitement radiate off of Corvina and into my own chest, calming down my wolf for the time being. “We have SO many wonderful reading options. We have scribes who came with us from Elornia who have written the history of the kingdoms, but there are also stories of fictitious kingdoms, fated souls, and majestic creatures to get lost in. Those are my favorite!”

“Mine too! Can we go in the morning?” Corvina practically leaps out of her dinner seat. She turns and looks at me eagerly.

“Of course, little bird. After breakfast I’ll show you where it’s located. I’ll even show you my secret reading nook.” I wink.

Slowly, the talking amongst everyone comes to an end.

“I think it’s time to retire for the evening,” she says as she gets up from her seat, and I follow. We walk through the double

doors and start up the stairs to the hallway of bedrooms. We walk in silence, but continue to quickly exchange looks at one another. We slow to a stop as we get to the front of Corvina's chambers.

She looks up at me through thick lashes. I brush her bottom lip with the pad of my thumb before sliding my hand behind her neck, intertwining my fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck.

I push her towards the wall, waiting to see if she'll protest. Instead she lifts herself on the tips of her toes. That's all the affirmation I need. I pick her up and wrap her legs around me. Our bodies are pressed together, her lips warm and soft as I crush her mouth with mine.

My tongue slips inside of her slightly parted lips, gentle at first but quickly becoming more demanding. The world around me seems to fade as she wraps her arms around my neck. My fingers remain entangled in her hair, a firm grip affirming my hold.

A deep moan escapes Corvina's throat, grinding her hips into my cock. Gods, I can't take much more of this. "You're going to ruin me in the best way, little bird." I break our kiss, resting my forehead on hers. Corvina unwraps her legs from around me and I lower her to the ground, already desperate for our bodies to be pressed together again.

"I think it's you who will ruin me." Her breathless reply makes me catch my breath as she disappears behind her bedroom doors, leaving me alone in the corridor.

I stalk the length of the hallway, turning to look back towards Corvina's chambers before entering my own.

I spent the night restless, tossing and turning. The sun has still yet to rise, but I push my way out of bed. The kiss between Corvina and I has been playing on a loop inside my mind. I exit my chambers and walk down the long hallway to the stairs. I can

smell the sausage and hotcakes before I near the dining room. Melany, the head of the kitchen, always has the breakfast spread out before the sun rises over the horizon. I open the doors to the dining room and the only person missing is Cordelia. Corvina moves a strand of hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. She gives me a coy smile before returning her attention to the conversation she's having with Fallon and Thatch. We all take our seats, still missing Cordelia, and begin to eat breakfast. Melany has placed hot cakes, scrambled eggs, sausage, and a variety of fruits on the table.

“Did you still want me to show you to the atheneum after breakfast?” I ask before shoveling a fork full of hotcake into my mouth.

“If it's not too much trouble, I'd really appreciate it. I'm still trying to find my way around the castle. Lisbeth was also telling me about a village dinner tonight. Lisbeth said there may be some music and dancing. Would you...” She clears her throat. “Would you want to come with me?” She's quiet as she looks down to watch herself pick at the skin around her nails. I place my hand on hers, if only to get her to stop causing herself harm, and nod my head in response.

I lead Corvina out of the dining room once we finish eating. Opposite the dining room, there's a long hallway that leads to the High Court meeting chamber and an assortment of other rooms. The door at the end of the hallway opens into the atheneum. The vast room is lined with floor to ceiling shelves, all filled with books. I take her hand and bring her through the wooden tables and chairs, to the end of the room. There's a winding staircase that leads to a small loft above a portion of the room. The loft is small, but illuminated by the sunshine coming in from the large window that occupies most of the wall. Lisbeth has added a day bed full of blankets and pillows in front of the window, with a view of the castle's courtyard. On either side of the window is more shelving. These are the shelves of stories written by romantics and adventurers.

“Up here you can read without being disturbed. Stay here as long as you like and read any book you desire. You can take any books to your room as well. I’ll be at your door right before sundown to walk with you to the village.” I place a kiss on her forehead before exiting the room and walking to the meeting chambers.

Atticus

I enter the chamber to find my mother and the entirety of her court are standing around the table. As I take my designated seat near my mother, everyone seems to be talking over one another. Fallon is suggesting we use every member of the villages over twenty years, while Cordelia is expressing the importance of having herbs to make healing tinctures and salves in the event of a war. Reid is telling Lis that we need as many mages as possible to help him with a defense casting around the forest and how important it is we learn to break the enchantment on the limestones of Elornia. Mother is standing with her hands crossed in front of her and I know she is listening to everything being discussed between her court. She clears her throat and the room goes silent, everyone going to their designated chairs and sitting down.

“I hear everyone’s concerns and suggestions. The safety of everyone under my rule is and always has been the highest priority. Fallon, I’d like you and Atticus to formulate battle strategy, both a planned and an emergency order. Go to the displaced village and see if there’s any volunteers who’d like to join our army. Reid, if you go to the displaced villagers and the citizens of Kyrell, we may be able to find a few mages to discuss the protection casting with. There aren’t many, but hopefully

there's a couple willing to assist. Cordelia, take all you need from the herb garden. We have plenty of herbs to spare. Macoy, take Thatch to the temple and start teaching him techniques for making sense of his visions. Seers are such a rare gift, and what he sees may help us." My mother looks around at her high court and smiles in dismissal. Everyone stands up from the table and leaves to do their duties.

Reid has worked with other mages in Kyrell, experimenting with different enchantments to try and recreate the one around Elornia. In the last few years he has sent letters to the other known kingdoms regarding the type of magic it must be, since we don't know the original mage who placed the enchantment. Every kingdom agrees the enchantment is tied to the limestone itself.

Before, there wasn't a reason to plan for a war or escape, but I can sense my mother's fear now that Oberon's army has the ability to lift the magic at their beck and call. Leaving the island of Avaron—leaving our kingdom of Kyrell—was never an option. My mother says it is still not up for discussion, for it is our home, but Fallon and I have letters ready at our disposal to ask the other kingdoms for sanctuary or assistance in a war.

When my mother and her high court created the kingdom, they wanted to ensure that every affinity was represented and had a place to practice their abilities. But her most important reason for building Kyrell was to give everyone a place they can feel safe. Safe to raise their children and have a life outside of fear and having your rights violated.

The training yard shares the cliffside with my mother's garden, but is larger and wraps along the opposite side of the castle. Fallon and I walk across the training yard. In the center of the courtyard there's a fenced off training arena. Not large, but enough to fit three pairs of guards for sparring practice. At the center of the buildings is a temple used for prayer and meditation. Fallon and I walk into the strategy room next to the temple. Along the wall of the room are racks to contain the

soldiers' swords when they are not on duty, and above the racks are hooks to hang quivers and bows. Inside the center of the room is a circular table with maps and parchments thrown atop it.

We stand around the table and shift through all of the parchments and maps. Avaron isn't a large landmass, but the two large forests and the mountain range may work towards our advantage and give us the element of surprise. We discuss the strategies that would work in the favor of our kingdom and throw out any that may be detrimental to our population. Our kingdom's first priority is and always will be the innocents. My own priority has now shifted to Corvina.

"Our best course of action would be to utilize the Nefeli Woods. We'll have to go in smaller groups and slowly build a camp on the north side of the forest, closest to the mountain range. Once our army is all there, we can ambush them." She taps her finger on her chin. "If the limestone is really what's holding up the shield.. What do you think would happen if we break the stone somehow?" Fallon lifts her eyes from the maps and her eyes meet mine.

"I'll have to discuss the idea with Reid and see what he thinks, maybe look it up in some of the bound parchments... but I think you may be on to something, Fal." She straightens as her eyes dart to the entrance behind me, instinctively I put my hand on my sheathed sword. The smile that forms on her lips causes me to relax. Her bound, Eiran, is also her second in command. He's a fire elemental, but he is a secondary somatic. He bows his head in my direction before returning a smile at Fallon. Taking that as my cue, I leave the strategy room.

I walk across the training yard and back towards the edge of the cliff. A feeling in the pit of my stomach calls me to seize movement. I feel her before I see her. My body pulls me in the direction of the garden, my heartbeat quickens in anticipation of seeing her. Her dark hair blows in the wind as she stands on the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean.

She doesn't turn around as she practically whispers, "I've loved the ocean since I was a girl, but I've never felt the sand in between my toes or the waves crashing against my ankles. I feel like it's an entirely new world I have been shielded from."

"Come with me," I command. She turns and looks at me with crossed arms and raises an eyebrow. I shake my head and smirk as I turn to walk along the cliffside. She follows behind me, jogging to catch up with me.

"You know you COULD say please every once in a while instead of just demanding I do things." Her brows are furrowed as she stomps next to me.

I lean down close to her and whisper. "Where's the fun in that, little bird? I love getting you hot and bothered." Redness spreads across her breasts and travels up to her cheeks. Everything about her draws me in. The need to kiss her. To touch her. To protect her. But I will never force anything on her, especially not a soul bound. So I'll remain patient for her to realize what we are for as long as she needs.

I keep my thoughts to myself as we walk through the Dahlia garden, and I watch as Corvina runs her fingertips across the tops of the flowers. The garden comes to an end as we meet an iron gate, some parts of it old and rusted by the moisture in the ocean air. The pathway that leads from the garden has now turned into dark sand. We walk through the threshold of the gate and onto the weathered stone steps that hug the curve of the cliffside, leading down to the shore.

As we near the end of the steps, she takes off the flats she was wearing and tosses them by the steps. I stay by the staircase as she walks to the crashing waves. She closes her eyes and leans her head back, releasing a sigh, as she digs and wiggles her toes into the sand. My body begs me to go to her, so I start to walk in her direction. The waves crash hard around her as the wind blows through her hair. She drops her head and turns to look at me over her shoulder.

“I can’t believe this is what I’ve been missing. I feel... I feel like I’m home,” she says in the most enthusiastic tone I’ve heard come from her yet.

“I can say I feel the same.” We both know I’m not talking about the ocean. For me, she is what’s been missing. She is home. I expect her to turn back to the water, but instead she adjusts her body to face me completely.

“In Ripam, you said I didn’t understand why you’re so protective over me. But I do understand. I just wanted... I needed to hear you say it. You haven’t, and I’ve just been waiting around. Then you kissed me in the corridor. I just... I don’t do mind games, Atticus. I won’t play cat and mouse with you. Either you want this or you don’t.” She huffs a laugh and shakes her head in frustration.

“I have been yours, little bird. There is no game between us. I have been waiting for the opportunity to make you mine, to show you the depth in which my love for you burns.” I slowly begin closing the gap between us, running my finger over her cheek as I push her hair out of her face.

I don’t know if it’s the weather or the intimacy at the moment, but she releases a shudder while goosebumps form along her soft skin. Her gaze shifts between my eyes and my lips. That is all the confirmation I need. I wrap my hands around her face and lean into her, stopping just before our lips meet. It is her who closes the gap between our mouths as she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me into her. This kiss is different from the one we shared last night. This one is a promise. A vow.

Our kiss deepens as an enormous wave crashes mercilessly against the sand. Quickly, I grab Corvina and move her away from the waves that break against the shoreline. She removes herself from my grip and walks towards the now chaotic tide. I reach for her hand, but come to a halt as I watch the ocean calm as she nears the water. Confusion creases my brow as the ocean becomes motionless, the wind still stirring around us.

A gust moves past Corvina, causing an unfamiliar scent to drift in my direction. I know the scent of an elemental, but this scent is more dense, not quite like the others I've come in contact with. As quickly as my thought forms, Corvina begins to walk out further towards the still water. I expect her to stop once she reaches the water's edge, but instead she keeps walking. Realization makes my knees buckle as I find her not sinking beneath the surface, but walking along the top of the water. It's obvious she's very powerful. We just don't know to what extent.

I lean my shoulder against the rocky face of the cliff to watch Corvina discover what abilities have awakened. We know from her garden work in Elornia she can manifest water, but now we also know she can manipulate it as well. My heart speeds up in response to the enjoyment that has spread across her face. This is probably the most carefree I've seen her.

I realize we've spent most of our day on the beach as the sun begins to set, casting an orange hue on the dark water. Corvina turns and begins to make her short walk back to the shoreline. Her clothes and hair are drenched by the water. My cock hardens as I look over the dress she wears clinging to her curves. I shift my body away from the cliffside to stand in front of her.

"The dinner at the village should be starting soon, if you still want to go? I can wait outside of your room while you get out of your wet clothes." She nods in confirmation. I gesture to the stairs, allowing her to go up first as I trail behind her.

Corvina

Once I'm in my room, I run to my armoire and choose a clean dress. I run my fingers over the different fabrics and types of dresses before choosing a dark gray cotton dress with a corset top. It's loose enough that I'll be able to dance freely. I quickly run a comb through my wet hair before tying it back into a braid, pulling out a few strands of hair to frame my face. I hang my wet dress on the side of the bathtub to let it dry so that it doesn't ruin, and hurry to the door of my room and take a deep breath before opening the door.

Atticus is standing against the wall across the way from my room. He looks up from where he was fidgeting with his fingernails and gives me a sly smirk. My stomach flips as I give him a quick smile before we turn and walk through the corridor. I remain silent, my brain is still reeling with the new level of my abilities and Atticus's confession. As if he senses my uncertainty, he reaches down and takes my hand in his. He rubs the pad of his thumb across the back of my hand as we walk down the stairs and out of the castle, and the gesture calms the stirring in my stomach.

The village is alive with music and laughter as we walk between the canvas covers. Lisbeth's hair is bouncing as she

dances with Thatch and two other teens, who I don't know. She spots us as we walk in, and waves happily in our direction with an infectious smile before she begins to make her way in our direction.

"My sister is going to come and try to convince me to dance," he says low, close enough to my ear that only I hear him. "I don't dance, but you should go with her and have a good time. I'll stay here and watch." He grabs the side of my head before pulling me in and kissing my temple.

"Corvina!" Lisbeth says drawing out the last two letters of my name. "I am so excited you guys are finally here! Please convince my brother to dance." Atticus gives her a dismissive hand gesture before winking at me.

"He already said he won't dance, but I'll come with you! It's been awhile." She doesn't give me a chance to change my mind, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the makeshift dance floor. I turn back to look at Atticus who just shrugs in response.

The music is being played on a couple of stringed instruments. The rhythm is upbeat and lively as I jump around and take turns swinging with Thatch and Lisbeth. A couple of songs pass. When the band begins to play their instruments, I notice the song is slower than the others. The dancing area quickly fills with couples of young and old who grasp each other's hands and sway back and forth. I make my way to follow Lisbeth and Thatch to the area where Atticus was sitting when suddenly I am swung around and being swayed by a man I don't know. I look to see if I can find Atticus, but he isn't with Lis and Thatch. Bile rises in my throat as my brain replays that last night with Kane.

"A pretty girl like you shouldn't be here alone." His breath is hot against my cheek. I try to fight his grasp on my hand, but he tightens his grip everytime I try.

"I'm not here alone and I don't really want to dance to you," I rasp in response. Looking around frantically for Atticus.

“I don’t see anyone here with...” His words are cut off and I see a dark misty tendril wrapped around his neck. Suddenly, Atticus emerges from the darkness behind him, towering over him.

“She’s mine, Archer. Next time a woman tells you they don’t want to dance... Let them go or it will be a problem. Got it?” The darkness in his eyes as he recalls his shadows from around Archer’s neck sends chills down my spine.

“Yes... I’m sorry Prince Atticus, I didn’t realize she was with you. I’m sorry, Princess,” Archer says with a shaky voice before turning and running in the opposite direction.

“I can take care of myself, you know.” I say as Atticus pulls me into him, resting one hand on my lower back and taking my hand in the other. “And I thought you don’t dance, Atticus.”

“I know you can take care of yourself, but sometimes it’s okay to let other people help. You can’t take care of everyone around you and leave so little energy for yourself. Let me share your burden where I can. As for dancing, I don’t dance.”

“If you don’t dance, what are we doing?” I motion to our bodies as they sway back and forth.

“We’re dancing, Corvina. Obviously.” He rolls his eyes dramatically, causing me to let out a laugh. “Your laugh is quickly becoming one of my favorite sounds. I can listen to it all day.”

“I don’t know why he called me princess though. That was sort of... odd,” I say, trying to change the subject to calm the fluttering my heart is now doing.

“I just publicly announced you as mine, Corvina. I imagine a lot more people will start addressing you as princess.” *Mine*. His voice echoes in my mind. He raises our combined hands and spins me around once before bringing my body back to his.

“Everyone seems so surprised at the idea of you with a woman,” I say, trying not to make the jealousy in my voice obvious. Which it absolutely is.

“I’ve never been with a woman, Corvina. So everyone is rightfully surprised.” I try to hide the shock in my eyes at his confession.

“You mean you’ve never been public with a woman before.” I raise an eyebrow, pulling myself back shortly to look up at him. He releases me from his embrace, grabbing my hand to pull me back towards our seats. “I’m surprised by you saying you’ve never been with a woman.” My voice is quiet, heat rising to my cheeks as I recall our kiss in the hallway.

“I’ve kissed, yes. I’ve also... enjoyed the company of women in other ways. But I’ve never had sex with anyone. The way my mother described the love she and my father had... I wanted that. I didn’t want something meaningless.” My heart feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest. Kane made fun of me for saying almost that same sentence.

“Me neither. I mean I’ve never slept with anyone. I wanted to wait for my soul bound... I guess that means I waited for you, Atticus. There was another... who tried to force his way, but was stopped.” Atticus lets out a low growl as he runs his fingers through his hair. He grabs my hand and pulls me off of my seat and out of the village.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he continues to pull me. We stop halfway into the garden and he turns to me. His eyes are darkened with desire. He grabs the sides of my face, tilting my head back.

“Say it,” He rasps.

“Say what?”

“That you’re mine.” His eyes are full of desperation as they shift back and forth between mine.

“Atticus, I’m yours.” He responds by picking me up and pushing me through the side of the garden, wrapping my legs around him as my back hits the castle walls. The sounds of the stringed instruments still linger in the air, but the world around me fades as he crushes his lips against mine.

“Mine,” he whispers against my lips before leaving kisses across my jaw, trailing them down my neck, stopping at the top of my collarbone. My fingers find their way into his hair as his lips return to mine. His hand trails up the back of my thigh, his fingertips brushing the edge of my underwear. A shudder involuntarily escapes me.

He drops his head in between my shoulder and jaw, placing me back on the ground and taking my hand. He’s quiet as he guides me through the courtyard and up the stairs that lead to the castle. The main room is dark and empty, with everyone in the village. We reach the door to my bedroom and he stops before opening it. He turns to me, lifting my chin so that my eyes meet his. We come to an unspoken agreement. An acknowledgment that this moment will change everything for us and there’s no going back. He runs his hand down my arm, stopping only as he grabs my hand.

“You are in control here. If you say stop, we stop.” I begin to tremble with the anticipation that is coursing through my body. He pulls me inside and shuts the door behind us. Still holding my hand, he pulls me towards the bed.

The room is illuminated by the light of three lanterns. He pulls my body closer to his, loosening the lacing of my corset as he trails his fingers up my spine. It’s too dim to see details, but bright enough to see the tightening of his jaw as he releases my breasts from the top of my dress. I lift his tunic up and over his head, dropping it to the ground next to us.

“Your body deserves to be worshiped, little bird.” Atticus slowly falls to his knees and pulls the dress the rest of the way down, letting it pool at my feet. He looks up at me, hunger filling his eyes as he runs his fingers along the top of my underwear and starts to pull them down. He lifts my left leg first, pulling the underwear off before switching and repeating the process to my right. As he stands, he runs his fingertips up the inner length of my calf, up to my thigh before briefly running them over my

center. A chill passes through my body causing my nipples to harden and goosebumps to cover my skin.

Atticus places a hand on each of my hips and leads me to sit on the edge of my bed. I lay down as his body covers mine alternating soft kisses and tiny nibbles along my neck and collarbone. He cups my breast, toying with my nipple before placing it into his mouth. I moan with the sensation of his teeth grazing against it. He releases my breasts from his mouth before dropping to his knees and spreading my legs.

“You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted to taste you.” His growl sends vibrations through my body as he settles his face in between my legs, his tongue begins stroking in long, slow licks. He slides a finger into my sex, moving rhythmically as his tongue mirrors the actions of his finger, my back arches against him with every stroke. My legs begin to quake as I shudder around his finger and Atticus lifts his head and looks up at me with a smirk.

He rises from his bent knees and lowers his hand down to his trousers, unbuttoning them and dropping them down to the floor with the rest of our discarded clothing. I stare at what I can see of his hard length in the dim light before he moves forward, spreading my legs further apart as he settles himself in between them. I welcome the weight of his body as it crushes mine. The sounds of our desperation fill the room as he kisses me, nibbling on my lower lip. I release a throaty moan. My body aching for his touch. “Remember, little bird. You say the word and we stop.” I nod in understanding. He lines himself up with my entrance, slowly easing his way into me.

“Fuck. You feel so good,” he hisses as he stretches me, sinking deeper. The burning sensation becomes a distant thought as my hips rotate to meet his slow thrusts. I grasp handfuls of the sheets, and Atticus places a hand on my waist to steady himself as he quickens his pace. A short deep moan escapes his throat as he pumps in and out of me, pushing himself deeper with each movement. My vision blurs as pressure builds in my core.

“Mine,” I moan into his ear, wrapping my arms around his neck. That is all it takes to push him over the edge. Stars blur my vision as his muscles tense, and his head drops onto my chest. He lets out a long groan as his cock pulses inside of me.

Atticus lays down next to me, pulling me close to his chest before he leans down and kisses me on the forehead. Running his fingers through my hair, I can hear the quick pace of his heartbeat thumping in my ear.

He shifts and slides off the bed before going into the bathroom. Seconds later, the sound of running water hums through the wall. Atticus comes back through the threshold, “Come with me, little bird.” I take his hand as he leads me into the bathing chamber.

Atticus steps into the tub and motions me to follow. I climb into the tub and sit in front of him, his legs on either side of my body. He runs a warm washcloth over my shoulders and upper back. I let out a small moan as the warmth of the water washes over my skin. Atticus places soft kisses along the tops of my shoulder, causing my stomach to do somersaults. As good as the kisses feel, I know my body isn’t ready for a second time. Fear creeps into my chest at the thought of disappointing Atticus. *Little bird, I will never be disappointed with you for setting your boundaries.* I hear his voice in my head, as clear as one of my own thoughts.

