



DARK
WOLF
KING

LINDSEY DEVIN

DARK WOLF KING

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS PARANORMAL ROMANCE

WOLVES OF THE NIGHT

BOOK 3

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I lifted my nose into the breeze and inhaled. This deep in the forests south of Efra, the woods were quiet, save for the rustle of small creatures picking through the undergrowth, and the whisper of the cold breeze through the canopy overhead. The earth was soft beneath my paws, and my ears flicked back and forth as I listened for any suspicious sounds.

Suddenly I caught the scent of my mate, warm and familiar on the cold air. I went at a trot, padding through the woods as I followed the smell. It was a cold winter day, but my thick white pelt kept me warm, and the sun overhead was only just beginning to dip lower in the sky. Ever since Kodan had burst into the throne room a few weeks ago, frantically announcing the emergence of unfamiliar Fae portals, Elias and I had added these perimeter inspections to our duties.

Strangely, though, nothing had happened. The portals were there, but no Fae had stepped through. The lack of activity only made me more suspicious. The Fae Queen Corinne had to be planning something — this had to be part of some scheme she was developing to take control of Frasia.

Of course, the Nightfall guard did these patrols as well, keeping an eye on any existing portals and noting any changes. It'd be easy to leave it to them, but a deep suspicion in my gut had me running my own patrols, too. After what Corinne had done to me, kidnapping me, trapping me in Faerie, and using my wolf magic to support her own, this didn't just feel like a threat. It felt personal.

I was closer now to Elias' scent, weaving southward to the trees until I emerged into a small clearing. In the center, Elias stood in his wolf form. He

was an immense beast, with a rich brown pelt and sharp golden eyes. But as soon as I stepped out of the tree-line and into the clearing, his tail began to wag like a pup's.

I bounded forward and nuzzled against him, burying my nose in the thick fur at his hackles. He folded his head against my neck and exhaled, a soft chuffing sound. The closeness briefly soothed the anxiety coursing through me.

We broke apart. Elias led me to the other side of the clearing, where a portal gleamed like a small puddle. It swirled in rich purples and blues, and warmth emanated from it, cutting through the Frasian cold. I sniffed around the edges curiously.

Careful, Elias' voice sounded in my mind. Don't get too close.

Scared I might fall in?

More scared something might fall out.

I took a step back and flicked my ears again. The portal was ringed in a growth of white-capped mushrooms, arranged in a perfect circle despite the cold. Closer to the portal there was more grass too, and moss and lichens crept up the trunks of the nearby trees. It was as if the portal had brought a taste of springtime with it.

Elias shook out his pelt. Then with a ripple of magic, he shifted back into human shape and stretched his arms overhead. He ran his fingers through the fur behind my ears. The sensation sent a shiver down my spine, and I nuzzled closer to his bare leg.

"It's strange," Elias said. "I didn't see any portals along the perimeter other than the ones we've already marked. If anything, some have closed. But they're all causing more growth, wherever they are." He wound his fingers thoughtfully across my pelt. "Did you see anything on your search?"

I shook my head. We'd split up, covering the southern boundaries of Efra together, but I hadn't seen any new portals.

"We should head back," Elias said.

I nudged his thigh with my nose, then wagged my tail gently. He laughed, then dropped down onto the grass of the clearing and tugged me close. I covered his bare body with my wolf, snuffling at the column of his throat, and even licking teasingly at the beard on the solid curve of his jaw. We'd done our rounds, and now it was time for us to return to Efra. But the cold air just felt so good on my fur, and the earth was still so soft under my paws. We had daylight left - and I was itching to run.

“Little wolf,” Elias teased. “I never thought I’d be the one encouraging *you* to shift back. I remember when I could hardly get you to change into this shape at all.”

I sighed heavily, and then with an easy ripple of magic, shifted back into my human form. Elias wound his arms around me. My bare body pressed against his didn’t do much for my distraction though. He hummed, pleased, and squeezed me tightly. “As much as I’d love to stay here,” he said, as his voice rumbled in his chest, “we really must get back.”