Atticus winks at me as he stands to get out of the tub, and I lean against the porcelain, still warm from his heat. I remain in the water with my thoughts as he leaves the bathroom. Hearing Atticus’s mind speak makes my mind wander back to my sister and Ardin. *Ardin.* My chest becomes heavy and sags in mourning. I close my eyes and allow myself to feel. *Just don’t let it make you numb.* The memory of Atticus’s words from outside of Ripam echo in my mind as I allow myself to feel the sorrow for the loss of my sister and Ardin. To feel anguish for Thatch losing both his mother and father at the same moment. My breath is shallow as the emptiness returns to its place in my chest. I refuse to allow

the darkness that hides in the corners of my mind to consume me, even as they beg to come out.

Come to bed. His voice floods my mind. I shake my head with a smirk and roll my eyes. *I heard that.* After I dry off my body, I saunter to my dresser and pull out a sleeping gown. Atticus is propped up on one of his elbows, and he pulls back the quilt and pats on the bed to signal me to lay down. As soon as my body meets the soft bed, he pulls me into his embrace. I nuzzle my head into his chest and breathe him in before we both drift off into a deep sleep.

Corvina

Atticus is already awake and starting his day by the time I get up and dressed. I braid my hair and pin it up into a loose updo. *I can't stop thinking of you.* Atticus's voice pours into my mind, startling me. *Well, you should stop and focus on your training.* I respond through our bond. I swear I can hear an echo of his laugh rattle in my thoughts. My doors close behind me as I walk down the corridor that leads to the staircase. I make it to the first floor before Queen Kasaia stops me just outside of the dining hall.

"Corvina! Good morning, darling." She pulls me into an embrace. Her hug is warm and inviting, pulling at invisible strings on my heart.

"Good morning, Queen Kasaia." I begin to bow, but she stops me.

"You're family, darling. You don't bow." Her casual use of the word makes me both uneasy and elated. "Come. Have breakfast with me." She places her hand on my upper back, guiding me to the dining hall. Melany has set out a spread of oats, different fruits, and sugars. I fill my porcelain bowl halfway with oats and add a splash of milk, a sprinkle of dark brown sugar, and a handful of fresh blueberries. A smile widens Queen Kasaia's face.

“That’s the way Atticus enjoys his as well.” She pauses. “So, Corvina. Atticus tells me your elemental magic has manifested a great deal. Have you had a chance to meet Eiran? He’s also a primary elemental, though his element is fire, elemental magic comes from the same place and manifests in similar ways. He would be an excellent teacher.”

“Eiran? No. I’m afraid I haven’t met him. But I can ask Atticus to introduce us today. Are there any books in the athenaeum for elemental magic? I’d love to understand more.”

“Yes, there should be. If you can’t find something, you can ask a scribe to assist you. They don’t get enough readers in there, so they’ll be excited.”

While we’re eating we discuss the garden, her plan for the future of Kyrell, and for just a moment we talk about her late husband, Berk. With a knowing smile, she talks about the love of your soul bound. She tells me of the power that soul bound love holds. In that short amount of time she talks about Berk I can almost feel how much she loves him. How much she misses him. My heart sinks at the thought of something happening to Atticus. With our upcoming war, nobody’s future is certain. *You can’t think like that, my love.* Atticus sends down our bond.

I really need to learn to shut him off.

After breakfast, I walk through the courtyard in front of the castle and find my way to the training yard. The rattling of the sword’s engagement fills the arena, echoing off the buildings all around. Atticus swings his sword and Fallon ducks, spinning her body before rising back up and clashing her sword against his. They repeat this movement before Fallon brings her sword point to his throat, signaling his defeat. Atticus raises his hands and bows to Fallon before they begin laughing, him bending slightly to wrap his arm around her shoulder. He lifts his head and his eyes light up when they land on me. I can feel my cheeks pinken slightly as he marches over to me.

He drops his sword to the ground before he places his hands around my hips and hoists me off the ground. Slowly, he brings me down so that my mouth hovers just slightly over his. Our breaths mingle in the air between us before he seals our mouths together with a tender kiss. Remembering Fallon is just feet away from us, I break our kiss and he lowers me to the floor. My knees are slightly loose and it takes me a second to steady myself before I walk over to Fallon. She bows her head slightly.

“Good morning, Princess. I imagine you caught the show of me defeating your bound.” Fallon gives Atticus a joking nudge to his chest. I shoot a quick glare at Atticus before returning my eyes to Fallon. “Oh, no. He did not tell me, Princess. Your scent changes slightly after you’ve solidified the bond,” Fallon says, and my face turns the deepest shade of red imaginable. *I had breakfast with your MOTHER, ATTICUS.* I shout inside his mind, causing his face to grimace.

“Oh,” I say in response, adjusting my shoulders, but I quickly find a way to change the subject. “Well, Queen Kasaia recommended I find Eiran to train with today. But I’m unsure of where to find him.” Fallon smiles slightly and is quiet for a second.

“He’ll be here in a second. He’s just getting the next sparring partners ready.” She taps on her temple with her pointer finger, winking at me, before walking away. I look at Atticus with a raised brow.

“They’re bound, love. Fallon and Eiran met in Ripam a few years ago and it was love at first sight. Eiran was here traveling with a company from another kingdom and Fallon was getting some supplies. Their paths crossed at the right moment and they’ve been together ever since.” As Atticus finishes his sentence, a man who’s almost as tall as Atticus comes out of the building. He has broad shoulders and sandy blonde hair, and a smile spreads across his face revealing two deep dimples.

“Princess.” He bows once he stands in front of me. *I’m never going to get used to that.* “Or do you prefer Corvina?”

“Corvina is great, thank you.” He nods.

“Fallon filled me in about your abilities strengthening. Congratulations! That’s awesome. I know you had elemental magic in Elornia, but abilities become so much stronger once you’re out of the castle walls. I can meet you in that building over there after dinner? I have a couple of other training obligations this afternoon.”

“That would be great, Eiran. I would really appreciate that.” He nods, bowing at both Atticus and I before leaving back into the strategy room.

“I dont think I’ll ever get used to everyone calling me princess. I’m not even actually a princess.” I laugh.

“Not yet, but you will be. Then eventually when my mother steps down, you and I will become the queen and king of Kyrell.” Atticus takes my hand in his. “But if you don’t want that, I’ll abdicate my throne and let it go to Lis.”

“No. No. I know how important Kyrell is to you and how hard your mother worked to establish Kyrell. I’ll.. I’ll rule with you. One day. Just not now or anytime soon.” Atticus and I maintain eye contact for a moment, before our concentration is broken by the sound of Lisbeth yelling.

“BROTHER! BROTHER!” She runs through the training yard and stops directly in front of us. She’s trying to catch her breath and talk at the same time. “Thatch... and... Macoy...” she huffs in between each word, the emptiness in my chest grows more void at the sound of my nephew’s name.

“What is going on, Lisbeth?” She just waves her hand to tell us to follow her, Atticus and I both take off running behind her. We run through the courtyard, up the stairs, and into the main room of the castle. Lisbeth quickly turns to go into the atheneum. Once we pass the threshold, I can hear my heartbeat ringing in my ears and my chest is heavy as my lungs try to fill themselves with air. We pass through the rows of books and tables before we get to the winding staircase that leads to the loft.

We practically skip every other step as we run up the swirling staircase until we get to Thatch and Macoy. Thatch has dark oil rolling down his face, his eyes still partially black. Macoy is rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“You had a vision. You both had a vision?” They both nod in response to my question. Macoy is the first to speak.

“We need to prepare for war faster. They’re coming for us.” Her voice is shaky and her chin wobbles, she’s trying to hold back tears.

Thatch looks up at me and I can see clear tears washing away the black on his face. His eyes meet mine as he opens his mouth to speak. He closes it, almost like he’s trying to find the words.

“My... my mom’s alive.” My knees buckle, Atticus catches me before I crash into the ground and my vision goes black.

I awaken in my bed, Lisbeth is sitting on the edge with her face in her hands. I put my hand on her shoulder, but I startle her and she jumps.

“Oh Cora! I’m so glad you’re awake.” She drapes her arms around me, my face being engulfed by her red hair. The bed dips as she pushes off of it and returns to her seat along the edge.

“I’m okay Lisbeth. What’s going on? Where’s Thatch?” I jump up as I remember Thatch’s words... *My mom’s alive.*

“They’ve all gone into the chamber room with my mother for a meeting. Atticus was very adamant on you staying in bed for a while after you awoke.” I throw the quilt off my body, opposite of the side she’s on.

“To hell with Atticus thinking he can decide what I do. Soul bound or not I will make up my own mind.” I open the door to my bedroom, Lisbeth trailing behind me. I get to the door of the meeting chamber and raise my hand to knock, but right before my knuckles are about to touch the door, it swings open. My breath hitches when I see Atticus standing there.

“You got here quicker than I thought you would, little bird.” He takes my raised hand in his fingertips, placing a soft kiss on my knuckles. He moves out of the threshold and allows Lisbeth and I to enter the room. Queen Kasaia is at the head of the table. Atticus sits in between her and an empty chair, he motions to me to come sit. Next to me is Lisbeth, and Thatch beside her. Across from us are two empty chairs followed by Fallon and Macoy.

“Thank you all for coming so quickly. Corvina, I hope you’re feeling all right after your fainting spell?” I nod in response. “We don’t know an exact moment as to when the war will begin, but it will begin. There will be an underground shelter for those who do not want to, or can’t, fight. Lisbeth and Corvina, there will be spaces for you below.”

“I don’t mean to cut you off, Queen Kasaia. But I intend on fighting. You heard Thatch’s vision. My sister is alive, and I plan on saving her and avenging my brother’s death.” *That’s my girl.* Atticus responds into my mind, sending a shiver down my spine. I look down as pink rises up to my face.

“I want to fight too, mother,” Lisbeth chimes in. Both Queen Kasaia and Atticus beam with pride.

“Okay... Well, Fallon you have two new trainees to add to the roster. Everyone, get ready. We don’t have the size they have, but our magic is stronger. It’s time to begin training, we will meet here again tomorrow after breakfast.”

Queen Kasaia motions to Atticus and I to stay behind. We watch as everyone files out of the chamber, and Queen Kasaia follows them and shuts the door behind them. Thatch turns to meet my gaze and I watch him through the crack as the door closes. The emptiness in my chest screams out in need to wrap him in my embrace and promise we’ll get Raine back. Doubt washes over my body, I try to quiet it, but it’s slowly drowning me. Atticus places his hand on mine, I look up to meet his gaze and remember I am safe. I am home.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to get her back to you, little bird.” His voice is a thick whisper. Queen Kasaia clears her throat, directing our attention to her.

“Corvina, I know your sister is the most important person in your life. I am relieved to hear she is alive. I’m going to be frank with you.” She folds her hands on the top of the table before inhaling deeply. “Oberon enjoys to torture. I’ve known him my entire life. I know the darkest parts of his soul. Oberon is my half brother. My mother was not my father’s soul bound. They were forced to marry to tie together the kingdoms. My mother was from an affluent family and it made sense. I was born first, making me the rightful heir to the throne. My father found his soul bound and brought her to live within the castle walls as his mistress. Oberon was born when I was just two. He was a cold and hurtful child. My father favored him, but when I became of age I was put on the throne. Oberon was so angry with my father, he murdered my parents in their bed chamber.”

The pain radiates from Queen Kasaia’s eyes as tears threaten to fall from the bottom lid. Atticus reaches his hand out to his mother, placing it on hers and lightly squeezing it. The moment between them is tender and caring. I only hope that one day the love between me and any children I have is like this. Queen Kasaia continues.

“He escaped prosecution and left Elornia. By the time he returned, I had met Berk and we ruled for some time before we had Atticus and then Lisbeth. He stormed the city and killed so many innocents. There was so much bloodshed. Berk got the kids and I out of the castle quickly, and I met up with dozens of other families. We established camp along the way, but it wasn’t until we built Kyrell I felt like I could stop looking over my shoulder. I just... I want you to be prepared for any state we find your sister in. She is alive physically, but we don’t know what he did to her spirit. Especially with the death of her soul bound. But we will stop at nothing to rescue her, Corvina.”

Atticus

I can feel the relief ease into Cora's chest when my mother promises the rescue of Raine, but then she starts plotting ways to get her sister out of the hands of Oberon and his army. Our first step in the rescue plan is to locate Raine within the castle walls. Corvina and I stay in the chamber room after my mother leaves, knowing she needs a moment to collect her thoughts.

"Do you want to talk about it, little bird?" I say to break the silence, placing my hand on the small of her back for reassurance. Her anguish causes a desire to build within my veins to do anything to rid her of that emotion. My inner wolf begs to come out, to rip the throats of everyone who threatens harm to her. My shadows follow his lead and spiral out of me in thick black mist. I know I need to go to the strategy room to make a plan with Fallon, but I don't want to leave her like this.

"I'm fine, Atticus. I don't need you to hover over me." Her tone is dry, the hollowness in her chest radiates through me as if it were my own.

"I know you don't, love. I want to help you. You can't let this emptiness consume you. Your sister is alive and we will get her out." I promise. She looks up at me through tear filled eyes before crashing her face into my chest. Her shoulders begin to shake as

the tears become streams on her porcelain cheeks, my shirt soaking in the process. I run my fingers through her hair in reassurance, letting her know she no longer has to face anything alone.

She releases herself from my embrace, smoothing her onyx gown in the process. The skin around her eyes is red and puffy, but my gods if she isn't the most beautiful person I've ever seen. I know she hears my thought as the red sweeps across her cheeks.

The only sound between us is the sound of our footsteps on the marble floor before we exit the castle. There's a slight chill in the air as the wind bounces off the ocean and blows through Kyrell. I intertwine my fingers in Corvina's hand as we walk through the courtyard and towards the training area.

Fallon is watching her sparring teams with crossed arms and a scowl plastered on her face. I know she is feeling the pressure and the uneasiness that comes with battle, but especially with the anticipation of war. Kyrell has only faced the occasional poachers that stumble in from Ripam, but never an all out battle, and I know this will go down in history as the Second War. She looks across the yard and yells for the sparring teams to continue as she walks over to me.

"Atticus, whenever you're ready, we can discuss a more immediate strategy method. Macoy is in the strategy room with Thatch, and she's ready to talk about everything she saw so we can discuss the best way to go forward. Corvina, Eiran is in the strategy room as well. He's waiting for you so you guys can train. If you're as powerful as Atticus says, we can definitely use your magic." Corvina looks at me with relief in her eyes at the use of her name. *I told Fallon that you preferred your name over the title of Princess.* She squeezes my hand in appreciation as we walk through the slick mud and walk into the strategy room. Corvina lets go of my hand to sit with Thatch and Macoy on the opposite side of the rounded table. Fallon, Eiran, and I remain standing as we listen to Macoy begin describing her vision.

“The vision began just as any of my other ones do. But this one was... more. I looked around and I was inside the forest, but I was laying down. I could feel the pain shooting through my muscles and when I looked down at my hands, they were sticky and covered in dark blood.” She takes a shaky breath. “My senses were overwhelmed with the sounds of people screaming out in pain and the smell of burning flesh around me. The last thing I saw when I came out of my vision was a soldier in armor with the crest of Oberon, swinging his sword down on me.” Everyone in the room remains quiet for a moment. Macoy looks at Thatch and shakes her head before he begins to speak.

“My vision was different. I think the timing was different than Macoy’s because I don’t think the war had started yet. I was seeing through Oberon’s eyes. He was hovering over my mother as she was kneeling in a dark room, the stale scent of mold filled my nostrils.” He takes a shaky breath and Corvina places her hand on his, encouraging him to go on while also giving him an approval to stop. Thatch takes a sharp inhale and begins again. “I was telling her that nobody escapes Elornia and that I will get my revenge on those who eluded my capture, that she was going to lead my army to them. My mother’s body was shaking and sweat beaded across her forehead. I saw cuts and bruises along her chest and arms, but I think she has an infection. I don’t know how much longer she will survive there.” He looks at Corvina with pleading eyes.

“We will do whatever we can to save your mother, Thatch,” I say before he and Corvina both turn to me, their eyes swimming with appreciation and hope. I excuse Macoy and Thatch so they can go back to the castle. Eiran and Corvina take their leave to go down to the oceanside to establish a baseline for Corvina’s magic and to determine where she would be most useful in battle.

Based on Macoy’s vision, we know that the battle will most likely be on the edge of the woods, but our goal is to push it as far away from Kyrell as possible. The river would play in our advantage since Corvina would feed her magic by the water that flows through it. Fallon and I agree to do our best to push the

battle to the Nefeli Woods rather than the Forest of Senka, but to try to keep it away from Ripam if possible.

We will not likely have the element of surprise as I originally had hoped, but now our priority is to keep the citizens of Kyrell safe and away from the battle. Fallon devises a strategy of multiple designated companies with soldiers of varying abilities and levels of power. Macoy insists on joining the fight, but Corvina has asked Thatch to stay behind. *I can't lose you*, she begged. Fallon, Eiran, and I will lead different companies and will be in various locations along the forest's edge. Corvina and I will be separated, she will be under Eiran's command. I don't like the idea of us being separated, I hate it actually, but it's for the safety of Kyrell and our people.

We break off in our respective companies. Our army as a whole isn't nearly as large as Oberon's, so we're relying on our varying forms of magic. There's two other shifters in my company; one is a falcon and the other is a fox. We have a few somatics, a mage, a couple elementals, and an abstract.

The abstract, Neera, is the only abstract we have in Kyrell, and one of the only abstracts on the island. Her ability is that she can manipulate your actions by hijacking your mind. She's ridiculously strong and one of the best warriors we have. My mother asked her to be in the high court, but she declined, and my mother respected her answer. Her yellow blonde hair that falls in ringlets that she pulls back into a half braid. Her slanted cheekbones are always adorned with red powder standing out against her pale skin. She is quiet, but hasn't ever given us any issues.

The Mage is Elion, tall with broad shoulders and long straight brown hair. Elion is primarily a mage, but has a secondary ability to conjure fire from air in the palms of his hands.

I place my company in sparring partners. The somatics are already in the army, so they know what to expect from training. The other members, however, have only ever trained in their own abilities. I partner each of the somatics up with someone of different abilities so that there's six partnerships in total. I watch over each of them, adjusting their footing and how they're holding their swords.

Since Oberon's mages know how to manipulate abilities, I explain to them the importance of relying on something physical like a sword or the bow and arrow. I keep a watch on Elion and the somatic he's sparring with. Elion dodges the blade with such smoothness, it's hard to look away as he practically dances with his partner. He ducks, the blade making an audible *swoosh* in the air, before he stands and lifts the tip of his sword to his partner's throat.

Neera has taken to the bow and arrow. I take her sparring partner while she practices with the target on the far side of the training yard. He's fast, but not fast enough. He's the largest of the members within my company and one of the biggest in the entire kingdom's army. His largeness does nothing for his speed. If anything, it inhibits it.

We continue training well after the sun sets over the horizon, the moon now high in the sky. I release everyone from practice after informing them we will meet at the training arena at sunrise. There are a few grunts, but overall there are mostly nods of agreement. Everyone leaves to their dormitories or the makeshift village. I can feel the stickiness of the sweat from the day coating my skin. I use a cloth to wipe the sweat from my brow before turning to walk towards the castle.

I quietly open the door to the room that I now share with Corvina, a recent development in our new normalcy. We are busy with the new training regime, sometimes nighttime is the only time we have together. I can see her dark hair swallowing the light blue pillow as I walk by her and into the bath suite. I quickly wash off the grime and dirt from my skin, the water

momentarily turning black. Once I'm finished, I get a pair of loose bottoms and crawl into bed with her. I slide my arm underneath her shoulders and pull her into me, the scent of vanilla and lavender engulfs me. I lay there and stir until I finally fall into a restless sleep.

Atticus

When I awake, all I find is a note from Corvina. *I've gone to meet Fallon for training. Thinking of you, always.* The sun is still below the horizon as I rise from the bed to dress in my training attire, which consists of a black tunic and black trousers. I slide my sheath around my waist and tighten the buckle before sliding my sword into it. My sword is simple, but one of my most prized possessions. Mother had it forged for me the day my manifestation happened. The black leather hilt is adorned with a black wolf on its pommel, the blade itself is made of damascus steel.

I walk down the staircase and into the dining hall, where my mother and Lisbeth are sitting at the head of the table. I kiss my sister on her temple, followed by my mother on the top of her head. Besides Corvina, they are the two most important people in my life, and I will stop at nothing to protect them.

“Why aren’t you out there training?” I ask Lisbeth.

“Why aren’t you?” Her snarky return brings a quick smirk to my lips.

“Touche, little sis. I’m just grabbing a quick bite before I go out there. I missed dinner last night and I was so exhausted I just crashed.” I take a bite out of a bright green apple. The apple is

crisp, the tartness biting my tongue. My mother watches me with a guarded gaze. I give her a small smile of reassurance, but I know it does little to calm the nerves that rattle through her body. I throw eggs, sausage, and fried potatoes inside of a flatbread and roll it up before taking a bite. I nod to my mother, she blows me a kiss as Lisbeth gets up to walk out of the castle with me.

As we walk, we use the time to catch up on the strategies and training we've been doing. Lisbeth has spent her spare time finishing the establishment of the new village. It was being built quickly due to the amount of help they were able to receive. Unfortunately, most of the help is now going to the upcoming battle, so the building has slowed. This makes Lisbeth sorrowful, but she understands there will be no village at all if we don't protect our kingdom. Once we get to the training yard, we separate and go to our companies.

The three of us decided that Lisbeth, Corvina, and I would be separated during battle in the event of multiple deaths. That way the succession of the throne continues within our family. Corvina and I are next in line for the throne. Since we are soul bound, and soul bound bond is higher than marriage, she will be able to claim the throne if something happens to me before we wed.

Neera is already shooting arrows into the target when I round the corner into our section of the yard, hitting the center of her target almost every time. The other members of the company are with their sparring partners already, but the somatic I was with yesterday isn't in the yard. I head into the strategy room and find him talking to Fallon, who bows in acknowledgment when she sees me into the room.

"Prince Atticus," She says sternly. She only uses my title when we are in the presence of individuals outside of the family or the high court. "Esra had a good idea for a night training, if you want to hear it."

I nod before he begins to speak. His thick voice echoes in the quiet strategy room. “I thought it may be helpful if we had intel on the forests in the night. I was thinking I could go and monitor them tonight. I won’t go past the river, but it may be helpful to have information on how they operate at night or if they operate at night.”

“I like that idea.” I look towards Fallon. “Let’s devise a group of four, a mix from all three companies, who would be helpful to have during this intel operation. I will go, Corvina and Lisbeth are not an option. Esra, since it was your plan you come too. So we need two more to go.”

After some deliberating between the three of us, we decided Neera and another somatic, Sander, would come with us. So I send Esra, Neera, and Sander to their homes to rest for a long night. While I decide to steal some moments with Corvina. I ask Melany to prepare a dinner in our chambers, separate from everyone else. I walk up the stairs and into our chambers. I place lit candles along the mantle of the fireplace, the bedside tables, and the small dining table. I have a quick thought of placing candles around the bathing suite, but the thought disappears as I hear the door to our chambers open.