I sighed heavily, then nodded. “Can we at least eat dinner in town instead of the manor?”

“I suppose we can do that.”

Reluctantly, I stood up, and then helped Elias back to his feet. We pulled on our clothes, stashed in a small bag by the largest tree at the clearing’s edge. I tugged my fine silk dress back over my head, and then swung on my heavy fur cloak. Already my cheeks were beginning to redden in the cold. I wore boots, but Elias went barefoot, dressed in plain dark canvas and his own cloak as well. Though I’d grown accustomed to Efra, I still wasn’t quite as comfortable in the lower temperatures as he was.

A well-trod path led from the clearing back toward the southern edge of Efra, as it was part of our routine, and the guards’ as well. The waiting guards opened the gates for us, and we slipped inside into the bustling city.

Since the late Duke of Daybreak —my father’s— attempted takeover of Frasia, Efra had healed with remarkable speed and resiliency. The narrow, cobbled streets bustled with activity once again, laughter spilled from the taverns, and merchants manned their stands on the street corners. As Elias and I strode side-by-side through the streets, the riotous laughter melted and was replaced by murmurs as wolves exchanged glances, elbowing each other. We were given a wide berth on the streets of Efra, but out of respect more than anything else. Over the months Elias had proven himself a reliable King. I’d made some missteps as Queen, but I thought I was well on my way to proving myself as a valuable leader.

When we’d first started the patrols, Kodan had been unsure about the two of us walking through Efra without a security detail. It’d only taken a look from us both to remind her that we’d handled situations a lot more dangerous than moving through the streets of our own kingdom. And how were we expected to lead at all if we never spent any time among our subjects?

Elias took my hand and led me down a narrow side street to a single-story

half-timbered building, marked only by a swaying sign, carved in the shape of a goose. Inside, dried herbs hung from the low rafters and a moose head hung over the roaring hearth. There were a few other patrons in the tavern, but the conversation was low and quiet. The innkeeper looked barely surprised to see us, and gestured toward a rough-hewn table by the roaring fire.

Elias nodded his thanks. He leaned back in the chair and warmed his bare feet by the fire. I grinned. “You could just wear boots, you know.”

“Mm, they’re too constricting.”

“And your toes going numb isn’t?”

“You get used to it.” He grinned back at me.

Funny how that smile still made my stomach do a small somersault. Even with a few crow’s feet at the corners of his dark eyes, Elias was the most handsome man I’d ever seen. The longer I was married to him, the better looking he became. He rubbed his short beard thoughtfully as he turned his gaze to the fire.

“It’s strange,” Elias said. “I keep expecting to see more portals. Or at least have them be a bit more stable. The flickering in-and-out is making me nervous.”

“Me as well,” I said. “Do you think it’s something she’s doing on purpose?”

“My instincts say no,” Elias admitted, “but I have nothing to back that up. It just doesn’t feel right.”

I nodded. “It feels like its the land itself.”

The innkeeper brought us each a plate of braised pheasant and buckwheat biscuits as well as two glasses of beer. It was plain, simple food, but the meat melted in my mouth and warmed me all the way to my bones.

“I’ve been discussing next steps with Kodan and the other advisors,” Elias said. He took a sip of his beer. “We can’t just keep waiting for something to happen.”

“Right.”

“We need to be proactive.”

“In what ways?” I asked. “We’re already doing all we can to track the progress of the portals expanding.”

“Yes, but I think there’s a better way.” A muscle in his jaw flexed as he gazed contemplatively into the fire. “How would you feel about taking on more responsibility in the court?”

I nearly dropped my fork. “In what way?” I asked.

He glanced over, one eyebrow raised.

“Of course, I want to,” I said quickly. “I know I still have some things to learn about the intricacies of the court, but I...I feel like I’m ready to take on more responsibility.”

I didn’t want to only be the Queen of Frasia, kept in the manor as a prize for the King — which is what I’d expected would happen when I first arrived in Efra to participate in the King’s Choice, what felt like a lifetime ago.