Corvina walks through the door, exhaustion causing her face to sag. She smiles weakly when she looks up in my direction. She lets out a long, deep sigh as she rubs the bridge of her nose. “Oh, Atticus!” She exclaims, placing her hand on her chest, as she notices the scattered candles, the dinner of roasted root vegetables, and the baked chicken on the table. She drifts across the room and sits at the table set for two, only sitting for a moment before placing food on her plate. She lets out a throaty *hmm* as she takes a gulp of the white wine I had brought up for dinner. I sit across from her and place food on my plate.

In between bites, we talk about how training has been going. Corvina tells me all about her combat training the first half of the day with Fallon and then going to Eiran to do elemental strengthening the second half. The happiness radiates off her as

she describes the sensation when she manipulates water, which I've learned is her favorite thing to do. Her hands are flying in the air as she describes the dance-like movements of the water when she calls to it.

"I think I can be a wonderful asset to the upcoming battle," she beams.

"I know you will be, little bird," I reply before taking another piece of roasted carrot into my mouth, smirking as I chew. "Speaking of the upcoming battle, I'm leading a night operation and will be gone until morning. We will leave when the sun begins to disappear under the horizon."

"Who else will be going with you?" she asks with a hint of concern lingering in her voice.

"Esra, Neera, and Sander. It's a good team. We'll be safe and have all the necessary protocols in place." I can see the relief wash over her when her shoulders fall slightly. We finish our dinner and say our goodbyes for the night. Corvina stands on the tips of her toes to drape her arms around my neck, her scent enticing me to stay as she brings her lips up to meet mine. I break our kiss after a moment, exiting the chambers. I walk down the dim corridor and towards the staircase. *Be safe.* Corvina says into my mind. *Always.*

I meet the other members at the edge of the forest we had agreed upon, everyone already there when I arrive. The three of them slightly bow in my direction, waiting for instruction.

"Stay on the northern side of the river. We're just going to scope out the area, no war or injuries tonight." They nod and we get into formation.

I lead us into the forest, Esra and Neera hang back on my left and Sander trails us on the right. The fog is dense, hiding the forest floor, and the sound of leaves rustling echoes around us as the ravens take flight off the gnarled branches, the sounds of their wings filling the gloomy sky. We stay spanned out as we walk through the forest and we make our way through the thick

mud towards the opposite tree line. The river is visible once we near the edge of the forest, the moon reflects on the water as the current sends gentle ripples through it. The moon's reflection on the water reminds me of the silver blue hue of Corvina's eyes. As if she feels my mind wander to her, her voice fills my mind. *I'm doing a 'girls night' with Lisbeth and Fallon.* I can practically see her raised eyebrow. *Have fun with that.* I reply as her anxiety sits in my chest, making it hard to catch my breath. *Calm down. Take a deep breath.* I tell her, the uneasiness slowly begins to lift. *Another one, little bird. Keep breathing.* The heaviness in my chest lightens and my breaths begin to deepen and release with more ease. *Good girl. Now go have fun.* I know she's struggling with the guilt that her sister is alive and being held prisoner by Oberon. She feels immense guilt whenever she does anything that resembles living, she begins to shut down as the heaviness in her chest takes over.

Neera, Esra, Sander, and I walk along the edge of the river just outside the forest of Sekna. In the far distance, we can see the gate of Elornia; however, I know I'd see it clearer in wolf form. "I'm going to shift. I won't be able to speak to you, but I will be able to understand you and I will nod my responses," I say to them.

Everyone has seen me in shifted form from afar, but it's different up close. I walk out of their view and remove my clothing, folding my pants and then my tunic. The sounds of my body breaking, bones groaning and snapping vibrate against the large tree trunks.

I walk along the river and back to the group, nodding and making eye contact with each of them as we form a circle. We all walk along the river's edge, but never cross the river. We break into predetermined pairs, Sander and I go west and Neera and Esra go east. I can see the very distant glow of fires along the top of Elornia's gate as we stalk the river's edge.

Once Sander and I get nearer to Ripam, the silhouette of Elornia fades away behind the trees in the Nefeli Woods. While

we are out on this patrol, finding routes and potential stopping points for the companies we will be sending out is important. Fallon and I agreed that sending out smaller companies would be the best course of action so that we don't draw attention to ourselves in a larger one. Looking towards the Nefeli Woods it becomes apparent that we would have an advantage if we hug the edge of the cliff and pass through Ripam and go into the Nefeli Woods. Reid and the other mages are working tirelessly to not only be able to put a boundary enchantment on Kyrell, but also to be able to break the one on Elornia.

Sander is in front of me, his hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword. He's scanning the woods on the other side of the river with a creased brow.

"I'm always jealous of how lush the trees in the woods are." Sander says, relaxing his brows. I look over to the Nefeli Woods and let out a huff in agreement. It's not common knowledge, but Reid placed an enchantment on the Forest of Senka years ago to make it seem unfriendly. The dense white fog, gnarled branches, and colorless forest are there on purpose to keep people out. Other than the occasional poacher from Ripam it's done the job at keeping people away.

I hear a whistle breeze past my ear, I turn to look up at Sander only to see an arrow protruding from between his eyes and blood sliding down the bridge of his nose. He falls to his knees unsteadily before falling face first in the mud. I snarl and turn to look along the river and find whoever shot the damn arrows. I see nobody along the river, so I turn my sights to both of the wooded areas on either side of the river.

Suddenly, a sharp hot pain seers through my shoulder. Pain starts to radiate through my bones, my body shifting back to my human form. I'm writhing in pain, my shoulder is not only in pain but it's *burning*.

Corvina

Lisbeth has one of the staff come and collect me from my chambers shortly after Atticus left. I am promised apple pie and cold cream if I come. My chest is heavy at the thought of what my sister was enduring while I was having a night enjoying the company of my bound's sister and closest friend. I feel sick. *Just keep breathing.* Atticus fills my mind. I can finally understand how my sister felt with Ardin, the love she felt. I can't imagine the pain she's in, both emotionally and physically.

I arrive at Lisbeth's chambers and knock on the door. When Lisbeth opens it, I can see Fallon sitting on the bed with her legs crossed. Her room is exactly as I would think it should be. The wood in her room is a warm cedar and the room is full of accents of gold and forest green.

"Corvina! I am so happy you came!" She brings me in for a tight embrace, shutting the door as soon as she releases me. Fallon waves at me with a slight smile.

"I promise I'm fun when it's not during training hours." Her cheeks turn a shade of pink I've never seen on her angled cheek bones.

Besides Raine and Marigold, I've never really spent time with anyone who I could potentially build a friendship with, so this

experience is new to me. The emptiness threatens to return, but I try to push it down.

One.

Two. *Just keep breathing.*

Three.

Four. *Don't let it make you numb.*

Five.

Lisbeth pulls me towards the bed and pats down next to her, inviting me to sit. The bed sinks under the weight of my body as I scoot onto the silky top sheet. I look up to Fallon and Lisbeth, meeting both of their eyes. The emptiness in my chest is gone for the time being, but I know it will be back. It always comes back. The room is silent for a moment, Lisbeth clears her throat and begins talking.

“So... How are you liking it here in Kyrell?” Her voice is cheerful and soft.

“I like it a lot. Your kingdom’s athenaeum is absolutely stunning. Atticus showed me the loft up on the second floor and I think I’d spend every day up there if I could! And your mother’s garden is gorgeous. I love to go out there for sunsets and just watch the ocean.” I smile at Lisbeth.

“I’m so glad you’re enjoying it! Will you be staying if they are able to liberate Elornia?” Her eyebrow raises as she concludes her sentence.

“Uhm. Well, I’m not sure. Atticus is next in line for the throne and I know how much Kyrell means to him, so I’d never ask him to abdicate. So if he’s here... I am too.” I shrug my shoulders. Lisbeth lets out a loud squeal and falls back into her pillows, clutching a smaller one to her chest. Fallon and I look at each other questioningly. We stay like that for a moment before we erupt in laughter. I’m mortified when I let out a little snort causing it to get silent for a second, and then we all begin laughing again.

“And you’re bound to Eiran?” I say to Fallon. Her eyes twinkle at the mention of his name.

“Yes. We’ve been bound for what feels like forever, but forever will never be long enough.” I’m surprised by the softness in her voice as she continues. “We met in Ripam years ago. I was there on a supply run and he was here with another kingdom’s army. I didn’t need to go into the tavern, but something was pulling me in. I went in and saw him sitting at a table. It was like some force had taken over the room and the only thing I saw was him. He talked to his commanding officer that same night and came home with me to Kyrell. After we...” Fallon sends Lisbeth a quick side eye glance. “Sealed the bond and I heard him in my mind for the first time, I thought I was absolutely crazy. It helps in a variety of situations though, especially in combat.”

“Yes!” It comes out as more of a squeal than anything. “When I heard Atticus for the first time I was so shocked. He had told me that most soul bounds develop a tether to one another’s minds, but I had obviously never experienced it. It makes sense, now. My sister, Raine, and my brother-in-law, Ardin, seemed to frequently know what the other was thinking, but I never understood how.” My heart aches at the mention of Raine and Ardin.

We continue talking until there is a knock at the door, my heart sinks to my stomach at the same time as fear tightens around my throat. Lisbeth skips over to her door and opens it to find Melany with pie and cold cream to go on top. My stomach growls in hunger, begging me to go and get a slice. Lisbeth takes the pie and bowl of cold cream and sets it on the small table across the room before wrapping Melany into a hug.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Fallon and I both say our *thank yous* as well. Melany smiles and retreats out of the chamber doors as Lisbeth begins to cut out pieces of the pie and puts them on plates for us, along with a big dollop of cold cream. My mouth waters the moment I smell the cinnamon and vanilla wafting off

the pie. I take a big bite, while making sure to get a bit of the cream too.

“This is SO good! Melany really is a genius,” I say as I spoon another bite into my mouth. Childhood memories of Raine and I sitting on the sofa with our parents come to mind as my mouth explodes with the warmth of the softened apples and the scent of spices. My mother used to bake pies for my father on a weekly basis.

Panic fills my chest and the darkness in the corners of my mind begins to flood my vision. It takes me a moment to realize this panic is not my own, it belongs to Atticus. “Something’s wrong.” I say out loud, jumping off of Lisbeth’s bed and running to the door without thought. *What is it?* I say to him as I run out of the door and out into the dark corridor. No response. *Atticus! What’s wrong?* My voice pleads as I beg him to respond. Still nothing. My heart feels like it’s going to break through the cavity in my chest where it resides. I run down the staircase, my night robe waving in the wind behind me. The chill of the night air causes my breath to catch. There’s still no response from Atticus.

Fallon is suddenly behind me, and now has her sword. A red fox wiggles its way in between my feet, wrapping itself around my ankle before looking up at me and slightly bowing her head and sauntering to the forest’s edge. My knees buckle as a sharp pain radiates from my shoulder. I clutch on to it as I cry out. I look to see nothing there that would be causing this level of pain. *Atticus.* My eyes shoot up and without a second thought I jump to my feet and race to the tree line. I run through the roaring pain that’s shooting through my bones.

The sound of thunder ripples throughout the woods and dark clouds fill the sky. Suddenly rain begins to fall, causing the ground below me to become slick and muddy. I’m practically gliding as I run through the rows of gnarled trunks. “Atticus!” I yell. My mind is irrational with fear, the darkness creeps in from every angle as the emptiness in my chest grows. I slip, landing on my knees and I can’t force myself to get up.

The dark cloud that always waits within my mind finally breaks through its barrier and engulfs me. I bring my hands to my face and let out a broken sob, pain begins to shoot between my shoulder blades as I feel them spread. The pain is running up and down my spine, as if the pain in my chest isn't enough. Wrapping my arms around myself, I let out a whimper as the pain begins to subside but I open my eyes to see a darkness surrounding me. I feel a soft hand on my shoulder, I jolt in surprise and look up to see Fallon above me. Her eyes are wide as she stares at the giant black raven wings that have broken through the skin on my back.

"What... What happened?" she asks quietly, staring directly into my eyes. She helps me to my feet, dusting off what mud she can. She stands in front of me, in a protective stance, with her sword out and feet planted firmly in the mud. It takes me a moment to gain my footing, the wings are heavy so I have to lean slightly forward to offset them.

We can hear the hushed voices of others, but because of the fog we can't see where or who they are. I tuck my wings as close as I can to my body as Fallon grabs me by the shoulders, shoving me inside the hollow trunk of a dark gnarled tree. She puts a finger over her lips and makes a *shh* sound as she stalks away with her sword raised. Acid rises in my throat and my heart falls into the pit of my stomach.

Fallon has gone to find out whoever is nearing us and Lisbeth, in fox form, has made her way back in the direction of the castle. Feeling like a coward, I stay hidden within the tree trunk. I alternate between biting the inside of my cheeks and the skin around my finger nails, both becoming raw. I close my eyes and try to steady my uneasy breathing. *Just keep breathing.* The words Atticus spoke flow through my brain, bringing comfort to the hummingbird rhythm of my heart. I hear the squishes of someone walking through the mud, I think the sound is coming from behind me. As the sound gets closer, I clench my hands into tight fists.

“Corvina, it’s me.” Fallon says as she comes around to the front of the hollowed tree. I relax my hands, releasing them from the tight hold they were just in. “Atticus is fine, Cordelia gave him a tincture to help with the pain and he passed out... I’ll explain on the way back to Kyrell.” *Atticus is fine.* The statement sings into the deepest corners of my mind. I can feel the tension release from my shoulders as I repeat it to myself one more time. *Atticus is fine.*

“So are my mother and Reid on their way back to Kyrell as well? Where are they?” I ask Fallon. I don’t want to go into war with any regret, so I know I need to talk to my mother.

“Yeah... They are. I guess there were talks in the tavern of an ambush tonight. I’m not sure if they have a seer in their ranks or if Oberon has one hidden within the walls of his castle, but I think they somehow knew Atticus and the others would be there. Atticus received an arrow through his shoulder, which is the pain you felt. Sander... Sander was shot with an arrow between his eyes.” She rubs the bridge of her nose and lets out a long sigh. “They’re most likely back in Kyrell already. Reid has powders that can allow for transport.”

My heart sinks at the news. “Does he have any family we need to notify?” I ask, she shakes her head in response.

We walk back to Kyrell in silence. We don’t need words to describe the sorrow we feel in our hearts for the loss of Sander. Though I know the silence is about more than that. Fallon and I also share an unspoken fear for what’s to come. This war has a level of uncertainty that everyone in the kingdom is feeling, but nobody speaks aloud. We exit the forest’s edge and out of the fog, Lisbeth has returned before us and is waiting at the bottom steps that lead up to the castle, her mouth drops open as she points to the wings behind my back.

“I don’t know how or what... happened. I was overwhelmed with the thought of losing Atticus and the next thing I know, I have fucking wings.” I point to the black wings behind me, throwing my hands up.

“Your secondary ability must be partial shifting! It’s common for people to shift during times of heightened emotions. Atticus helped me when I shifted, so I can vouch for his abilities as a teacher if you train with him. I can also help, if you’d like. I’m just so glad you guys made it out safely. I had to shift back before I came back with Cordelia and Reid. I saw them carrying Atticus and I... I just had to come back with them.” She wraps her arms around my neck, then Fallon’s. “Come on, I had them put Atty in your shared chambers,” she says to me and turns to walk up the steps. She’s so nonchalant about it that I’m kind of surprised.

“Uh... Lis.” She stops and raises her eyebrows, waiting for me to continue. “Can you teach me how to get rid of the wings?” I shrug my shoulders, rustling the feathers, and she giggles.

“Oh yeah! I’m sorry, Cora. Close your eyes.” I listen to her instructions. “Good. Now imagine your wings becoming smaller and smaller until they ultimately disappear.” I do just that and I can feel the weight of my shoulders lighten as my wings disappear. “It’s essentially the same thing to shift back!”

The walk up the stairs, to the castle, feels long. It feels almost as if time has slowed. My limbs feel heavy as we near my chamber, and the sound of my heart beating is loud in my ears, drowning out the sounds of everyone and everything around me. Lisbeth grasps my hand, Fallon taking the other one within her own, as we stop at the door. I look up at Lisbeth before switching my gaze to Fallon. Both of their eyes share the same look of fear mixed with love and compassion.

There’s a number of healers bustling around the room when we enter. One of them is talking to Queen Kasaia, my mother and another healer are bandaging Atticus’s shoulder, the last is collecting washcloths from around the room and placing them within porcelain bowls that are filled with crimson stained water.

The room is full of chaos, but my body can't move. The heaviness in my limbs worsens as Queen Kasaia speaks to me. I see her lips move but I don't understand what she's trying to say. My brain is trying to register what is happening. She takes a strand of my hair and moves it out of my face before pulling me into a tight embrace. I sit and watch as everyone hurries around the room, they're all moving so quickly and I feel like even the movement of my chest as I breathe is still in comparison.

Slowly, the healers begin to file out of the suite. Leaving Queen Kasaia, Lisbeth, my mother, and Fallon in the room with me. Lisbeth disappears into the bathing suite, the sound of water hums through the walls. My mother looks up at me, her eyes are full of concern. She opens her mouth to say something, but closes it quickly. Slowly, she stands and walks over to me. I stifle sobs as she takes me into her arms and begins running her fingers through my hair, like Raine used to do. I allow my wall to come down, and the years of hurt and anger that have been built up seem to fade. I'll never understand her leaving us, but at the prospect of losing other loved ones during this war, I'm choosing to not let my anger make me numb.

Lisbeth comes out of the bathing suite and informs us that she started a bath for me and that she thinks it would be best for everyone to leave the room. My mother tells me that there would be healers in and out of the room for the next few hours to monitor Atticus for infection and pain. I try to nod, but I don't think I move. Lisbeth is the only one who remains in the room. She takes my elbow into one hand and supports my back with the other as she helps me walk into the bathing suite.

"I won't stay here so you'll have privacy, but my room is just down the corridor if you need anything." Her smile is small and sweet as she walks out of the room and shuts the door. I sink deep into the water, which turns a dark brown with dirt and debris. I let the warm water consume me and dull the ache that courses through every muscle and covers every bone. I finish my bath and walk into my chambers to dress for bed. I'm slow and careful as I crawl into bed next to Atticus, my body groans in

response as I lay down. I carefully lay my head on Atticus's non-injured shoulder. As if his body senses me in his sleep he rests his chin on the top of my head and takes a deep breath. I watch the sun rise through the sheer light blue curtains that hang in front of my windows as my eyes get heavy.

Corvina

I'm jolted awake by Atticus leaning over the edge of the bed, releasing the contents of his stomach onto the floor. I run to the bathing suite and wet a washcloth. His face is warm to touch so I'm sure he's feverish. He lays back down and groans as he thrashes back and forth, obviously in pain. Opening the door to our chambers, I look around to try and find the nearest healer. I turn the corner to begin the descent down the staircase. I see the healer, Josephina, on her way up the stairs with her satchel.

"Josephina!" I say with a panicked tone.

"Good morning, Princess. I thought you'd sleep away another day. I was heading up that way to change the bandage around Atticus's shoulder now. Is something wrong?" Her eyes search mine for answers.

"It's Atticus. He woke up this morning and I think he's running a fever. The skin around his eyes have become sunken and very dark and the color of his lips is almost nonexistent." I hurry back towards my chambers, opening the door and beginning to cross the threshold. Atticus is still laying in the bed, his breathing shaky and shallow.

"I'm going to remove his bandage, you may not want to see what I believe is festering beneath it." Her mouth grimaces as she

unwraps the bandages, weaving the cloth over and under his shoulder. I release a whimper when she removes the small square of gauze to find the wound is not only red and inflamed, but the edges are lined with a thick green mucus-like substance. The wound that was perfectly circular yesterday has now spread and is misshapen.

“I need you to hurry to the meeting chamber and collect your mother. The high court is in a meeting, but I need you to tell her to come immediately.” Without a second thought I rush out of the doors and down the staircase. I barrel through the door to the chamber, lifting my head to find six pairs of eyes staring back at me. I try to catch my breath, my lungs burn as every inhale catches in my throat.

“Mother... I need... you to... come... to my... chambers... now...” I take deep breaths in between breaks from my words. Everyone’s brows are now furrowed with concern as they look at the Queen. She and Lisbeth quickly trail after my mother and I as we rush back to my chambers.

“Josephina? What is... Shit.” My mother looks at the festering wound, to the other healer, and back to Atticus’s shoulder.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Queen Kasaia’s voice comes out as a trembling whisper, but I think it was meant to be louder. She places her hand softly on the back of my shoulder.

“The arrow was poisoned. By the look of it I’d say it’s head was covered in an oil infused with either hemlock or nightshade. The antidote is the same for them both and I have it in my bag. It will not take effect immediately, taking maybe hours or days until he awakens. Once he awakens he will be weak and it will take time to rehabilitate him. But... he will wake up.” She looks me directly in the eyes. My mother directs her last sentence to me, but says it loud enough for Queen Kasaia and Lisbeth to hear as well.

She gets up and rustles around inside of her medicinal supply satchel, the sounds of glass clinking together breaking the

silence. My mother pulls out a bottle and examines the contents before putting it back inside of her satchel. She does this two more times before she pulls out a vial with an *ahh*. She walks over to Atticus and begins to clean his wound.

Once she's satisfied with the cleanliness, she pats it dry, pours some of the vial's content onto a clean square gauze, and places the gauze onto his wound before wrapping his shoulder with a clean fabric sling. He lets out a groan as my mother tightens the sling and ties it back into place. I stand at the end of the bed, mindlessly focusing on Atticus. Lisbeth drags a chair from the small dining table under the window over to the side of the bed, gesturing me to sit down. I don't know how long I've been standing, just staring at Atticus as he lays still in our bed. I look around to find the room is now empty. I don't remember my mother, Queen Kasaia, or Josephina leaving.

"You haven't eaten or drunk anything the last two days, Corvina. You slept the entire day away yesterday, understandably so, and you slept most of today." I shake my head. "You know Atticus would want you to take care of yourself. I'll go see what Melany made for dinner."

I look towards the window, and through the curtain I can see the darkness of the night sky, the moon's crescent shape hanging high in the sky. I lick my lips, suddenly realizing how dry my mouth is.

I stare at the moon for what feels like seconds, but Lisbeth comes back with a tray of food, sitting the tray down on the edge of the bed, and shuts the door quietly as she leaves my chambers. On the tray is a bowl of broth, a plate with mashed potatoes and a lamb chop, and a tall glass with water and lemon slices.

I fidget with the food, but force myself to drink the broth. The heat of the liquid warms my chest and core as I drink it down in small gulps. I move the tray to the floor and lay my head down by mine and Atticus's interlaced hands. The hollow spot in my chest hasn't eased up since I felt the pain in my shoulder. I can't seem to focus on anything other than the scene my mind

wanders to when I think of Atticus getting shot. Closing my eyes to rest, I imagine how his knees buckled as the arrow's impact caused his shoulder to jolt forward, his hand moving upwards to grasp the pain now making itself known as his mouth opens and a scream escapes past his lips. I already know Neera cut the arrow free by Atticus's shaky command, I overheard her accounting every detail to Fallon and Queen Kasaia. My mind's consciousness goes in and out as my head rests on the bed.

I must be dreaming because my fingers are no longer interlaced within the comfort of Atticus's hand. The sensation of my hair being brushed away from my face causes me to stir, opening my eyes. I blink more than once to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me as I see Atticus staring back at me. The sun is coming in from the windows, based on the amount of light peering in, the sun is high in the sky.

"There's my girl." His voice is hoarse as he speaks, as if he's been the one waiting for me to awaken. The tension in my chest shifts into a lump in my throat, my eyes threaten to release the tears that have been forming behind my lids for the last day. I try to open my mouth to say anything, but I can't speak. *It's okay, little bird. I'm here.* I hear his voice inside my mind, the sound of it is my undoing. I leap from the chair next to the bed and onto his uninjured side. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me tightly into his chest.

"I... was... so... scared..." I say in between sobs as he runs his fingers through the loose strands of my hair. My breathing steadies as I focus on his fingers brushing lightly against my skin.

"When I was struck... the pain was intense. But at that moment, I wasn't concerned with my own pain as much as I was concerned with yours. I remember my experience when you were shot in the calf and..." his voice trails off and he sucks in a shaky breath. "All I could think about was that I needed to find my way home to you." He tries to sit up and groans in pain, falling back against the pillows.

“You keep resting, I’ll ask your mother and the high court to meet in our chambers. Then I’ll go into the kitchens to ask Melany for some broth and maybe some salted crackers. You need to get something in your stomach.” I lean down to kiss his cheek, but he takes my face into his hand and plants his lips on mine. This kiss is tender. He’s kissing me as if he was unsure he’d ever get the chance again and he wants to savor every second. I slowly get up and begin to leave, stealing a glance over at Atticus as I shut the door behind me.

I knock softly on the door of the high court’s meeting chamber. The door opens and Macoy is standing there, I can almost see her stomach sink in fear. That’s when I realize nobody knows Atticus is awake except for me. Everyone bows their head slightly as I enter through the threshold. I lace my fingers together and let my hands fall to my front.

“Good afternoon. Prince Atticus is awake and asks for the high court to hold a conference in our chambers.” The authority in my voice is foreign and I can see everyone else hears it too by the pride in Fallon and Lisbeth’s eyes. Queen Kasaia raises her hands, signaling everyone to rise. Macoy opens the door, bowing as I exit the room first.

Once we get to the base of the stairs, I excuse myself and take my leave towards the dining hall. The windowless room is dark, the candles in the chandelier have been extinguished and the tables have no place settings. I can see a sliver of light coming from beneath the double doors that lead to the kitchens. I push them open and walk through the opening to find Melany is alone. She’s standing at the stove, stirring something in the pot atop the burner and quietly serenading herself with a melody. She gasps and places her hand over her heart, the pinks of her freckled cheeks darken out of embarrassment.

“OH! Miss Corvina, you scared me. My poor heart is racing!” She lets out a quick giggle that causes her silver colored ringlets to bounce.

“I’m sorry, Melany. I should’ve announced myself as I opened the doors.” I point over my shoulders in the door’s direction.

“Nonsense! I’m just scared of everything in my old age. What can I do for you, Miss?”

“Prince Atticus has awoken and I’m sure he’s hungry. I was thinking I could bring him up some broth, maybe some salted crackers if you have any. I don’t want him to eat too much too fast.”

“Oh, what good news! Please sit, Miss. I’ll whip ya up some fresh broth right now! I’ll even give you a snack while you wait.” She winks in my direction and turns on her heel to the cold storage and pulls out a few containers. She places them on the countertop and opens one of them up. I can’t see what she’s doing but I can tell she’s cutting into something. As she turns I can see light illuminating in between her hand and the plate. “My fire ability sure does come in handy when I have to warm up food!” She smiles as she places a plate of apple pie in front of me.

Melany is making your broth, but I’m eating my pie first. See you soon.

Atticus

There's a knock a moment before the door opens. My mother, sister, and the rest of the high court file into the room one by one. My mother immediately rushes over to my bedside and places her hand on mine. Lisbeth follows with tears streaming down her face as she approaches me.

"I'm fine, Lis. I'm here and I'm healing." She's unable to speak as sobs escape her mouth and she rests her forehead on my hand, my mother places her hand on her shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better, my son." Everyone nods towards my mother. "Before you sent Corvina to retrieve us, we were discussing the strategy of protecting the villages. I've known Oberon to have no difficulty killing innocents, but I have a big problem with it. I would like to save as many as possible."

I nod as my mother concludes her thought before I begin speaking. "As do I. The catacombs will not hold enough people. They aren't large enough to hold the villagers who reside in Kyrell and the ones who came after Berk was marched upon."

"The nearest land mass is Lyra. I can send a letter to King Caspian, he..." My mother is cut off by the sound of Fallon loudly clearing her throat. My mother turns her attention in Fallon's direction. "Yes, Fallon? Did you want to add something?"

“I’m sorry Queen Kasaia, but I sent out letters to Lyra and the other two neighboring kingdoms yesterday.” Fallon hangs her head in shame.

“We will discuss going against direct orders later and in private. Although, I can admit, even as queen, sometimes I am blind to certain aspects of what can be best for my kingdom. That is why I have you, my high court, to keep me on the right pathway for what is best for everyone.” Fallon’s shoulders sag in relief. “Now, let us go and let the prince rest.” My mother begins to move everyone towards the doors.

“Mother, can you stay for a moment? Lis or Fallon, can one, or both, of you keep Corvina busy for a few minutes? She’s in the kitchens with Melany eating pie.” All three of them look at one another, confusion written all over their faces. Lisbeth shrugs and skips out of the room with a quick *okay*. My mother shuts the chamber doors and turns to me with a raised eyebrow, adjusting the hem of her gown before gliding over to the edge of the bed.

“Yes, my son. What is it?” She pulls up the chair and sits down, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

“I won’t pretend you don’t know what we’re going to discuss. If you’re okay with it, I’d like to ask for Corvina’s hand. But, I’d like to do so with the ring dad gave you when he asked for yours. I’ve already spoken to Cordelia, she was more than happy to give me her approval. I know it’s untimely with an impending war, but I just need Corvina... I just need her to know... to REALLY know.” My mother pulls out a small black box hidden from within the pockets of her dress, and tears begin to form against her lashes as she nods her head.

“I have carried this with me everyday since the two of you rode in, waiting for you to be ready. I could see it. I could see it in your eyes that she was your bound. I hope the love your father and I shared is stored within these stones and woven into the metal. You and Corvina will live years of love and happiness, my

son.” She opens the box and looks at the ring that sits between the cushions within.

The sound of the door handle jiggling breaks our silence. My mother closes the box with a *snap* and shoves it under the pillow. Corvina barrels into the room, almost falling as she juggles a tray of food. Red creeps up her neck and spreads to her cheeks as she looks towards my mother and I. The porcelain dishes on the tray *clink* together as she treks across the room, sitting the tray on the small table near the window.

“I don’t know how Melany does that! I almost dropped that tray a dozen times, especially going up the staircase.” She turns and faces my mother and I, releasing a hard breath she places her hand on her hips. My mother stands and kisses the top of my head before walking over to Corvina and pulling her into a tight hug.

“I’ll excuse myself and come back tomorrow. I’ll have the meeting conferred here so that you’re involved.” She waves as she exits the room, closing the door quietly behind her. Corvina turns back to the tray and fidgets with the dishes as my mother leaves. I push my misty tendrils out of my fingertips and will them to travel up Corvina’s ankles, wrapping around them. *Atticus* she warns, her back still to me. I send them up the hem of her dress, gliding them slowly up the inner parts of her thighs. Her head tilts back and she releases a slight whimper.

“Atticus, you’re insatiable! You need to eat.” Her eyes are dark when she turns, my shadows returning to me as she walks towards me. She stands next to the bed and adjusts my pillows. I play with the laces on the top part of her dress, gliding my fingers lightly over the swells of her breasts. She stops and glares down at me in warning, but the slight upward curve of her lip tells me something different. She hands me the small bowl of broth and demands I drink it, and takes her place near my feet on the end of the bed.

“I have something to tell you, love,” she says as I’m taking a sip of my warm broth. I lift my eyes from the bowl to look at her

and raise my eyebrows.

“My second manifestation happened. I don’t know if it was the energy of that or the stress of you being injured that caused me to sleep for almost two days.”

“What was the second manifestation? Some do take more energy than others, or it could have been a combination of the two.”

“Yeah, it was the strangest thing. I was overwhelmed with thoughts of losing you. It was consuming me from the inside out. Then a searing pain began to course up and down my spine, radiating in my shoulders as I felt the bones shift. After the pain began to subside, I noticed a heaviness in my back and a large shadow engulfed me. There were WINGS, Atticus and they were HUGE. Lisbeth was able to help me bring them back in, but I don’t know how to use this ability or the wings.”

I don’t like hearing that I was the cause of such pain, even if it wasn’t intentional.

“I can help you, little bird.” I wink at her, laughing at the irony of the nickname now that she’s manifested into a partial shifter. “We can start training once your mom gives me the clearance to get out of bed. I hope that’s soon because I’m itching to get out of this bed already.” I take a deep breath to brace myself. “We should also bring up the effect your emotions have on the weather when we talk to Reid.” Her eyes widen and confusion creases her brow.

“My emotions? I don’t understand.” Her eyes fall to the ground and dart around as if she’s searching for something.

“You haven’t noticed in times of upset, the weather often reflects your mood?” An eyebrow raises. Surely she’s noticed something.

“I mean, sure, I’ve noticed. I guess I just never thought it was my song.” She shrugs. “So... Now I can control the weather too?” Her shoulders sag.

“I’m not sure to what extent.”

“I suppose I just don’t fully understand how the enchantment that Oberon placed worked. Why did I manifest a second ability so late? And weather control? I know Eiran mentioned abilities that were stronger outside of the castle walls. It’s just... a lot to take in.” She lets out a deep shaky breath. I want to take it all away from her, all the things that weigh her down.

“I think Oberon put some kind of enchantment to limit the abilities he could control. But Reid would be the best to answer this specific question, so let’s ask him in the morning. Stay for the high court meeting, you and I will be leading them soon enough.” I wink at her, but the look on her face says she doesn’t think I’m funny.

“I’d never make you choose between me and Kyrell, but knowing one day I will become queen... is terrifying... I...” She releases a shuddering breath and looks at me, her eyes are full of unease.

“Corvina. You are my home now. The kingdom. The throne. None of it matters if you aren’t by my side.” I motion for her to come lay down next to me.

“I’d never ask you to give up your throne, Atticus. I just need to shadow your mother and get used to the fact that I’ll be royalty one day.” She sighs as she wraps her arm around my torso, I pull her in closer towards me. I lay next to her and I think about the ring under my pillow.

In the morning, the high court files into our room. My mother enters first, followed by Lisbeth, Macoy, Fallon, and then Reid and Cordelia come in shortly after. Corvina and Cordelia give each other a small smile. Everyone says their good mornings and exchanges pleasantries, I can sense Corvina’s reluctance to be here. *It’s okay, little bird, you belong here just as much as I do.* I say into her mind. I can feel her apprehension lift a little bit, but not enough to calm her unease.

“Good morning, all.” My mother speaks. “There’s not a lot to discuss today, so we will keep it short. Fallon, I know you had some concerns that needed to be discussed and then Atticus, I know you and Corvina had something to discuss with Reid. However, how are you feeling my son?” My mother motions a hand between Corvina and I.

“I’m feeling wonderful. Cordelia and Josephina have given me a salve for the pain and a tonic for the infection. I feel substantially better. Now Reid, Corvina and I were curious as to what kind of enchantment was on the bricks of Elornia’s wall that would cause a late manifestation or would stifle certain abilities. As some of you may know, two days ago after my attack Corvina’s secondary ability manifested. Her emotional response to my injuries resulted in a secondary ability to partially shift and form raven wings.” Fallon and Lis clapped, both of them beaming with pride.

“Congratulations on your secondary manifestation, princ... Corvina.” I have no doubt Corvina gave Reid a certain glare as he began the word princess. “From the information I was able to find, the enchantment was specifically cast for abilities that are considered unstable as well as suppression of any secondary abilities. It limited the abilities that elementals had to where the power was lower than you were capable, which is why when your power finally opened up you were able to do much more. Elementals are easiest to manipulate and control because their power comes from the physical world. Mage, somatic, and abstract aren’t as easily controlled, but still able to be manipulated slightly. However, Oberon bent their magic to his will... if they did not comply, he resorted to violence. But the primary darks were unable to be controlled by the enchantment, that’s why they were cast out and unable to return. Secondary abilities aren’t as strong as the primary so that’s how they were able to suppress abilities that came second.” We all stay in silence for a moment, taking in the new information.

“That’s... that’s a lot of information, Reid. How do you recommend we move forward?” my mother asks.

“I’m hoping between my abilities and that of a couple other mages we can ward the forest for protection of those within Kyrell, but it may only be temporary my queen. We still haven’t heard anything back from King Caspian of Lyra, so we aren’t sure if we have any combat support from another kingdom.”

“We will protect our own. Anyone who is able and willing to fight will stand with us,” Fallon says, her chest puffed with pride.

“What were your concerns, dear?” My mother says, turning her attention to Fallon.

“I was just curious when Atticus would be available to return to duty, my queen. I do not mean to rush and I will understand his leave of absence if necessary.” Fallon bows her head as she finishes her response. All eyes in the room fall to Cordelia.

“Prince Atticus should be cleared for duty in two days’ time. He’s taking the tonic to keep infection away and his dressing is getting cleaned twice a day, but his wound is looking better by the hour.” Cordelia looks towards everyone in the room, stopping her eyes on my mother and bowing slightly.

“Wonderful! The High court is dismissed for the day.” My mother clasps her hands together with a light *smack* and everyone begins to leave the room. “Corvina, Lisbeth would like to train with you today, just harnessing your shifting abilities some more until Atticus resumes your training. When you’re done with Lis, Eiran also is taking over your tactical and will be training you on how to combine your elemental gift and combat.” Corvina nods as she stands from her seat next to the bed, leaning down to kiss me lightly on my forehead before following Lisbeth out of the chambers.

Atticus

The next couple of days move so quickly they are a blur. Cordelia and the other healers have been in and out of our chambers, and I think I've seen them more than Corvina. She has been busy with her relentless training, but she doesn't ease up no matter how physically exhausted she is. She awakens in the morning to train with Lisbeth and ends her nights training with Eiran. The sunlight has barely started casting a light on the castle grounds and Corvina is already out in the training arena with Lisbeth.

There's a knock on my door, breaking my train of thought. I give whoever is on the opposite side of the door permission to enter.

"Good morning, Prince." Josephina's voice is quiet as she enters the room with her satchel of supplies.

"Hello, Josephina. I might lose it here another day, please tell me I'm cleared for training again." I've been down too many days, surprised I haven't made an indent in the floor by now with how many times I've walked the halls of this castle.

"Let's start by looking at your stage of healing." She motions for me to sit at the edge of the bed and begins removing the dressing, making a low *hmm* as she unwraps it. "Well, Prince..."

You're cleared. But, your muscles are still healing. So, light duty when possible and I'm sorry to say I wouldn't recommend shifting for the next few days."

"Thank the gods!" I say as I throw my hands up. "Thank you, Josephina. Your dedication and care were essential to my healing. Now if you'll excuse me I've got to go watch my girl fly." I practically run out of the castle.

I turn the corner of the castle and head into the training area. I feel like the air is stolen from my lungs as I see Corvina hovering above the ground. Her thick black wings extend from just next to her shoulder blades, and her dresses had to be tailored to allow for the shift. Corvina stretches out each wing, the black feathers quiver against the wind. She flutters them slightly, just to allow herself to stay suspended in the air. The feathers of her wings are slick and smooth, hidden deep purples and grays shine in the reflection of the sunlight. She hoists one knee up and lengthens the other leg as she braces herself to slowly land. *It's not nice to stare, Prince.* Her back is to me, she turns her head slightly and smirks over her shoulder. Members of the army stop training and bow their heads as I stalk through the yard.

"Atty!" Lisbeth screeches, her eyes widening, as she peeks out from behind Corvina's wings.

"Prince Atticus, I'm so glad to see you're out of the castle and able to join us again. Training isn't the same without you," Eiran says, Fallon falling in step behind him as they walk towards us. Corvina turns as they all walk in my direction. The top of her wings are slightly above her head as she folds them in.

"I'm on light duty when I can help it and Josephina said no shifting for the next few days. The muscles in my shoulder aren't fully healed." I rotate my shoulder to relieve some of the stiffness. I catch Corvina watching me through the motion, her brow now

furrowed. *I'm okay, little bird. It's just a little stiff.* My statement does nothing to relieve the stress on her face.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back out with us. Eiran is right, it wasn’t the same without you.” Fallon playfully punches my uninjured shoulder. We break our formation and walk towards the sparring arena. Corvina, her wings exposed but still tucked, is the first to enter the arena. She is followed by someone I recognize as an air elemental, but her name escapes me. *Her name is Zima.*

They lift their wooden swords into the air, maintaining eye contact as they circle one another like prey. Zima swings first, Corvina immediately blocking the blow. Her wings twitch as she strikes Zima in the ribs. I’m stunned. Eiran and Lis had said she was progressing quickly, but seeing it in person is something different entirely. Zima conjures air and pushes Corvina backwards as she stumbles to the floor, grasping her side. Corvina opens her wings and digs her heels into the ground, anchoring herself as she comes to a stop. Fury burns in Corvina’s eyes as she looks up to Zima through her furrowed brows. She flaps her wings, pushing off of the ground and hovers over Zima for just a moment before she rushes in her direction. She lands on Zima, taking her to the ground, the dirt swirling around them as they land.

“She yields!” Fallon says as Corvina backs off immediately. She extends a hand out to Zima, who laughs as she grabs it to help herself stand.

“You’ve gotten so much better, Corvina. You’re a natural!” Zima manages to say as she’s catching her breath.

“Thank you, Zima! I’ve had wonderful teachers.” Corvina’s eyes beam with pride as she looks over to Fallon, Eiran, and Lisbeth. Corvina’s wings slowly dissipate as she turns and begins walking towards me.

“I’m free for breakfast if you’re hungry. Melany has been bringing meals to the strategy room.” She extends her hand to

me. I take her hand in mine and lead her through the courtyard and into the strategy room.

“What are your plans for this evening, little bird?” I ask her, trying to keep my voice void of any indication there may be something up my sleeve.

“Training with Eiran should end just before sunset. Then I’m all yours.” She rests her head on my arm.

“Good. How would you like dinner in the garden? After training, go to our chambers and get ready. Then come to the garden and we’ll eat dinner by candle and starlight.” I kiss the top of her head before we separate to opposite ends of the table. *Sounds magical. Count me in.*

Fallon, Eiran, and I talk strategy while eating our breakfast. Corvina and Lisbeth listen, but are still learning about battle, and observe our discussion. Thatch and Macoy have been keeping to themselves as of late, so they are absent from breakfast. The last vision took a lot out of Macoy, but Thatch’s turned him into a zombie. He’s seemed to have shut everyone except for Macoy out. Even Corvina has a hard time getting through to him. We have a plan to save his mother, Corvina tried to explain that several times. By the end of breakfast it is decided that Neera and I will go back out for patrol tomorrow morning.

I leave the training arena to go into the kitchens and talk to Melany about my dinner plans. By the end of my meeting with Melany we decide on boiled potatoes, lamb, and honey glazed carrots for dinner, and apple pie for dessert. Cordelia, Reid, and my mother are walking out of the meeting chambers when I leave the dining hall. Cordelia lifts a finger, signaling me over.

“Hello, Cordelia. Mother. Reid. I hope all is well this afternoon.” Though he doesn’t give any indication, I know Reid is aware of the plan. Cordelia and my mother, on the other hand, are barely keeping their composure.

“Prince, if I could have a word, privately, before you go up to your chambers?” Cordelia timidly asks. I nod, motioning her to

step away from the others. My mother and Reid see themselves through the dining hall doors, leaving Cordelia and I by ourselves in the main room. "I. I just had a request. If possible, of course. I have a dress for Corvina to wear tonight. It has pieces of my wedding dress, from my wedding with her father. The seamstress added pieces to the gown I commissioned for Corvina."

"I think she would really like that, Cordelia. If you'd like, I can place it on our bed for her to find after training." I place a hand on her shoulder, giving her a soft smile.

"That would be wonderful, Prince Atticus. Follow me to my chambers?" I nod and follow her up the staircase. "Excuse me if I'm overstepping, but I was also curious if you and Fallon had made any progress on rescuing Raine?"

"We do have a couple ideas, but they both depend on different things. Fallon has asked that I refrain from sharing specifics for now. Once we have more of a set plan... You will be the first to know of it. I promise." She nods as we arrive at the door to her chambers and she opens it. I stay out in the corridor and wait for her to return with the dress.

"Here you are, Prince." She gives me a small smile as she hands me the cream colored garment bag.

"Thank you for this. I think it will mean a lot to her." I walk down the corridor to our chambers, setting the bag on the bed as I walk through the room. The time is nearing sunset, so I quickly bathe and change into a clean tunic and trousers. I run my fingers through my damp hair, pushing it slightly back so that it's out of my face.

The table is already out in the garden, set with black linen, porcelain dishes, and gold eating utensils. I light the three deep red candles that sit in the middle of the table, their flames flickering in the rolling wind from the ocean. *Just finished training. I'll get dressed and meet you in the garden.* My heartbeat quickens at the sound of her voice echoing in my mind.

There's a dress for you on the bed, wear it. I say, she doesn't reply but I can feel the heightened sense of excitement that floods through her at my demand. I steal one last glance out over the ocean, knowing that shortly, everything will change.

Corvina

I wrap up my training session with Eiran as the sun begins to sink below the horizon. The sky is deep red and burnt orange, and the cool ocean water crashes around my ankles as the tide rolls in. I close my eyes and allow myself the moment to imagine my life until recently, the smell of Elornia's marketplace, the pastels of the sunrise reflecting on the limestone of the castle, and my sister. Gods, I miss her.

Finding out she's alive has rattled me, but I can't imagine how Thatch is feeling. As the wind picks up, it brings a crisp chill onto the cliffside in waves. I wrap my arms around myself in the hopes of it warming my exposed arms. I let Atticus know I'm heading to the castle as I turn to leave the shore. *There's a dress for you on the bed, wear it.* He can be so demanding. I cut through the training yard and round the corner to get to the steps of the castle.

There's a garment bag draped on the edge of the bed when I enter our chambers. I run my fingers over the cream vinyl bag as I walk by it and through the threshold of the bathing suit. I fill the bath and add in my favorite oils before sinking into the water, careful not to wet my hair. There's a nagging feeling in my

stomach but I can't quite put my finger on what the cause could be.

When I exit the bath, I quickly dry off and walk through the threshold back into my chambers. I hook the garment bag onto my armoire and loosen the ties that keep the bag closed. Once I remove the garment bag, I set it to the side and I am immediately awestruck. I run my fingers lightly over the puffy charcoal tulle sleeves, the wrists are cinched with black beads. The wrists match the three beaded belts that meet the deep V of the neckline. I put the gown on and I'm mesmerized when it fits me perfectly, landing just above my feet with a slight train.

I adjust my hair, tying the front back with a dark gray ribbon. I add some light rouge to my cheeks and lips, looking at myself once more in the mirror before I turn and leave the chambers. As I descend the main staircase, I can see the light under the closed dining hall doors and shadows moving across the room. Atticus and I have been so busy, I'm not surprised he wants to do a night with just us. I can see candles illuminating a small table, the silhouette of Atticus near the cliffs, as I walk through the garden.

"Hey you," I say loud enough for him to hear and hopefully not startle him as he's deep in thought.

"Little bird, you look... you look... beautiful." His voice is tender and quiet. He places one hand on the small of my back and the other slightly behind my head, lacing his fingers into my hair. He looks into my eyes, searching them for a moment before delicately placing his lips on mine. They're warm and inviting as I melt into him. "Come and sit," he says, breaking our kisses and directing me to the table.

"This is the exact distraction I needed," I say as I look over the plate, all of my favorite foods are here. I look over which option to taste first and decide to go with the boiled potatoes. The taste of rosemary and cream explodes in my mouth as the potato practically melts on my tongue. A small groan escapes my throat as I take a bite of the lamb.

“Good?” Atticus huffs a laugh as I nod my head.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had anything cooked by Melany that I don’t absolutely love,” I say as I take a sip of red wine, the soft balance of tart and sweet dance on my tongue.

“Eiran and Lis say your training is going well. They say you learned incredibly fast. Once I can shift properly again, I’ll take over your shifting training.”

“I really enjoy training with Lis, so I’d like to continue with her. Plus, I don’t think I’d be able to focus on training when you get all bossy.” Heat radiates from my chest up to my face.

“Oh... Is that so?” He smirks and raises a brow. I roll my eyes, but we both know I like it when he teases me.

We conclude dinner and Melany brings out dessert, removing our dinner plates. I can smell it before she sets it down on the table. Apple pie. Atticus cuts us both a slice of the warm apple pie and I take a big bite. I let out a *hmmm* and roll my eyes to the back of my head dramatically. The breeze dances through the garden, causing the stems of the dahlias to sway back and forth.

“You know my dad used to give my mother fresh dahlias every week. She kept a bouquet on the dining room table everyday.” He lets out a sigh.

“It seemed your parents really loved one another.” I reach out my hand to rest it on his.

“They did.” His voice trails off. I watch his brow furrow. I can feel the sense of apprehension that’s blossoming in his chest, causing my own to tighten.

“I know fear covers the kingdom in anticipation for the upcoming battle. There’s so much that is unknown as we wait, but one thing that I know for sure is you are my home, Atticus.” I reach my hand out for his.

He lifts his gaze to meet mine and my heart drops. “Little bird... No matter where life takes us, in any way you’ll have me.

I'm yours. All day. Everyday. Always. I... I'm yours." His voice is barely above a whisper. I let out a gasp when he pulls a dark box from his lap, opening it, and placing it on top of the table. In the center of the box is a hexagon shaped moss agate set in an intricate gold band, the metal swirling in vines around small moissanite stone clusters. My eyes dart to him, full of tears as I realized what this moment means for us.

"Corvina. You are a part of me, now and forever." I'm at a loss for words as he takes the ring out of the box and slides it onto my shaky left hand. "I know the timing isn't ideal, but I need to know you're mine in every way. Will you be my wife?"

"I...Yes. Oh my gods yes." I nod, my knees wobble as I try to stand, and as quickly as I blink he's at my side holding me up. My heart is racing as I look at the ring now adorning my finger.

"It was my mother's ring. The one she had when she wed my father. It was important to me that in the event I met my soul bound, she... you would wear it." He laughs nervously, running his fingers through his hair. The wind dances through the dahlia flowers.

"It's absolutely breathtaking, Atticus." My words trail off. He rests his forehead on mine, our breaths mingle between us as he runs his fingers along my neck and trails them over my shoulders. Goosebumps form along the surface of my skin at the gentleness of his touch, the tension between us grows thicker as he begins to kiss along my jaw. As he pulls away, my skin begs to be kissed... to be touched.

"We will have to finish this later, little bird. We have people waiting for us." His voice is a whisper against my ear.

I'm confused when he takes my hand and leads me up to the stairs, to the closed doors of the dining hall. The double doors open and I see the high court, along with Thatch, standing near the table. Everyone's faces are illuminated by their smiles, even Thatch. The smile that spreads across his cheeks warms my heart, especially since he's been so cold and distant since his last

vision. There's a mixture of *congratulations* and *I'm so happy for you* as we walk through the room. I make my way over to Thatch.

"My mother is going to be so thrilled for you and Atticus," he beams, but my chest aches at the thought of my sister and the loss she suffered.

"I won't wed Atticus until your mother is safe with us," I promise. He wraps his arms around my waist and I run my fingers over his hair.

We spend the next couple of hours in the dining hall with everyone. There's a couple of musicians playing melodies on stringed instruments as we enjoy the variety of desserts Melany and the other chefs prepared. Queen Kasaia and Atticus discuss the formalities of what's to come after the wedding. Fallon and I keep it lighter and discuss possible wedding color schemes. I briefly overhear the queen express her desire to step down as ruler after the wedding, Atticus and I replacing her. Lisbeth adds in her question, which is when will we have babies. I knew that question would come sooner or later, but the weight of the ring on my finger is still foreign and heavy.

My mother has been looking at me over the crowd for the better part of the evening, but has been hesitant to cross the room to me, so I decide to make my way over to her. After 15 years, she's still as beautiful as she was when I was a child. She straightens her stance when I begin my approach.

"Hello, mother," I say. I try to not sound cold, but it's still difficult for me to feel at ease with her.

"Congratulations, Corvina. You look absolutely stunning. May I see your ring?" I nod and hold out my hand. She takes my hand in hers, the coldness of her fingers takes me by surprise. "It's beautiful. Did you... like the gown?" She looks up from my hand and into my eyes, my brows knit in confusion. "It has parts of the dress I married your father in. I had a seamstress create something specifically for you...I want you to know, I did love your father, Corvina. Even if he wasn't my soul bound, I loved

him deeply and I miss him everyday. I see so much of him in you. In your loyalty and your ability to see the best in every situation. You're so much like him." She brushes her hand on my cheek causing a lump to form in my throat.

"Thank you so much," I force out with a shaky breath.

Hollowness makes its presence known in my chest as my mind begins to race, pulling itself in so many different directions I don't know which one to follow. The demons that reside in my mind begin to question my ability to rule. My ability to be a wife. *A fucking wife.* The darkness begins to seep out of the corners in my mind where it lays in wait for moments like this, moments when it can catch me weak.

One. I try to search the room for something... anything I can focus on.

Two.

Three. I remind myself to try and breathe. The heaviness in my chest makes it difficult to take a deep breath.

Four.

Five.

Suddenly, Atticus places his hand over mine. He doesn't break the conversation with his mother. Hell, he doesn't even look in my direction. He just slides his hand over mine, rubbing the pad of his thumb over my knuckles. His touch is calming and gentle. I try to focus on the movement of his thumb as I reel the dark clouds back into their homes. *Breathe, little bird.* I close my eyes for a moment, filling my lungs with a deep breath, and I slowly release it. My heart rate begins to come back to its normal speed as I let out an exhale.

Everyone slowly leaves the dining room as the exhaustion begins to set in. We've all been training what feels like nonstop to protect Kyrell and the people that live within the kingdom. Atticus and I intertwine our fingers as we exit the dining hall and

head up the stairs towards our chambers. Once the door is closed behind us, I'm impatient to finish what we started.

"Can you help me?" I turn my back to him, bringing my hair over my shoulder to expose the back of my dress and the buttons that line my spine. He slowly unbuttons my gown, his fingertips tease me as they gently brush my skin with each button being undone. The dress is loose so it falls easily, pooling at my feet. I'm left exposed... naked. He removes his tunic, dropping it in the pile with my gown. Atticus lets out a growl and pulls me to him, my back pressed up against his chest. He glides his finger up my navel and to the spot between my breasts.

"Little bird," he whispers against the tip of my ear, lightly running his fingers along my nipple before he palms my breast. My head falls back, resting against his chest. "Use your words. What do you want?" he demands.

"You. I want... you," I say as he toys with my nipple with one hand and glides his other down towards my center, stopping as he meets the top of my underwear.

"Give me specifics, love. What do you want me to do to you? Do you want me to feast on that delicious pussy of yours?" I let out a whimper. A plea. "Or do you want me to fuck you with my fingers." My breath shutters. "Now that I've tasted you, that I've felt you, I will never NOT crave you. Now, tell me... what do you want?"

"I... I want you to fuck me with your fingers." My need to be touched by him radiates through me.

"Good girl," he whispers as he glides his hand under the waistband of my underwear. I feel a rush of cool mist wrap around my ankle, pushing my legs apart slightly as Atticus finds my center. He slides a finger into my entrance, my breath hitches in my throat. Slowly he removes his finger and moves to my clit, circling gently in smooth motions. I let out a whimper as my knees threaten to buckle below me. In a quick motion, Atticus removes his hand from my underwear and lifts me up, turning to

walk towards the bed. He lays me down on the edge and bends down, grabbing my waistband and tugging off my underwear before tossing them to the side. He removes his trousers and lets them fall to the floor, kicking them off. His shadows spread my knees apart as he positions himself above me.

I welcome the weight of his body as he covers me. His lips meet mine in a frenzy, teasing my bottom lip with his tongue. I part my lips slightly, and he groans as his tongue meets mine. Atticus slides a finger into the apex of my thighs and makes smooth circles on my clit with his thumb, my hips buck as pleasure surges through me. *More. I need all of you.* I speak into his mind as the sensation becomes too much. I'm no longer in control of my body, I arch into him as he pumps his fingers into me. Slowly he begins to withdraw, lining up his tip with my entrance. I raise my hips to meet his thrusts. He places a hand on my hip, stilling my movements as he pulls out just enough to tease me and make my body beg for him to come back. I feel the cool mist I've come to recognize as his shadows glide up my sides, circling themselves around my wrists as Atticus brings my hands above my head. His shadows hold my arms in place as he drops his head to my neck and kisses just below my ear before driving into me again, causing me to gasp. His thrusts are slow as he pushes all the way into me.

"Fuck, you feel so good." His praise causes something to ignite in my chest. I fight against his hold on my me and begin to rock my hips so that they meet his movements. Atticus moves his hands to grip my ass, plunging himself deep inside of me as his thrusts become faster. Heat begins to pool at my core, begging for release.

"Oh, gods," I whimper into his ear as my body begins to shake, the lower part of my stomach tightens with pleasure. My pussy spasms and clenches around him.

"Say my name, little bird," he whispers into my ear. I never knew what to expect when I found my soul bound, but this is better than anything I could've imagined.

“Atticus,” I say breathlessly as he thrusts deep into me, his shoulder muscles tense. Atticus rocks a couple more times before letting out a groan, his cock pulsing as he fills me. He recalls his shadows before lifting himself off, the cool mist glides over my breasts and across my thighs before disappearing. I turn over onto my side, propping my head on to my palm.

He climbs off the bed and places a kiss on my forehead before he walks over to the small table in our room, lifting the lid off of a platter of some kind before crossing the floor and returning to the bed. He sits the platter on the side table and opens the drawer, pulling out a small brush and motioning for me to come to him.

“I’ll be gone before you wake. I know you were at the meeting, so you’re aware of my patrol with Neera. I’m meeting with Eiran and Fallon before Neera and I venture into the woods.” I realize I don’t know a lot about Neera. She’s always come off so cold and kept to herself, so I’ve never tried talking to her.

I sit in front of him, between his knees, as he unravels what is left of my braid. He runs the brush through the knotted mess, brushing delicately as he encounters and untangles the knots. He begins to pull strands back and forth in fluid motions, and it doesn’t take long to realize he’s braiding my hair.

“How long has Neera lived in Kyrell? She must be around our age, which would have meant she was a teenager when Oberon infiltrated Elornia.” He places the platter in front of us and pulls my back up against his chest. Grapes, cheese, and crackers cover the platter, and I pull a grape off the bunch and pop it in my mouth as I wait for his response.

“She came alone before the wall was built. When she was a teenager. I think like 16 or 17, but I don’t know what age for sure.” He shrugs. “She lived in Berk for a while, but eventually moved to Kyrell. My mother wanted her to have a place on the high court and she declined.” Questions circle my mind... Why would she decline being part of the high court?

“Huh... and she’s all alone?” I say. My chest tightens as I continue to think and ask some of the questions that fill my mind. I hand him the now empty platter and move to his side. We both shift to get comfortable.

“Yeah. But she’s a good asset to our command. Why so many questions?” Atticus raises a brow.

“Oh I was just wondering... I haven’t spoken to her too much.” I bite the inside of my cheek. I don’t know what it is, but something doesn’t sit right with me. Atticus kisses the tip of my nose and covers himself with the quilt. He’s practically snoring as his head hits the pillow.

Corvina

Atticus is already gone by the time I wake up, just like he said he would be. He left a pale pink dahlia on his pillow with a note. I unfold it and it only says one word, *always*. I twirl the flower in between my fingers before swinging to put my feet on the floor, and place the flower on the bedside table. I'm startled by a knock on my door. I wrap my robe around myself, and my mind is racing. Fear builds up in my chest, making it heavy. After Atticus's injury on his last patrol, I don't know what to expect. I hold my breath as I open the door.

"Good morning, Princess." The girl bows. I've seen her before, but I'm not sure of her name. "Queen Kasaia asked that you see her in the throne room and that this be brought up to you." She smiles and motions to the small table across the room with her chin.

"Oh, of course!" I open the door and swing my arm to signal the okay to come into my chambers. The heaviness in my chest lightens and I let out a sigh of relief. "Forgive me, I'm still learning who everyone is. What is your name?" I feel my cheeks redden.

"My name is Roselyn, princess." She smiles and sets the tray down on the table. "But, really everyone calls me Rose." She turns

to me, bowing slightly, and exits my chambers, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I walk over to the tray and look over its contents, oats and some fresh berries. After I finish the breakfast Roselyn brought me, I get ready for the day and leave my chambers to meet Queen Kasaia in the throne room.

The throne room is towards the front of the castle, and the only room in the castle, besides personal chambers, I haven't been in. The entryway leads to a domed room, and a crystal chandelier hangs in the center. Three large windows that are floor to ceiling in length illuminate the room, and forest green tapestries flow in front of them. In the center of the room is a short platform that holds two thrones. On each of the thrones is an emblem of the kingdom's crest, a phoenix in flight. Queen Kasaia is standing in front of the thrones and turns when she hears my approaching footsteps.

"Hello, Corvina!" She pulls me into her arms. "I'm not sure what you had planned for this morning, but I know Atticus is gone and I figured it would be a great time to talk about the wedding and coronation." She wraps her arm around me and walks me closer to the thrones. "I know ruling can be intimidating, but I really think it will come naturally to you." I'm not so sure, but I don't say that outloud. I chew on the lining of my cheek as I contemplate my response.

"I don't have much to discuss wedding wise, yet. Atticus and I agreed we wouldn't wed until after the battle and after my sister is home with us. I was under the assumption that coronations don't come until after the wedding?" I say to her, hoping I don't sound rude. Sometimes my natural tone is misunderstood for something else.

"Traditionally, you are right. Coronations don't come until after weddings. However, Atticus and I discussed it with the high court this morning and everyone was in agreement that we should do a coronation before the battle, if that is okay with you. You and Atticus are soul bound and that transcends the bounds of marriage." Her smile is soft as she pulls my hand into hers.

“Oh... Okay. So when is the court thinking of doing a coronation?” My voice is shaky, but I try my hardest to not make it obvious. *Breathe, little bird. It'll be okay.* Atticus senses my apprehension through our bond. I try to calm my quivering lip.

“We were thinking about holding the coronation ceremony in a few days. Atticus is doing a patrol today, as you know. But he will be home by the evening and we can finalize the details with him. After the battle we can talk about the wedding, but for now I'd like to focus on the coronation if that's alright with you.” Queen Kasaia says with light in her eyes.

“So, where do we start with planning?” She looks towards the wall and a hidden door opens. Out comes three other members of the household's staff. One is holding a forest green box that appears to be made of velvet, the other is holding a black garment bag, and the last is holding a rolled up parchment.

She points in the direction of the young man holding the velvet box. “This box isn't to be opened until the day of your coronation, it holds a crown I had specifically made for you. My parents surprised me with mine on the day of my coronation and that was a tradition I'd like to continue with you and Atty. This bag is your dress. I had it made the day you came to Kyrell with Atticus. You can look at it now, if you'd like, but that's up to you.” Cara comes forward with the garment bag and hands it to Queen Kasaia. The queen looks at me in question, awaiting my response.

“I'd like to see it now, please.” My heart rate speeds up and my palms become clammy. Queen Kasaia begins to untie the knots along the side of the bag and pulls out a strapless black tulle gown, its bodice is covered in beads that switch from purple, dark blue, and black depending on how the light hits it. *Like the wings of a raven.* Atticus fills my mind. *I had my mother change the beads once your wings manifested. I thought it was a nice touch.* I can practically hear the smirk in his voice. This dress is absolutely breathtaking and tears line my bottom eyelid as I look it over. The beads start at the top of the dress and begin to space

out as they cascade down the skirt. “Queen Kasaia... This dress...” My mouth stops forming the words as a lump forms in my throat.

“I really do hope you like it, Corvina. I know you will do wonderful things as queen and I can’t wait to see everything you accomplish during your rule.” She looks towards Cara who helps her put the gown back in the garment bag. “Take it up to her chambers, please.” Cara nods and leaves the room. “This parchment is for your eyes only. I don’t want to be morbid, but I’ve decided to join the fight against my brother. If something should... if something should happen to me... this is for you to read, alone.” She hands me the rolled parchment. I looked up to her in surprise.

“You’re fighting?” I say, my brow creased. The plan was always for her to stay behind with the rest.

“I can’t let others fight my war. I can’t let others fight and die for me if I’m not willing to do it for them.” Her voice is commanding and she seems to stand a little taller as she finishes. “But, enough about the battle. After your coronation, there will be a feast. Everyone from Kyrell is welcome to attend. Do you want to hold the dinner inside or in the garden?”

“I think the garden would be lovely. I’ve come to find comfort in the garden you’ve built.”

“The garden it is then!” she exclaims and we walk out of the throne room, wrapping her arm under mine. “As for the menu, I was thinking we could have Melany decide on that when the time gets closer.”

“I agree. I’ve told Atticus countless times I don’t think I’ve tasted anything of Melany’s that I don’t just absolutely love.” She tosses her head back in laughter.

“You and I both, sweet girl.” She pats the top of my hand. The gesture is so small, but it fills my chest with happiness and a feeling of comfort I haven’t felt since Raine.

The queen and I wrapped up our coronation talk around lunch time. I go to the training yard to find Fallon to see what kind of training is happening today. Fallon, Eiran, and Lisbeth are in the strategy room and everyone's face is laced with concern.

"What's going on?" I ask, looking between the three of them. Fallon opens her mouth, shuts it and ponders how she is going to answer, before opening her mouth to speak.

"There may be an issue with someone inside Kyrell... We think someone has infiltrated our armies." My stomach sinks and my heart follows. "I started thinking about it and the attack on Sander and Atticus didn't seem accidental. There's no way that the soldiers in Elornia would've known about night patrol, unless someone gave them inside information."

"Does Atticus know?" I have countless questions flowing around in my mind right now, but my first concern will always lie with Atticus and his safety.

"Yes. I told both him and Neera before they went on their patrol." The tension is so thick in the room you could cut with a knife. My stomach flips as I think about how much harm this could bring to our kingdom.

"Do we have any idea on who it is?" I ask. If somebody could be feeding Oberon information somehow, that could risk the lives of everyone in Kyrell.

"We have no idea. We don't want to interrogate every member of the guard. So I guess we can try to narrow it down between the three of us and then question a select number of soldiers." That sounds fair, and we all nod in agreement.

Over the next couple of hours we discuss different members of the army, leaving out no one. I don't know anyone as much as the three of them do, but I appreciate them letting me be a part of the meeting. As we continue our conversation, something in my gut keeps nagging me about Neera.

“I know this might sound... crazy, but how well do any of you really know Neera?” They exchange confused glances at one another.

“I guess we don’t really know her too well, why?” Fallon asks. I know Atticus values Neera so I want to be careful with my next choice of words.

“I dont know... it’s probably nothing, but when Atticus was talking about going on patrol with her I got a nagging feeling in my stomach and it’s been fairly insistent all day. Like I said though, it’s probably nothing.” I smile unconvincingly.

“Corvina,” Lisbeth says, reaching her hand out and placing it on mine. “If your instincts are telling you something is off about someone, it’s probably for a reason. Especially with your shifting ability manifesting recently, it’s not unheard of for people to take on traits of the animal they shift into. Even if it’s only a partial shift.”

Fallon chimes in. “Ravens are known to be extremely intelligent birds and are often believed to be messengers. We respect your instinct, but most of all we trust you. So if you say something is off, then something is off. Can you contact Atticus? They’re out in the forest together.” My shoulders sag with relief at the validation of my friends... my family. I call to Atticus through our bond, my heart sinking at the thought of something happening to him. *I’m on my way back to you, little bird. Tell Josephina to ready a bed. My stomach drops. I am fine, love. I’ll explain everything when I get back. See you soon.*

Atticus

My mind is reeling after talking to Fallon this morning. I'm replaying conversations and different encounters trying to decipher who could have infiltrated our army. When Fallon and Eiran first brought up the idea, it didn't seem to make sense, but the more I think about all that's happened recently, it seems entirely possible. The thought makes my heart sink deep into the pit of my stomach.

"Are you well, prince?" Neera places her hand on my upper arm to get my attention. A chill creeps up my spine and causes goosebumps to form along my skin.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. Thank you, Neera." Fallon and I agreed to not tell anyone outside of the high court about our theory until we have more ground to stand on. One of the biggest concerns we have is the safety of everyone in Kyrell. We're walking along the forest line and I can faintly see the Duman Mountain range through the broken and barren trees. I know the mountain range will serve us well, we just have to decide how we want to utilize them. I rotate my shoulder, the pain isn't prominent but the dull ache is still there.

"Where do you think would be the best advantage points for our army?" Neera asks, putting her hand above her eyebrows to

shield her eyes from the high sun.

“I think the mountain range will serve us well, but we also won’t be going out all at once. There will be small sections going out one or two at a time.” I scan the river as we walk towards the mountains. She nods in understanding as I point out and explain the different areas of the range that will serve us the best.

The sound of water splashing loudly catches my attention. I pull my sword out and stand in a fighting stance, my shoulder screams out in protest of the sudden movement. I can see the long wavy blonde hair of a woman swaying in the wind as she runs across the riverbed. Sheathing my sword, I run in the direction as she is, towards Kyrell, in an attempt to stop her. She falls onto the mud as she exits the river’s current.

“Miss. Do you need some help?” I bellow in her direction, her head jolts up in my direction and she stands, walking toward me.

“Hee..l.p. m..e.” Her voice is shaky and barely above a whisper. As I get closer to her, I’m able to see a cut through her lip and bruises along her cheeks. I immediately recognize her nose and bone structure and realize who’s running in my direction. I reach out my arms to her, catching her as she falls.

“H..e.. is... c..o..mi..ng..” she whispers right before she goes limp in my arms. Holding her, I start to run towards home and turn to find Neera, but I can’t find her. I’ll have to come back later to look for her because right now I have to get Raine back to Kyrell.

I rush through the doors of the castle holding a very cold and wet Raine. Heading straight for the healing quarters, I don’t stop until I get there. Josephina is in the room when I push open the doors. She looks up with shock, then down at the woman in my arms, and points to a bed.

“Prince Atticus, who’s this and what’s happened?” she asks as she pulls back the quilt to one of the cots and turns to collect the supplies she’ll need.

“Josephina, this is Raine. She is family and we need to save her. I will let Cordelia, Corvina, and Thatch know she is here, but for now let’s keep it between us and just get her mended. What do you need me to do?”

“Of course, Prince. I do need to strip off her wet clothes, so I’m going to kindly ask you to leave. Just go tell who you need to tell and she will be cleaned and mended by the time you are able to tell them.” She says with a slight smile, I turn to rush out of the room. *Where are you?* I ask Corvina through our bond, searching the castle rooms for Cordelia while I wait. My chest is heavy and I don’t know if it’s because of me or because Corvina knows something is wrong. *I’m in the strategy room. What’s wrong?* I see Cordelia and Reid exiting the dining hall, followed by my mother, Macoy, and Thatch. Perfect. *Come to the castle. Now.*

“Cordelia. Thatch.” I bow my head slightly towards them. “I need to speak to the two of you, Corvina is on her way.” Both of their faces drop in concern of what it might be. Corvina barrels through the castle doors practically gasping for air. Corvina looks towards her mother and nephew before looking towards me.

“What? What is it?” she says. Her voice is shaky and frantic. The panic I’m feeling in my chest has to be hers.

“I was on the patrol with Neera.” I can feel Corvina’s bond reaching out towards mine, trying to claw its way into my thoughts. “A woman ran through the river towards us... it was Raine. I knew it immediately when I saw her. She’s in the healer’s quarters now.” No faster than I say the last word, the three of them take off running down the hall and right through the doors. I follow them, but slowly so that I give them a moment. I don’t know if Raine will be awake or asleep or what she’s had to endure at Oberon’s hand. I think back to Thatch’s vision.

Corvina is at Raine’s side with tears streaming down her face. Raine is cleaned, dressed, and mended just as Josephina said she would be. Josephina looks at me and tilts her head to the

slide slightly, gesturing me to meet her at the opposite side of the room.

“She had cuts and bruises all over her arms, chest, and face. I cleaned them all, thank Nefeli she didn’t need stitching. She does have an infection that I gave her a tonic for. She didn’t wake up for the duration of her treatment and she may not awake for some time. Stress is hard on the body and I imagine she was in a great deal of stress.” Josephina looks over at the bed where they are gathered around Raine. Corvina is holding her hand and even from here I can tell it’s bordering on too tight, but I know she’s too scared to let go.

“Thank you, Josephina. I’ll relay that to them in a moment. I’m going to let them have their space.” She pats my arm and takes her leave through the doors. I walk over to the small fireplace in the corner of the room and put a couple of logs within the opening. It’s getting cooler outside and I know with the sun setting soon the room will feel cooler. Shit. *I’ll be back.* Corvina’s head lifts up slowly, her eyes meeting mine. *I couldn’t find Neera along the edge of the river when Raine came to me. I’m going to talk to Fallon.* She nods and quickly returns her gaze to her sister.

I don’t have to walk far because everyone who’s not in the healer’s quarters is in the dining hall. I walk in the direction of my mother and Fallon, who look like they’re sharing an intense conversation. They both look up at me as I approach them.

“Hello, son,” my mother says, pressing her cheek up against mine. Fallon turns her body to face mine completely. “So, who was it that you brought home?”

“It was Raine. I don’t know how, or if, she escaped or how she got here but I had to bring her to the healers.” My mother nods in agreement. “That’s actually why I came in here, Fallon. Did you happen to see Neera come back through the forest? I somehow lost her during the commotion.” My mother and Fallon look at each other with furrowed brows.

“We were just discussing her, Prince. I think we have a problem.” My heart sinks as Fallon’s words play through my mind. “Corvina has a strong intuition about her.”

“An instinct? What kind of a... oh.” I glide my hand over my chin. “She was asking questions about her this morning and I didn’t think anything of it.”

“After Thatch’s vision, it worries me that she went missing at the same time as the reappearance of Raine.” My mother’s voice is calm, but laced with concern.

“I agree,” Fallon chimes in, nodding her head.

Fuck. Neera is the betrayer? It can’t be. I think back to when the arrows pierced through my skin, I lift my hand and rub my shoulder.

“But she’s been here since the founding of Kyrell? She followed us into the ruins that became Berk?” I question out loud.

“Yes son, she has. But she came as a child of fourteen with nobody else with her. I looked back at the travel manifest I took when we fled Elornia to check.”

Anger sends heat through my veins. *Is everything okay?* This is the last thing she needs to worry about just after getting her sister back.

We’ll talk later, little bird.

“Come with me. This isn’t a conversation to continue out in the open.” My mother motions for us to follow.

She and Fallon enter the meeting chambers first. I stop in front of the chamber doors, looking down the corridor towards the healing quarters and fight the urge to go in there to embrace Corvina. I’m well aware of the insistent heaviness that has been sitting in my chest since I brought Raine back to Kyrell, but the ache radiates as if to remind me it’s still there. Fallon looks at me across the space of the room and tilts her head slightly to her side. I cross the threshold and shut the doors behind me.

“What did Neera know?” My mothers voice is strong and commanding. I run my fingers through my hair, remembering the last conversation I had with her. *Shit.*

Atticus

For the first time since I was young, I can't make eye contact with my mother. I placed too much trust into Neera and disclosed too much, and now I have to let them know everything I told her. Thinking back to our conversation, she knew exactly what to ask and when to ask it.

"She knows our entire plan and she only knows because I told her. At the last patrol, I disclosed our plan of attack right before Raine came running through the water. She... She knows everything." I stammer and sit in one of the chairs along the table.

"Nobody blames you, Atticus. We all trusted her. We are all just as blinded. We will just have to make a new plan." Fallon places her hand on my arm as she sits next to me.

"She's right, son. Nobody's angry. We had no reason to suspect she'd be a traitor. Maybe in an unusual way this gives us an advantage, now that she knows where our army is going to be." I know what they're saying is true, but that doesn't stop the nagging in the pit of my stomach. A reminder that I could've saved Sander's life.

"Neera must have had some kind of insight into the workings of an army, aside from being in ours." Fallon's brow furrows and

she lowers her gaze, shifting her eyes back and forth. “She is incredibly skilled at the bow and arrow. Almost like she had a lifetime of training, even before she came to Kyrell. She also knows how to work a dagger unlike anyone I’ve ever seen. And she’s the only abstract in our lifetime to be able to hijack one’s mind.”

“... and she always asked the right questions. She’s Oberon’s perfect weapon.” Fallon finishes my thought, releasing a drawn out sigh. I tightly clench my jaw, struggling to keep my composure. The tendrils of my shadows begin to pool at my feet.

“My son. You have every right to be angry, but we will figure this out together.” My mother’s voice is soft, reminding me of when she’d comfort Lis and I as children. Fallon clears her throat.

“As for our strategy now, I think we need to fill everyone in on the news about Neera. After everyone knows, we should restructure the grouping of individuals. Neera is an enemy now and she knows the strengths and weaknesses of our entire army. Eiran and I will do that tomorrow after debriefing everyone. Eiran, Atticus, and I will still lead the companies, there will just be changes to the people within them.” Fallon’s voice is shaky and I can tell by the darkness that fills beneath her eyes she’s lost nights of sleep over this upcoming battle. We all have, but many of the citizens within Kyrell don’t remember the first war.

“There’s something else,” my mother says, exchanging looks with Fallon. “King Caspian has sent word. He is willing to give refuge to any who seek it, but he said he can not risk his army. He sends his sincere apologies and says he wishes there was more he can do without endangering the small army he has.” Logistically, there’s no way we can build and ready that many boats by the time this war is going to begin.

“Reid is working tirelessly on the enchantment to protect Kyrell from those who don’t reside here. Even if we can’t get off Avaron, we can still protect those within Kyrell.” My mother looks between the two of us. “Actually, he should be arriving

soon. He said there was something he wanted to talk to us about so I told him to meet us here.” My mother seems optimistic. I find myself questioning even if this enchantment works, how long will it keep everyone safe? There’s a light knocking on the door, and the three of us rise from the table once Reid enters the chambers.

“Queen Kasaia. Prince Atticus. General.” He bows as he acknowledges each of us by title. He’s the only person who refers to Fallon as her title, and by the look on her face, I see she still isn’t a fan.

“Reid, please sit.” My mother motions him to his seat, we all take ours, and she folds her hands on the table before her. “What news did you bring us?”

“As you all know, I have been trying to figure out a way to place a protection enchantment around Kyrell. I wanted one similar to Elornia, but I wanted to design it differently so that their mage couldn’t undo what I cast easily.” He takes a deep breath. “I’ve reached out to other kingdoms, conferred with the few mages in Kyrell and... I think I have something that will work.”

“Just the kind of good news we needed after our most recent bad news.” My mother’s smile widens and she clasps her hands together. “Is there anything you need for the enchantment? How can we help?”

“Well, actually Queen Kasaia. This is unusual, but I’ll need blood from the royal family. Just one single drop of each of you. That would mean you, Atticus, Lisbeth, and...” His eyes darted to me quickly. “Corvina of course, since she’s in a sealed soul bound to Atticus. This can be done at the coronation in two days’ time.”

“Blood magic hasn’t been used on Avaron in several decades, Reid. It was forbidden.” My mother narrows her eyes. “Is there a reason you deemed it necessary?” She lifts her chin slightly, waiting for his response.

“I’ve talked to everyone I could find. I’ve read all of the books in the library, including the forbidden section. In all the correspondence I’ve had with other kingdoms and the mages here within our own kingdom, everyone says the same thing. Blood magic is the only way to protect Kyrell with an unbreakable enchantment.” His voice is laced with panic and he’s stumbling on his words.

Blood magic was made forbidden when my great-grandparents ruled Elornia. The mage who used this specific form of magic became obsessed with the surge of power he was given by Duman, the god of the abyss. Despite where he rules, Duman isn’t wicked. But, his magic is the most uncontrollable. According to my great-grandfather’s account, once the mage felt Duman’s power surging through his body he began to crave it. His craving became insatiable and he eventually lost himself to the power. Reid even suggesting this means that we have no other way to protect the people that live within Kyrell.

“I will discuss it with Atticus, Lisbeth, and Corvina. Being tied to blood magic can be a danger to everyone involved and I won’t agree to anything without discussing it first.” My mother stands and folds her hands in front of herself. Reid takes the cue and rises from the chair.

“I hope I didn’t offend you, Queen Kasaia. I’m only trying to protect Kyrell and everyone who lives within it.” My mother glides over to the door of the chambers and opens it, expressing to Reid that she’s not offended. Shutting the door once he’s gone, she turns to me and Fallon.

“I think that’s enough excitement for one day. It’s time for dinner. Atticus, I will ask Melany to bring food to everyone in the healers quarters. Fallon, if you and Eiran would rather dine in your chambers tonight, I’d understand.” We all say our goodbyes and go in separate directions.

I assess the room as I enter the healing quarters. I'm on high alert with everything happening, and until Reid is able to enchant a barrier, I don't see myself being able to relax. Corvina is still in the same spot as when I left earlier, right next to the bed. She's still holding onto Raine's hand and staring at her with pleading eyes. We've shared this hollow feeling since Raine was put into the healing quarters and I don't foresee it going away any time soon, just too much has happened. I stalk across the room and lightly press my hand on Corvina's back. She looks up at me, her eyes sag in exhaustion.

"Any change?" Tears form along the brim of her lower lashes as she shakes her head back and forth. "Why don't you go to our chambers, take a bath, and a quick nap. I'll have Melany bring some food to you up there." She quickly glances back at Raine, I can sense her desire to follow my request, but I also sense her hesitation.

"I want to be here if she wakes up." Her use of *if* makes my heart sink. I brush a strand of hair out of her face.

"*When*, little bird. When she wakes up, because she will." I cup her cheek in the palm of my hand. She feels so frail under my palm. "I will sit here and wait. You need rest too. You have to take care of yourself, love." She sucks in a deep breath, holding it for a moment before releasing. She's reluctant to leave and I do understand why, but my first concern will always be her.

Corvina

Atticus is insistent that I go to our chambers to rest, my mind is reeling with thoughts. What if I leave and she wakes up? What if she doesn't wake up? What if she never does? It's a never ending cycle of questions flowing through my mind. It's just Atticus and I in the room with Raine. My mother left a while ago and Thatch left shortly after. Neither gave reason for their departure, but I assume my mother was riddled with guilt and Thatch felt grief. I can see the worry heavy behind Atticus's eyes. I know he's worried about me, but the only thing I can think of is Raine healing.

Reluctantly, I decide to take Atticus's advice and depart to our chambers. My hips ache as I move to a standing position, they feel tight from sitting as long as I have been. I know they will welcome the comfort of a warm bath. I look back at Atticus as I walk through the doors, he looks up at me with a soft smile and gives me a slight nod. *I'll be here when you come back. I won't leave her, I promise.* My brain doesn't process the walk from the healing quarters to our chambers. It was as if one moment I was there and the next I'm standing next to our bed. I look around the chambers and even though I've found a home here in Kyrell, with Atticus, I am looking around the room as if it's someone else's. My chest feels hollow and aches to feel whole.

When I enter my bathing suite, I find unlit candles and a basket filled with a variety of oil vials and satchels with salt mixtures. The handwriting on each vial and the tags on the small mesh satchels belongs to my mother, and describes to me the contents of each. I lift up one with thick salt crystals and dried rose petals, *Use with rose oil for encouraging feelings of love and balance*, written on the tag. I set it back into the basket and lift up one that I can see has lavender flowers, *Use with eucalyptus oil to relax your mind and muscles*, the tag reads. I hold the satchel against my chest and close my eyes tight. This is exactly what I need.

I hang the satchel over the faucet so that the water runs directly over it as the water disperses. The smell of eucalyptus fills the air, followed by a subtle hint of lavender. My muscles and hips rejoice as I sink myself deeper into the depth of the bathtub.

Once I near the end of my bath some time later, I take a deep breath and send down to Atticus. *Anything?* I ask him. *Still no change, my love.* I let out a sigh and brace both hands on the sides of the tub before lifting myself out of the water. I dress lightly in a gray cotton dress. A knock steals my attention away from my reflection in the mirror as I brush my hair. Melany is in the hallway and lifts the tray she has in her hand.

“The Prince asked me ta have this brought to ya m’lady.” She hands me the tray and gives me a slight smile. There’s something about her that’s so calming.

“Thank you, Melany. I appreciate all that you do.” I smile as I take the tray from her. The smell of the broth on the tray causes my stomach to grumble.

I’m laying in the bed fast asleep and I hear the door click open, quickly clicking shut shortly after. The sound of the door locking mechanism moving into place follows. I can sense hesitation from them, I peak out of the corner of my eye but only

slightly so that they still appear closed. The moon is shining in through the open windows enough for me to see the dark shape of a familiar body. I open my eyes and see Atticus rushing towards the bed, I jolt up to a sitting position.

“Was there change?!” My mind races back to Raine. I must have fallen asleep at some point after eating. I only meant to close my eyes for a moment. I throw the quilt off of me and jump out of the bed, fumbling with my flats as I try to slip them on.

Atticus moves his body in front of mine and begins to gently move my hair off my shoulders, exposing my neck. I’m unsure of the reason, but the action causes my stomach to flip in a way that hasn’t happened since the night with Kane.

“Atticus what’s wrong? You’re frightening me.” A lump forms in my throat and I look up into his eyes. I see nothing. No life. No love. Nothing. They are just... empty and cold. He doesn’t respond as he looks into my eyes. He just stares blankly for a moment before taking his hands and wrapping them around my throat.

Panic builds in my chest... I’m scratching at his hands and wrists trying to escape from his hold, but he’s too strong. I’m pleading with my eyes for him to release me, trying to reach him through our bond but it feels like I’m reaching into a large dark void. Why can’t he hear me? Why can’t I reach him? My vision begins to blur as dark spots appear. I know my end is near...

I jolt out of my slumber. Cold sweat has drenched through my clothing and is all over my bed sheets. I push my soaked hair away from my forehead, it sticks to my skin around my neck. *Are you okay? What’s happened?* I can hear the panic in Atticus’s tone as he asks. My heart is racing and I know I need to calm myself, but the panic is so strong. I close my eyes.

One.

Two. It was just a dream.

Three.

Four. It wasn't real.

Five.

Just a dream. Just a really bad dream. I know from his reaction that he can tell it wasn't just a dream. I examine my reflection in the mirror, searching for any markings on my neck. Unsurprisingly I find none, but I can still feel his hands wrapped around my neck.

I can't make eye contact with Atticus as he stands upon my entrance into the room. I can feel his confusion from the lack of eye contact, but I'm still unsure of how to bring myself to tell him what I dreamt.

"Hel... lo." The voice is just below a whisper and raspy. But I know that voice. I run to the side of her bed, tears streaming down my face as a laugh escapes my throat.

"Raine?" My voice is shaky. "Can you hear me?" I take her hand in mine, holding probably too tight. I never thought I'd get the opportunity again.

"Co..ra?" Her eyes flutter open and my heart sinks. Atticus adjusts her pillows and helps her sit up before handing her a glass of water.

"Hi, Sissy," I say. "Do you need anything? Do you need something to eat? I bet you're starving." I want to offer her a hundred more things. My mouth is speaking faster than I mean it too so I'm jumbling over my words.

"Th...a...tch," she says. Her eyes begging for reassurance that he's here. That he's safe.

"I'll go get him," Atticus offers. *And your mother? Or should I wait for that reunion.* He smiles at her while he asks me that in my mind. *Definitely wait.* He nods and leaves the room. My sister's eyes roll in my direction, raising a brow slightly and giving me a small smirk.

The doors to the healing quarters fly open and Thatch practically jumps on Raine as he stumbles through the room.

They're both sobbing and Raine is smothering his face in kisses. Atticus follows into the room a moment later, looking at me and tilting his head just slightly for me to come to him. I look back at my sister and her son as I walk towards Atticus, they're so wrapped up in their own world they won't notice I'm gone.

"What was your dream, Corvina?" he says sternly. The tone takes me by surprise. I take a deep breath and calm my racing thoughts before opening my mouth to speak.

"You strangled me. But your eyes were void... you were so empty. It was terrifying, but it felt as real as you and I standing here now." My voice shakes as I recall the dream. I outstretch my fingers before balling them back into fists.

"I hope you know I'd never hurt you. If I ever try, I beg you to drive a dagger into my heart." He looks to the ground and pinches the bridge of his nose.

I grab his hand and place mine within his. "I know you would never hurt me. It was a terrifying bad dream, but that's all it was. A dream. A nightmare. It's just taking me a moment to settle my nerves. It wasn't because I feel like you'd hurt me. Before we left Elornia..." I take another deep breath. "I know I've touched on this before, but I did have a friend, I say that term loosely, who became aggressive with me. Ardin, Raine's soul bound, saved me. But he still hurt me before he got there." My heart aches at the thought of Ardin.

"His name?" Atticus's shadows swirl around him. "When we meet Oberon's army I will make sure I'm the one who takes his life. He will look into my eyes as I drain the life from him."

"His name is Kane. He is somatic and in the king's guard, so I'm sure we will see him at the battle."

"Perfect." He turns and walks away, his shadows swirling behind him. I can feel the anger festering in his chest.

Thatch comes out of the room, peeking his head out of the door. “Mama’s asking for you, Auntie. Josephina gave her some tea to help her sore throat.” He wraps his arms around my waist before running off. I push the door open and see Raine sitting on the side of the bed talking to Josephina as she does her check. She has a little bit of her glow back, but you can still see the toll exhaustion has taken on her. As I approach, Josephina smiles at me and walks away from the area around Raine’s bed.

“Josephina says I’m doing exceptionally well, but to continue resting.” Her voice is almost back to normal and that brings a joy to my heart I didn’t think I’d feel again.

“Of course.” I take a deep breath. “Raine, there’s something I didn’t tell you earlier. I wanted to wait until you were feeling better.” Her eyebrows rise. “When I was injured, Atticus took me to the town healer. I didn’t know it until we got back to Kyrell, but you and I know her.” Her face drops and I know there’s no need for more explanation.

“Are you okay?” She asks, her eyes angry. I nod, and she continues. “Where is she?”

My stomach is in knots.

“I can have Josephina get her. She’s the high healer of Kyrell, so Josephina works closely with her.”

“Please do, sister. I have waited fifteen long years to have this conversation with her.” She purses her lips. I know Raine wouldn’t ever tell me or complain, but I know she resents the way she had to raise me. No sister should have to raise their little sister when they are just children themselves.

The tension in the air when my mother enters the quarters is so thick, I can cut it with my dagger. My sister is angry and she has every right to be. My mother fails to make eye contact with her, but my sister stands strong in her gaze.

“Mother,” Raine says, the tone in her voice surprises me. Raine has always been so light and happy, but this voice is something else.

“Hello, daughter. I’m glad you’re here in Kyrell and...” My mothers voice is low and full of shame.

“Don’t you daughter me and don’t you tell me how GLAD you are that I’m here in Kyrell when Corvina and I could’ve been here with you the entire time.” My sister’s body is shaking. “You CHOSE to leave your twelve and eighteen year old daughters to fend for themselves. You CHOSE not to come back for us. So you lost all right to ‘*daughter*’ me.” She spits.

“I know I can never apologize enough... But I am sorry, and Corvina has found it in her heart...” My mothers voice is cut off by my sister’s laugh.

“Corvina has forgiven you because *I* raised her to be a good human.” My sister places her hand over her chest. “She has forgiven you because *I* raised her to be understanding and loving.” My sister rolls her eyes. “You get no credit in how amazing Corvina has become, because I raised her.” My sister’s chest rises as she inhales a deep breath. “You left me to raise her. You have no idea how much anger has flooded in my veins for you for the last fifteen years. So don’t expect any hugs or love from me.” My sister turns away from my mother and waves her hand dismissively towards her.

Corvina

The next day came and went so quickly. Since Atticus and I share chambers now, Raine was able to move into the ones that previously belonged to Atticus. We immediately started discussing painting the room and went to work on the color scheme. Raine is definitely not a dark and moody color palette type of girl. Picking out paint for the walls in the castle reminded me of painting the walls of our home in Elornia and it tugged on my heart.

I know she felt the same longing and heartache for our home, not the kingdom itself, but the home we built when we were left to raise ourselves.

We haven't talked about Ardin or the loss of her soul bound. After meeting Atticus, I can't even imagine the pain she felt. The connection of the soul bound is all consuming, and there are some days where all I can think about is losing myself in his touch. I can't imagine the severance of a bond like that.

"Thatch's quarters are on the same floor?" Raine's question breaks me from my train of thought.

"Yes. All of the high court's chambers are along this corridor, Queen Kasaia's being at the end of the hall. Thatch isn't technically on the high court, but you guys are part of the royal

family now.” I still can’t fathom how much of a change all of this is for her.

“Will I have a job?” Her voice is lined with apprehension.

“When you think you’re ready, you can work anywhere you’d like. I bet you’d really get along with the seamstress. You can finally utilize your love for design.” I smile at her.

“We... just choose our jobs?” Her brows furrow.

“It took me a while to get used to it as well. I still try to go to the village when I have time to work in the garden. They are very welcoming!”

“Maybe I’ll talk to the seamstress then. I’m feeling much better and I don’t think I can sit still much longer.” She lets out a laugh, and her head falls back. I missed that laugh.

“I can walk over to the village with you, if you like. She lives there but works out of a shop in the marketplace.” *We’re going down to the village to speak with Viviana.* I say to Atticus, he doesn’t answer. I know he’s frustrated and I know it’s not with me, but I still have an uneasiness in the pit of my stomach that I can’t seem to be rid of.

My sister and I walk arm in arm through the dahlia garden, passing through the makeshift village, and the kingdom’s produce garden. Just beyond is the permanent one of Kyrell. The buildings are all made of dark stone blocks, and the doors and windows are framed with dark wood. I’ve only heard stories of this village by Atticus, but up until this moment I’ve never had reason to venture past the garden.

Walking through the village roads, arm in arm with my sister, feels so familiar and comforting. We see the wooden sign painted with the image of scissors and a spool of thread, one end fed through the eye of a needle. “This must be it,” I say, entering the building. Viviana is working on a gown draped on a bust in

the back of the shop. I can see the curls of her ashy blonde hair bob up and down as she pins needles into the fabric.

“I’ll be right with you!” she hollers without looking up from her project. I run my fingers along the various fabrics she has hanging from the wall.

There are so many beautiful colors and textures. I let my mind wander quickly to the fabric choice of my wedding gown. Now that Raine is safe with us in Kyrell, I don’t feel guilty thinking about something that makes me so happy.

“What can I...” her voice trails off and her tone quickly changes as I turn around. “Oh, Princess! I’m so sorry to keep you waiting. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Just Corvina, Viviana.” I smile. “This is my sister, Raine. She has a deep love for design and is new to Kyrell. We were hoping you were looking for some help in your shop. Possibly an apprentice.”

“Actually, I am. With the influx of people after the displacement, I am swamped. When can you begin?” Viviana says to my sister.

“Is tomorrow ok?” Raine asks, nervously twirling her hair in between two fingers.

“How about the day after? The whole town is closed tomorrow for the coronation.” Shit. I forgot about my coronation. Raine’s eyes dart to me quickly before returning them to Viviana.

“Two days is perfect.” Raine extends her hand out to Viviana, who accepts the gesture and shakes her hand. We leave the building and decide to stay and explore the village. The familiar smell of freshly baked bread and pastries fill the air as we walk through the sheets.

“So. Coronation, huh?” my sister says, squeezing the top of my hand. “I never thought we’d ever be anything more than

laborers. Now you're a princess. I don't think the gods could've chosen anyone better to rule, Cora." She beams with pride.

"It's weird. I know. It's SO weird." I laugh. "When I met Atticus, I felt that tug you always talked about with Ardin, but I never realized what it would feel like. I was surprised when he told me he was a prince." Her face pales. "Shit, Raine. I'm sorry. I wasn't even thinking." She shakes her head and smiles.

"He wouldn't want me to live my life feeling sorrow anytime his name was spoken. I know my Ardin and he would want us to talk about him often. I know he was a man of few words, sister, but he loved you so much. His memory lives on in Thatch..." She chokes on a sob. "... I missed my monthly bleeding the day before Thatch's manifesting. I'm so excited to have another piece of Ardin, but I don't know the first thing about raising a child alone." My chest aches for her.

"Does Thatch know?" She nods, and I wrap her into an embrace. "Another nephew or a niece?" My heart is soaring with excitement. "You'll never be alone, sister." I love being an aunt to Thatch and I can't wait to be able to dote on this baby. I know my sister and Ardin struggled to conceive after Thatch. After the loss of their second, my sister and Ardin decided to stop trying for another. I squeeze my arms around my sister's neck.

Are you still in the village? Atticus's voice fills my mind, taking me by surprise. *We are.* I responded, still slightly annoyed he didn't respond to me earlier. *There's something going on along the tree line. Fallon was on patrol and told Eiran. I'm on my way now.* The tree line? I'm closer than he is. I can be there quicker and it's time he starts letting me help.

I turn to Raine. "We are not done talking about this, but I have to go check on something. Can you find your way back to the castle?"

"Yeah, it was pretty easy. I'll probably stop at the garden on the way back. Are you okay?" she asks, her voice full of concern.

“Yeah. Everything’s fine. I was alerted to a disturbance on the forest line, and I’m just going to check it out. I’ll be careful,” I respond and open the back panels Viviana has sewn into a majority of my gowns to accommodate my wings. My sister’s eyes grow wide as my wings sprout from my shoulder blades.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that.” She lets out a huff. I warned her of my new abilities, but seeing is different than hearing. I give her a quick hug before I run towards the edge of the village. *I’ll meet Fallon there.* I tell Atticus, not leaving any room or time for disagreement before I push off into the sky.

I soar above the tree line and slightly into the bottom of the clouds. I can see a few soldiers nearing the Forest of Senka, I count six. No, seven soldiers. I spot Fallon running through the trees towards the edge of the forest, so I drop down to a space ahead of her. The ground is slick as I land into the mud before Fallon, taking off into a run to try and keep up pace with her.

“Does Atticus know?” she says breathlessly as she appears at my side. I’ll fill her in on our disagreement later.

“I told him I’d be coming to stand with you, he should be arriving soon,” I respond as I match her strides.

“I don’t think he was expecting to be soul bounded to someone who would constantly challenge him. It’s fun to watch.” She lets out a laugh.

“I think he would be bored far too easily if it was anyone else.” I raise a brow. We slow as we near the edge of the forest line.

“By the power given to me by Queen Kasaia, what is your business here?” Fallon shouts. The soldiers have their heads down and fail to respond to her. “I will not ask you again, what is your business?”

The leading soldier lifts his head up and my blood runs cold. My knees threaten to buckle under the weight of my body, which

is now feeling incredibly heavy. His eyes narrow when he looks upon me. Anger that I've come to know all too well fills his glare. He lifts his hand up to the soldiers behind him, signaling them to halt their movements. They are still by his command. My blood runs cold.

“Ah... Hello again, Pet.”

Kane.

Atticus

I can feel the coldness practically fill her veins. Something is wrong. Very wrong. I reach for her through our bond, but the darkness that steals her thoughts hinders my grasp. *Little bird, speak to me. What's wrong?* No response. I'm running as fast as I can in human form, my instinct is telling me to shift, but my muscles aren't fully healed.

My shoulder blade hisses in pain. This isn't from my previous injury. No, this is something else. Corvina's scream ricochets off the trees, causing the birds to take flight. *Corvina.* My muscles burn as I push them to their limit. I've never wished for the ability to mind speak with Fallon as much as I do at this moment. I know she's near Corvina. Fallon is strong, one of the strongest somatics I have ever known.

I can see black wings on the floor, Fallon is pulling Corvina by her shoulders with tears streaming down her face. Near them is a man I'm unfamiliar with, but when I see the outline of a blue crest, I understand the unfamiliarity. Flanking the man are six other soldiers, Oberon's men. The man in the middle has a sadistic smile on his face and it makes me think he's enjoying the pain he's just inflicted on my soul bound. I slow to a walk as I near Fallon and Corvina.

“Oh my gods, Atticus. I’m so glad you’re here.” Fallon sobs. “I don’t know what happened. Corvina was standing next to me and the next thing I knew she was frozen. She wouldn’t move. Then something flew by us and then she was on the ground.” She takes a shaky breath. “I think they threw something at her.”

“My... wing,” Corvina chokes out, looking up at me with tear filled eyes. “I... heard... it snapped,” she sighs. That explains the pain in my shoulder blade.

“Can you stand, my love?” I take Corvina from Fallon’s hold and try to stand her up. Her legs wobble for a moment before she nods and stands without movement. “Take her to the castle, Fallon. She needs to go to Cordelia. She will know what to do and how to heal the wound to your wing.” The man in the middle interrupts my sentence.

“I wouldn’t waste my time with that whore.” He spits on the ground near him. Red begins to flood my vision, sending heat through my veins.

“What the fuck did he just say?” I look at Fallon before turning my gaze to Corvina. I’m going to enjoy cutting this man’s neck.

“It’s Kane.” Corvina’s voice is barely above a whisper, fear filling her eyes.

I narrow my eyes. “Take her home. Now, Fallon.” Then I slowly turn to face the soldiers standing before me. “Which one of you is responsible for her wing?” Kane’s eyebrow raises.

They all remain silent, Kane smirks. I snake my shadows out from under me and will them to close the space between myself and the group before me. Kane is unphased, but the other six begin to look around at one another. Panic fills their eyes. The tendrils of my shadows begin to crawl up their legs.

“It was Kane! He threw the rock.” One of them bellows, but my eyes are fixed on Kane. My blood boils as he holds my stare.

“Do you see how easily they betray you?” My shadows creep up everyone, with the exception of Kane.

“Please... Oh gods. We’ll go back to Elornia,” one of the others pleads as my shadows engulf their bodies.

“I can’t let you do that,” I respond, my voice eerily flat. He’s the first that I take the life of, my shadows wrapping around his neck.

“Oh gods,” another whimpers as the shadows seep into their head. Blood escapes her ears first, then her eyes, and finally trickles out of her nose and mouth as my shadows liquify her brain. The others remain quiet as they wait for the impending death. Kane and I maintain an unwavering stare down throughout the deaths of his soldiers.

“Your turn.” My voice is low. I call my shadows back to me. I unsheath my sword and stand ready for the fight. Kane bellows a laugh, tossing his head back before returning his gaze to me.

“You want to fight me over some... whore?” Anger blurs my vision and I charge with my shadows behind me.

Kane’s sword is in the air and it hits mine with a loud roar of the metal. I swerve his attempt and block with my sword, the edge of his sword knicks my forearm. I do not show the pain that is now stinging my arm. I cut his cheek, he lets out an angry groan and reaches up to touch his face, pulling back his hand to reveal blood on the tips of his fingers. He hisses and swings his sword with frenzy.

Our swords clink when they hit as we move back and forth. I almost lose my footing while we stumble across the pebbles and rocks that line the river. With one fluid motion, Kane hits the sword out of my grasp, slicing my hand in the process. I wield my shadows to surround him, wrapping their tendrils around his ankles and pulling him to the ground. I place my boot on his chest and pull the hidden dagger out from within. My shadows are holding him down, he struggles, but is exhausted from the fight, and his injury has hindered his ability slightly.

“Any last words?” I say through my teeth, holding the dagger to his throat. All I can think about is the feeling of my dagger slicing through his skin.

“Neera was a good fuck, but an even better spy. You should check on your queen.” I place my dagger onto his throat, wielding my shadows to creep into his brain. I don’t remove my eyes from his as they grow large and blood starts to drain from his ears. Slowly, I slide the dagger across his throat and watch the blood gush out of the wound. After the life drains from his eyes, I check for a pulse before taking off in a sprint to the castle.

I run up the steps to the castle before crashing through the castle doors. “Mother?!” I yell out. The staff all look concerned. “Where is the queen?” My voice is filled with panic. Everyone is shaking their heads. I run into the meeting chambers. The room is dark and my mother’s chair is facing away from the door.

“Hello, Prince.” The chair turns around to reveal Neera sitting there, playing with her dagger.

“Neera,” I seeth. “What did you do to my mother?” My fists are tightly clenched into fists.

“That isn’t the proper question to ask.” She smiles. “First, ask me who I really am.” I don’t give a shit who she really is, but I ask anyway.

“Who are you, Neera?” Besides a traitorous bitch. I don’t want to say anything to set her off, so I keep it to myself.

“Well, prince. I’m your cousin.” The blood drains from my face. “You see, my father always knew the Elorinan throne was his birthright. But your bitch of a mother stole it from him. So when my father decided it was time to get his throne and your mother escaped after the siege, he knew he needed someone to infiltrate and wait until the perfect time to strike.”

“But nobody knew Oberon had a child?” I’m so confused, but I focus my face to stay stoic so I can get as much information as

possible.

“Well, my father has taken countless lovers and has had many children. I was born from his housekeeper. Once we were born, we were stripped from our mothers and placed in a compound with tutors and sparring instructors. Once our abilities manifested, we were released to live in Elornia and given a mission. I am my father’s favorite, so I was tasked with the biggest mission of all: killing his sister.” My chest tightens. “I succeeded.” She smirks and my blood boils.

Atticus. What’s Wrong? Corvina begs through our bond. The dagger I just used to kill Kane is sheathed back into my boot. I’ve seen Neera aim and shoot, so I’m not sure if I’ll have time to unsheath it.

“Tsk. tsk. Tsk. Prince.” Neera wiggles her finger back and forth. “As I said, we were given a mission and I succeeded. I am released from my father’s command. I am finally free from my father’s hold.” She closes her eyes and releases a shuddering breath as she drives the dagger just below her breastbone.

Instinctively, I run to her. Moving her to the ground and laying her head down. I’m so angry at her betrayal, but she was a victim in her own way. Raised to believe this was the purpose of her entire life. That makes me sad for her, in some fucked up way.

She looks up at me with grief filled eyes, her breathing goes ragged as blood seeps out of the corner of her mouth. She gurgles on the blood that is filling her mouth and gasps for breath before going limp in my arms.

I lay her down on the ground, running my hand over her empty eyes.

Now, I have to find my mother and hope Neera has failed.

Atticus

I need you and the whole high court to meet me in the main room, immediately. Tell Fallon to relay to Eiran. She doesn't respond, but I know she hears me.

I see Reid and I stop him.

"I need everyone in the main room now. Please get Cordelia and Thatch." He nods as Fallon and Corvina come up the stairs of the castle and enter the main doors, Eiran follows. Cordelia comes down the hallway with Thatch.

"Does anyone know where Macoy is?" Everyone shrugs and shakes their heads. "Someone can update her when they see her. We don't have time. Neera snuck into the castle. I don't know when she came back, but she did. I'll fill you all in on the details she disclosed to me later, but she claimed her life's mission was to kill the queen." Everyone lets out a collective gasp. "She said she succeeded, but impaled herself with her dagger before she said anything else. We need to find the queen." Everyone nods and mumbles in understanding and begins to leave the group.

We split up in different areas of the castle grounds. Corvina goes into the dahlia garden, Reid and Cordelia go to her chambers, and Fallon goes to the strategy room. I branch off from everyone and go into the throne room, a lump forms in my

throat as a dry sweet metallic scent fills my nose. I know I'm unprepared for what I'm going to find. The light from the moon fills the room, its reflection bounces off of a dark liquid puddle. I move closer to investigate and as I near I can see the outline of my mother's face. My stomach sinks, bile rises in my throat, and I want to vomit. *Find Lis and keep her away from the throne room. Alert the high court that I found her.*

People come and go from the throne room, but I remain next to where I found my mother. I can't get up. My limbs feel heavy and my mind is consumed in a dark cloud. Reid comes to take my mother's corpse and Melany follows soon after to clean up the blood, tears streaming down her face in silence.

Melany demanded to help clean up. She and my mother had been friends for a long time and she didn't want any others seeing my mother in such a state. I don't even know what to feel or what to think. I just feel so weighed down. People look to me for guidance, but I don't know what to say.

Corvina comes into the throne room and sits down next to me. My eyes are fixated on the blood stain on the marble floor. My mother's blood. She clears her throat and says, "I know it's insensitive and I'm so sorry. The high court says we should still do our coronation tomorrow, as planned." She reaches out to touch my hand, I pull back. It has nothing to do with her... I just don't want to be touched right now.

"Fine," I respond, standing for the first time in what could be hours, and leave the room.

We can't meet in the meeting chambers since it is also in the process of being cleaned. There's been so much death, a thick cloud of grief is resting within the walls of the castle. The high court meets in the strategy room instead. Corvina and I take our new places at the head of the table, my heart aches in the absence of my mother.

“I know this meeting is anything but joyful. My mother was a wonderful queen and will be deeply missed.” Lisbeth releases a choked sob, but I can’t look at her. Grief overwhelms me. Guilt festers in my gut like a parasite, eating me alive. “Corvina and I will have a small coronation tomorrow, but there will be no feast. No celebration.” My tone is strong and steady, but I feel the exact opposite. I can feel everyone’s worried gazes burning holes into me, a desire to run away builds up in my chest. “I know my mother would’ve wanted something large and grand, but I just... I can’t right now. Anything else anyone would like to discuss?” I cross my arms in front of my chest, hoping it shields me from their judgment.

“No, Atticus... King Atticus. I think that is it, for now,” Cordelia says. “However. We will have to discuss your mother’s funeral arrangements when you’re ready.” *King*. I don’t think I’m ready for that title, but I was left with no choice. Oberon took that from me.

Corvina and I are the last in the strategy room after everyone else leaves. I can feel the weight of her concerns weighing down my body, as if I didn’t feel heavy enough.

“Say what you want to say, Corvina.” The harshness in my voice causes her to jolt back. I don’t blame her. The anger I feel is making it hard for me to be around myself.

“I’m just worried, Atticus. I... I can’t feel you anymore.” Tears begin to line her lashes and she bites down on her lower lip. I want to scoop her up into my arms and tell her how sorry I am for being this way. But I don’t because I can’t. Anger is an all consuming monster and when you get angry enough, not even love can break through.

“I’m... fine, Corvina. Let’s just get the coronation over with and we can move on. We can begin the plan of attack for Oberon and Elornia.” I stand and push the chair under the table, slamming it harder than I mean to.

“Will you come to bed with me tonight?” she says, her tone riddled with hope. But I can’t be around her when I’m like this. I can’t be around anyone.

“I’m going to sit outside for a while.” She opens her mouth to speak, I’m assuming it’s to offer to sit with me while I think. “Alone.” Her face falls and she looks to the ground before leaving the room. Fuck. She doesn’t deserve any of this.

Grief has a mind of its own, doesn’t it? It’s been only a short time since the loss of my mother and I feel like I’m never going to be the same again. The joy in little things seems so fickle now when all I can think about is revenge. I’ve found myself searching the halls or expecting her as I turn a corner. Only to be disappointed when I close my eyes and see the outline of my mother’s face, her eyes closed like she’s sleeping but I know she’ll never wake again. I’ve told Corvina not to let her pain make her numb, but right now being numb is the only thing I want to be.

I never went to our chambers last night. After our encounter, I sat at the oceanside until the sun began to rise. I didn’t even realize how much time had passed.

I walk up the stairs that follow the cliffside and through the garden, managing to steer clear of everyone scurrying to get ready for the coronation.

I go to the training yard to release some steam on a sparring mannequin, better a fake body than someone else. I unsheath my sword and hit the mannequin over and over and over, anger blurs my vision. Without realizing what’s happening, my teeth begin to elongate and sharpen. I drop my sword as my bones begin to crack, pain radiating through my still healing shoulder. All I can see is the blood pooling around my mother, the open wound in her abdomen. Visions of Neera stabbing herself play in my mind in tandem with those of my mother. I’ve seen battle, hell I’ve taken so many lives myself. I welcome the pain that’s shooting through my bones and muscles, I’m glad to know I can

still feel something. My thick black fur erupts from their follicles and I take off running, leaving Kyrell and everyone in it behind me.

I run through the trees, feeling the crisp air glide across my fur. I didn't realize how much I've missed this freedom. My grief is burning through my veins, filling me with red hot anger. I can't think of anything else but the blood escaping my mother's mouth as I run through the mud, my vision narrowing on what's in front of me. I wonder if there's a way for me to get into Elornia, a way for me to kill Oberon myself. He will pay one way or another for the life of my mother. Tears threaten to escape my eyes, I shake my head to combat their impending fall.

I'm near the river's edge and instead of stopping, I cross the currents and follow the edge almost to Berk. I haven't been back since we left after the attack. As I pass over the slight hill, my heart sinks when I find the village turned to rubble and ash. All of the hard work my mother put into this city as a refugee to those who sought it out. I walk through the buildings, entering what remains of the village, and throw my head back and let out a howl.

"Well, look what we have here. A dog," a voice behind me says. The hair along my spine rises as I show my teeth, letting out a growl in warning. "Aw. Don't be like that. We can be friends if you're a good boy, *King Atticus*." An evil smile erupts across his lips.

He's tall, but not taller than me when I'm in human form, but definitely wider. He's bald and grumpy looking, a series of scars cover the left side of his face. His eye looks to be permanently closed and his nose is bent, most likely broken and never set back probably. I let out a huff, in wolf form I can't communicate with him. He's playing with some kind of marble, running it in between his fingers.

He spits on the ground next to him. "I'm Bash, this is Davian." A man appears from behind him. Davian is much smaller and younger than Bash, looks to be no more than Lisbeth's age.

Markings cover his arms and the exposed skin of his chest. His shaggy light brown hair falls in front of his face, but his eyes are unblocked.

Bash whistles, snaps his fingers, and points in my direction. I try to move my paws, but they don't move. Why can't I move? I look towards Davian as he walks in my direction. He seems to be shivering, and the dark circles under his eyes show me he's exhausted. He turns to look at Bash, who's preoccupied with the marble in his hand, and lowers his head to me.

"I'm incredibly sorry for what I'm about to do." He looks back at Bash again. "Oberon became my guardian once I manifested my abilities..." I sniff him, he's a shadow walker.

"What's taking so long, boy?!" Bash yells. "I set the enchantment to trap him and shield his abilities, you were supposed to transport. You're not supposed to try to make friends. Hurry your ass." Davian looks at me and lowers his head, mouthing *I'm sorry* before we are covered in shadows and everything goes black.

Corvina

I awake to a cold and empty bed, my chest aches in longing for Atticus as I run my hand over his pillow. He's so deeply consumed by his grief, I fear he'll never come out. As soon as the sun fills my room with light, it's flooded with people. Melany brings food and snacks, Fallon and Lisbeth comes for moral support in Atticus's absence, and Raine wants to help with my hair and cinch up my dress. The morning goes by so fast, and Atticus is nowhere to be found.

I go to my jewelry box to get out my ring and some other jewels, putting on matching a gold necklace and earrings that are simple with a single moissanite dangling from the chains. My eyes sting as I slide my ring onto my finger as I remember the story behind it, the love of King Berk and Queen Kasaia. Then a thought jumps out at me, making me sigh as I remember the parchment Queen Kasaia gave me in the event something should happen to her. I go to my dresser and dig around for the rolled up parchment. I unwrap it and it read:

My dearest Corvina,

If you're reading this, something has happened to me and I have left this world. This leaves the fate of Kyrell in the hands of yourself and Atticus. Tell him not to worry about me, I have no doubt his father

is waiting on the threshold of wherever we land once our time is up. Lisbeth will be okay, she may struggle for some time, understandably so, but she's always been resilient. She will have you as a strong role model and I couldn't be more proud of the relationship the two of you have developed.

I do worry for Atticus. He will shut down and he will let his anger consume him, as he did with the loss of his father. Be patient with him and don't lose sight of the things you love about him. The man you love is somewhere underneath all of that anger.

Now that I'm gone, Kyrell belongs to you and Atticus. The crown is a heavy burden to bear, but the gods made a wonderful choice in the soul bound of the next king. You are strong, Corvina. But your greatest attribute is your love and loyalty. I'm so grateful to have gotten to get to know you, even if our time was cut short.

Love always,

Queen Kasaia.

I clutch the parchment to my chest as tears stream down my face, I let out a sob. I sit on the edge of my bed, my fingers turning white from the force that I'm holding the parchment. There's a knock on the door so I quickly wipe the tears away from my face and fold up the parchment, returning it to the drawer in my dresser. I smooth out my dress before opening the door. Fallon stands before me in her formal general uniform, she bows as I open the door.

"Do you want good news or the bad news first?" I let out a sigh, letting my shoulders sag.

"I don't need any more bad news, but let's start there." She fidgets with the buttons on her jacket. Oh gods, what could it be?

"Nobody can find Atticus." My stomach drops. "I'll go back and look for him, I'll even venture to Ripam and see if they've seen him there. But it'll have to happen after the coronation. The good news is everything is in place and ready for you."

“But... How can I do this without Atticus?” A lump forms in my throat and my wings rustle. “I... I can’t do this without him.” My voice cracks, threatening a sob. Fallon places both her hands on my upper arms. Her hands are warm against my exposed skin.

“You can and you will. Kyrell needs you. Everyone is grieving and Atticus’s solution was running away because that’s how he’s grieving right now. I’m sorry everything is landing on you, but we need you. Being soul bound is a bond unlike marriage. You’re already part of the royal family and his throne will be here, next to yours, when he comes home.” A sense of pride fills my chest. I have too many people depending on me to crumble and succumb to my grief now, even if all I want to do is hide under the protection of my quilt. “Oh... kay. Let’s do this damn thing.” Fallon laughs and wraps her arms around me, pulling me tightly into the embrace. The heaviness in my chest lessens a little bit knowing I’ll have her at my side.

Entering the throne room feels unreal. Bile rises in my throat thinking about this being the last room to hold Queen Kasaia’s heart beat. Everyone turns and faces the entrance of the room as I reach the threshold. Fallon is on my side where Atticus should be. I reach for him through our bond, only to find emptiness. The feeling is an unwelcome reminder that he is gone and falling away from me. Lisbeth is standing at the side of the throne with Reid, some of his responsibilities as a high mage are crowning the next leader and leading the coronation ceremony.

Everyone’s eyes follow me as I walk through the parting sea of people, towards the thrones. *My throne.* I’m careful to keep my wings raised, but pull them in so they don’t drag on the floor and hit people as I walk by. When Kane hit my wing with the rock, it hit just right and fractured the bone. Lisbeth’s eyes are surrounded in red and I stifle the urge to take her into my arms and squeeze her, but I’ll do that after the ceremony. I reach Reid as he’s standing between the thrones and he smiles lightly, the

corners of his mouth are only barely curving upwards. He clears his throat and begins the ceremony.

“Members of the high court and the citizens of Kyrell, I wish we could meet for such a joyous celebration under better circumstances. I know the loss of Queen Kasaia will be one we will feel for a long time to come.” I fight back the tears that are threatening to escape. “Queen Kasaia and I spoke in length about Princess Corvina and the type of rulers she and Prince Atticus will be.” My breath hitches when Reid looks at me. “She and I were in a consistent agreement in the abilities Corvina possesses to rule Kyrell. She will be a fair, loyal, and strong ruler. She loves fiercely, but protects those she loves even more so.” He motions to Lis to hand him the velvet box that Queen Kasaia had said was my crown.

“Princess Corvina. Do you vow to uphold the values of Kyrell?”

“I do.” My heart raches. I can feel a source of magic running through my veins.

“Do you promise to protect Kyrell and all of those who inhabit it?”

“I promise.” An incandescent glow begins to form around my fingers, weaving in and out between them.

Reid places a hand on the box, mumbling something under his breath. The same light swirls around the box as he opens to reveal my crown. The tone of gold, the intricate vining around the dark green stones, and the accents of moissanite match my ring almost perfectly. My wings sag with my shoulders, Reid reaches into the box and pulls out the crown. He takes a deep breath before he places it on my head. Magic jolts through my body, sending waves of power through my veins. My eyes meet Reid’s and he lowers to my level and whispers, “I’ll explain after.”

I rise to my feet and Reid motions for me to turn around, my legs don’t want to comply with the movement, but I push them anyway. My eyes meet everyone in the crowd, but I find myself

searching for one person. I still can't reach him and it makes an uneasiness fill my stomach. I force myself to smile as I look at the people in the crowd. *My people*. My eyes linger over Raine and Thatch in the front of the crowd before moving to Fallon, Eira, and ending at my mother.

"May the gods grant you a long and peaceful reign, Queen Corvina." Everyone in the crowd bows their heads before me, and as they rise, cheering begins. My chest feels heavy and my wings feel as if they are shrinking. I reach for my bond to Atticus, but it's still dark. *Just breathe*. I hear him say, pulling his voice from my memories. I take the deepest breath my chest allows, even though it doesn't lighten, it feels easier to breathe.

Upon Atticus's request, the coronation feast was postponed, so I opted to dine with my family. The chair Queen Kasaia once sat in, at the head of the table, remains empty. Fallon and Eiran sit next to me, Thatch and Macoy sit next to them, my mother and Reid across from me, and Raine sits next to Lis across from Atticus's empty chair. The room is silent as we dine, the loss of Queen Kasaia heavy in the room, as is the absence of... King Atticus. I decide I'll have to be the one to break the silence.

"I think I will commission new tables from the carpenter in town. I think a large round table would be a better fit, it would allow me to see everyone's faces." My mind goes to the scene in the meeting chambers. "I'll also have another one made for the meeting chambers." I take a bite of the lamb stew Melany prepared. The rich and floral notes of rosemary and sage dance on my tongue.

"I like that idea a lot." Fallon smiles and squeezes my hand. A small gesture, but it seems to help in calming my racing heart.

"Reid, you said you'd tell me about the rush of magic. I forgot to ask after the coronation." Really, I had just rushed out of the throne room so fast we didn't have a chance to talk. I didn't want to talk to anyone.

“Ah, yes.” He takes a sip of his wine to wash down the bite I had just interrupted. “So, the vow during the coronation is an unbreakable one. Very similar to the one you and Atticus will...” His face drops and the table goes still.

“It’s alright, Reid. I’m not a porcelain doll. I won’t simply shatter at the mention of his name. He’ll be home when he’s ready.” I maintain a steady tone, but inside I don’t know how convinced I am of my own statement. I’m trying to remain patient, having lost a parent of my own, I’m familiar with the pain.

Fallon clinks her spoon’s edge on her wine glass, clearing her throat and standing. She raises her glass. “I know our hearts are heavy with the loss of such a wonderful queen, but I’d like to toast to Corvina. May her reign be long.” She looks at me and smiles. “To Queen Corvina.” Everyone raises their glasses and repeats her last sentence. My heart feels full of the love around me, but still the emptiness remains.

As we conclude dinner, Reid pulls me to the side of the dining hall. I can see the concern behind his eyes. “I do have some less than good news, Queen Corvina. I wanted to wait until after the small celebration, but with the absence of King Atticus... I can’t do the blood spell to place the boundary around Kyrell. I need him here to complete the spell.” My heart sinks.

“Thank you, Reid. We will have to figure something else out.” He nods and leaves the room. I pinch the bridge of my nose and let out a long sigh. I should go get some sleep, but I don’t want to be reminded of my soul bound’s absence more than I already am. I walk through the front doors of the castle, lifting the hem of my dress so I don’t slip, and enter the dahlia garden. I stand on the cliffside, closing my eyes to let the mist of the sea surround me.

Corvina

A day passes and there's still no word from Atticus. Fallon and Eiran are taking teams out to the forest's edge to search for him, again. I open the windows to my chambers and look out to the ocean. The sky has been dark and gloomy since Atticus left, the clouds look heavy, but there's still no rainfall.

I dress for the day, with the help of my new handmaiden. Melany introduced her to me last night. Alora is an elemental, like me, and her family was displaced by the attack on Berk. Like so many others, her family has struggled to find work, so I couldn't refuse her employment. She's young, I'd say in the beginning of her adult life. She wears her honey brown hair in a braid that she wraps around her head like a crown. Her cheeks are rosy, a welcome contrast to her fair colored skin. She's quiet and doesn't speak much at all. I don't know if it's because she's intimidated or scared... or both.

She helps me lace up my gown, the corset back is lower. Alora pulls the back tight before knotting it, the gown is beautiful but not practical. The bodice is beaded down to a point and the tulle bows out around my hips. I chose charcoal gray to wear, not ready to embrace lighter colors.

“Alora, when you get a moment I’d like to meet with my sister to discuss some additional gown designs. Can you let her know please?” I smile at her, she doesn’t change her blank expression but nods.

“Is there anything else, Queen Corvina?” she asks flatly. I shake my head and she turns to leave the room.

I’m once again left alone in my chambers. They feel so cold and void of life without Atticus. I try to reach for him, knowing I’ll most likely come up empty. Something is wrong, I can feel it.

I go to the marketplace in the village with Fallon and Lisbeth. I try to pull my wings in tight as we walk through the streets, but I’m taking up a lot of room. People stare at me as I weave in and out of the crowd. We get to the first stop, the carpenter, and go inside. The door chimes as it opens and a small man with a receding hairline and thick spectacles scurries to the front of the store.

“Ah. Queen Corvina! To what do I owe the pleasure of you visiting my store today?” His voice is nasally, but kind.

“Hello, Hayes. How are you today?” I fold my hands in front of me, the motion making my heart ache as my memory recalls Queen Kasaia doing the same movement frequently.

“Excuse me, where are my manners? I’m well, thank you. How are you?” He smiles a wide smile, his eyes close as the corners of his mouth meet them.

“I’m good, thank you.” A lie. “I was actually hoping to commission a couple of tables from you today?” He beams and I can practically feel the excitement send ripples of joy through his body. “I am in need of two large circular tables. I don’t mind the design or the wood type, just large enough to sit... let’s say twelve people, and circular.” He nods and writes something down on parchment.

“I’ll have them done and sent to the castle in no time, Queen Corvina.” I extend my hand and he takes it, shaking it excitedly.

We walk back out to the hustle and bustle of the town square and I see the forge sign. I look at Lisbeth and Fallon.

“I need to go in there, but I want to do it alone.” They look to one another with reluctance, but I do my best to reassure them I’m fine. They stay out on the street as I enter the forge and discuss what I want with the blacksmith.

After leaving the town and coming back to the castle, I’m exhausted and ready to sleep. I spent the morning meeting with the villagers and listening to their concerns. Everyone’s complaint is basically the same thing. With the increase in people, there’s a need for jobs. I sat with the high court shortly after and discussed with them any actions that can be done to create more jobs. Lisbeth and I are working on different ideas to help the villagers. After all of my meetings, I concluded the day in the village.

My ribs sing as Alora releases the corset backing at the end of the day. Once Alora is finished unlacing my gown, she walks to the door and stands there. Her face is laced with pain.

“Alora, I must ask. Have I done something to offend you in any way? Please speak freely.” Her eyes widen in surprise.

“Oh my gods, no Queen Corvina. I’m so sorry. I’m a secondary abstract and my ability is sensing others feelings. So when I’m near someone their... emotions can overwhelm me if they’re strong enough.” Her eyes drop to the ground, her pinks reddening.

“And mine have been exceptionally strong lately.” My cheeks burn along with hers. “I’m so sorry I jumped to conclusions, Alora.”

“It’s okay. I’d do the same. Your mother’s developing a tincture to help minimize it.” She shrugs and bites her bottom lip.

“Oh no, Alora. You mustn’t! Being empathetic can be a beautiful gift with the right training. Macoy, our high seer, is a wonderful tutor.” She opens her mouth to protest. “I insist.” She smiles and nods.

Alora leaves the room and I tuck myself under the quilt. My bed feels so big with only me. I lift my hand and run my fingers over Atticus’s pillow. I lift my knees to my chest and allow myself to let the tears escape.

When I open my eyes, I realize I must be dreaming because I’m in a dark room and the walls are lined with stone. The air around me is damp and stinks of mold. I lift my hands, unable to see them, but I can see the reflection of a metal chain in dim lighting, almost as if they’re glowing. I look around the room and I see the outline of a woman with curly hair. She’s mumbling something, but I can’t make it out. I try to move closer but my body won’t move.

Quickly she moves closer to me, her voice is getting louder, but it sounds like something is covering my ears and I can’t hear her fully. I need to get closer to her, but why can’t I move? Suddenly, the sound of an iron gate slams shut and a man enters holding a lantern. He walks over to the iron bars that surround the cell I’m in. The light flashes on the area where I’m sitting. I look down at my hands again only... They aren’t mine. They belong to Atticus. Am I in his head? The guard says something, but it’s still muffled and I can’t make anything out. This is incredibly frustrating.

Atticus

My eyes flutter open, my head feels groggy. Where am I? The room is dark and I can't see anything. One minute I was running along the river... the next, I'm here.

I reach through to Corvina and I find nothing. She's not there. Only an emptiness now sits where our bond was... How long have I been here? There's a shifting sound near me and I try to jump to my feet, but my wrists and ankles are shackled. What the fuck.

"Don't bother trying to escape. They'll just kill you." Her voice is shakey. "They will kill everyone you love too." I can hear the tremble in her voice. She wants to, or has been, crying.

"Where are we?" My voice cracks, my mouth and throat are so dry. "How long..." I cough. Oh gods. I hope Corvina knows I wouldn't just leave.

"We're in the dungeons of Elornia." She stops and holds her breath, like she's awaiting something. Her voice turns to a low whisper. "Days come and go down here. You'll lose track soon."

An iron gate slams shut, causing me to jolt where I'm sitting. The woman goes rigid as a guard holding a lantern enters the

room. He holds the lantern up against the bars of the cell, giving little light to the room.

“Well... well... well... Hello *King*.” The man says mockingly as he spits on the ground. “I’m going to enjoy sending your new queen your head,” he says between his teeth, turning and leaving the room.

“New queen? What’s he talking about?” she questions. I can hear the rustling of her hair as she tries to move closer to me.

“Oberon had my mother, Queen Kasaia, murdered. My soul bound and I were next in line. I imagine they crowned her, even in my absence, for the good of our kingdom, Kyrell.” My shoulders sag as I realize I missed seeing her crowned.

“He killed people I love too. When my family tried to escape, they killed them and then took me prisoner because of their treachery. It’s just me now.” She lets out a shaky sigh.

“Why can’t I shift or use my abilities?” I try to will my shadows, but nothing happens.

“The cuffs are enchanted. Your abilities won’t work while you have them on.” I let out a deep sigh and sink my back onto the rocks behind me. I try to reach out for Corvina again... still nothing.

Some time passes before the guard comes back. He throws trays onto the ground, and slides them over in my direction. No matter how hungry I am, I will not eat their food. My stomach grumbles in its protest. The guy leaves back down whatever hallway he came down, the light leaving the room with him.

“I’m Atticus, by the way. I’d shake your hand, but I’m a little tied up at the moment.” She lets out a laugh.

Thunder sounds in the sky, echoing down into the cell, causing the bars to rattle.

“Hello, Atticus. My name is Marigold.”

Corvina

I wake in a sweat and jump up to fetch my robe. That felt too real to be a dream. I rush through the corridor and bang on Fallon and Eiran's chamber door. Eiran opens it, yawning and rubbing his eyes. When he realizes it's me he straightens his back and his face goes blank.

"It's okay Eiran. I'm so sorry to wake you guys, but I need Fallon immediately." She appears behind him, tying her robe around her waist.

"Of course, what's wrong? Are you okay?" Panic fills her eyes and I don't know what to think. My mind is racing.

"I had... a dream. I think I was in Atticus's mind. I don't know for certain where he is, but I think Oberon has him." My voice is shaky and my chest is tightening. I can feel my entire body tremble.

"Okay. Eiran and I will go back to Ripam and see if anyone knows anything. We'll ride at dawn." She places her hands on my shoulders. "We will get him back." I want to believe her, but the darkness in my mind tells me we won't.

I pace my chambers back and forth for what feels like forever. Fallon and Eiran ride out shortly after the sun begins to

rise and I wait impatiently for their return. Alora knocks lightly on my chamber doors and I holler for her to come in.

“Queen Corvina, the blacksmith is downstairs. He said he has the piece you commissioned, but if it’s a bad time I’ll tell him...” Her voice is low.

“No, I’ll come down. Thank you, Alora. It will be a welcome distraction.” I go down the stairs with Alora. “Hello, Elio! I’m so glad you were able to finish it so quickly.”

“Of course, Queen Corvina. I hope it’s what you wanted.” I unwrap the brown cloth covering the package.

“This is perfect.” I smile. I leave the castle and walk to the dahlia garden. I lift up the hem of my dress and kneel on the edge of the dirt. I don’t have a shovel so I just use my hands to dig a hole near the base of one of the dahlia plants. I place a medium sized, silver plated plaque in the ground and pile the dirt back around it, securing it in place. The plaque reads:

In memory of King Berk and Queen Kasaia.

Loved and Remembered.

Always.

I walk to the edge of the cliff, taking a deep breath as the wind rolls in on the waves. The clouds are still dense, the sunlight has been scarce for days. I hear her footsteps before she nears me and I can tell it’s bad news.

“Corvina... You were right,” is all Fallon can get out as she chokes on a sob. My heart drops. The darkness from every corner and crevice of my mind floods in at once. The clouds begin to move and the sea rages. I slowly turn my body to face her and the rain begins to finally come down in a pour.

“Oberon will die by my hands.” Lightning spits down from the sky, hitting ground around me as thunder booms so loud it’s deafening. My eyes narrow as a wave crashes on the cliff behind me, washing up on the shore, and my wings shift in the wind.

At that moment... I know I will stop at nothing to get Atticus back.

If Oberon wants a second war... He'll get it.

Epilogue

Atticus

I've lost track of how long I've been down here. I'm trying to remain hopeful that I'll soon be rescued, but I'm losing what positivity I have left. The shackles on my wrists are too tight and I can feel them eating into my skin. The dirt and blood caked along my skin makes me realize how much I've taken for granted the access to a bathtub, or hell, even access to a stream.

The guard with the lantern, who I've come to realize is Bash, who doesn't come in often. Sometimes he brings multiple meals and others we don't see him for what feels like days. I'm starting to think it's a tactic so that we lose our sense of time. He throws in trays with food for Marigold and I. It's never good food, most of the time it's some kind of mush and mushy vegetables. I was left with no choice but to eat, I feel myself growing weaker by the moment.

They do unspeakable things to the prisoners here, Marigold stopped speaking altogether after some of the guards took her the last three times. I don't ask what happens and she doesn't willingly give any information. I'm sure I'll have new scars along my back from the flogging I get when I don't give them any information about Kyrell, or the new queen. I try to reach out to Corvina everytime I wake from my sleep, not daring to say her name out loud for fear of her being next. I won't let her be next.

Corvina

It's been four long weeks since they took Atticus. Three weeks since I've felt whole. I reach for him constantly only to

come up empty handed. Fallon and I have had countless sleepless nights trying to find a way to break through the barrier only to come up empty handed.

We've been in correspondence with the royal family of Lyra about coming to our aide. King Casspian is unrelenting in his determination not to help us with an army, but he is sending his mage to Kyrell to assist us. Without Atticus, Reid can't use the full power of blood magic to protect our kingdom and the citizens. However, with a binding enchantment he can use my blood alone to place a casting of protection that is tied to me and me alone. Reid said it will work because of the unbreakable vow I took and the magic that coursed through my body when I was crowned.

Lisbeth has thrown herself entirely into finishing the expansion of the village, creating more jobs for the villagers, and doing whatever she can to stay out of the castle. Raine has been ill with morning sickness for the last week and has taken up a bed in the healing quarters once again. My heart aches for her at going through this experience without her soul bound. I can only pray to the gods and goddess so I won't suffer the same fate.

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Katarina Martinez lives on West Coast with her husband, three kids, and three dogs. She is currently a full time college student, stay at home mom, and indie author.

In her spare time she enjoys to camp with her family and crack open a good book with a nice iced vanilla latte. She enjoys reading romantasy and the occasional romcom. If she isn't reading, she is listening to audiobooks, podcasts, or blasting her early 2000's playlist because let's be honest... it was never a phase.

She hopes you get as much joy from reading her books as she gets from writing them.

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