“I want you to be the court cartographer,” Elias said. “Officially.”

My eyes widened. I hadn’t heard of such a role — had it existed before me? I’d have to ask Lady Glennis. To think that my lifelong obsession in maps would take me here...it nearly bowled me over.

Elias chuckled at my expression. “I’d like you to lead the team of guards who are doing the regular border patrols,” he explained. “Keeping a more detailed log of the portals, where they show up, when they close, if they change. Eventually the duties will expand to a more comprehensive mapping of Frasia, and then, hopefully, our neighbors’ lands as well.”

“I’d love to,” I said. “But I have to ask — what for?” As incredible as this sounded, I hated the thought that this was something Elias had dreamed up idly for me, as a way to keep me busy while he dealt with leading the Nightfall pack.

He scooted his chair closer and lowered his voice. “If Corinne does escalate, we’ll be roping in our neighbors regardless of whether they want us to or not. The better the information we have about the land, the better prepared we’ll be to defend it. And if it comes to that, I’ll expect you to act as our diplomatic liaison.”

Again, I balked. “You trust me to do that?”

He laughed, low. “You want the truth?”

I hooked my foot around his ankle under the table, ignoring the curl of anxiety in my chest. “Always.”

He took another sip of his beer. “It scares me to imagine,” he admitted. “After what happened with Draunar, and then with Corinne. But I’ve discussed it with Kodan, and we both know you’re smart, and quick-thinking on your feet. I do trust you.”

The words landed on me like a warm touch, and I smiled into my own glass.

“And your interest in cartography will make you a natural diplomat,” he

said. “Queen Enet was impressed with your knowledge of Askonian history and traditions. That kind of awareness goes a long way.”

“I’d love to do more travel and diplomacy,” I said. “Traveling these lands has always been my dream.”

“I know,” Elias said. “I wish I could offer it to you in a better context. One that wasn’t us attempting to stave off the Fae Queen.”

I leaned over the table and kissed him briefly. “As nice as that would be, knowing you trust me to take this on is better.”

Elias grinned again. “Good. Once the jaguars depart, we’ll get started with preparations.”

“Speaking of the jaguars,” I said, “we need to prepare some for their departure dinner. And potentially some supplies to send with them as a show of goodwill — that’s important to Askonians.”

“See?” Elias said. “This is why you’ll be an excellent diplomat.”

The conversation turned to the details of the dinner. Elias was significantly less interested in my musings about if I could convince Queen Enet to prepare another performance from the Askonian dancers, but he listened diligently as I sketched out the plan for the dinner.

The thought of developing a new role in the court, and potentially acting as a diplomatic liaison — a *war* diplomat — made me nervous. But at the same time, this was what I had wanted all along. I wanted to be his equal in leadership. Here was my opportunity.

I wasn’t going to let him down.

“Incredible!” I cheered, standing up from my seat at the dais to clap. The Askonian dancers in the center of the hall took sweeping bows, the bells on their ankles and wrists jingling merrily with each moment. The performance really had been remarkable — exciting and elegant and hypnotic all at once. The other guests in attendance, all wolves of Nightfall dressed in their finest wear, looked just as awed as they applauded the performance.

The Nightfall band joined the Askonian one, and they began to play together, a drum-heavy version of a traditional Frasian jig. The dance floor filled with wolves and jaguars alike, and I smiled as the energy escalated.

At my side, Queen Enet leaned closer. “Your Highness? Do you have a moment?”

“Certainly,” I said. I glanced over at Elias, but he was wrapped in conversation with King Khainan and another of the Askonian generals. For their departure dinner, the Askonian King and Queen had dressed in their usual finery. Enet was dressed simply but elegantly, in dark silks, with a silver shawl winding around her narrow arms. I followed her off the dais onto one of the balconies overlooking the forests of Efra.

“I’m grateful for the intelligence you’ve given us, Reyna,” Enet said as she gazed out over the tree line. “I imagine if the Fae Queen had approached us blindly, my husband would’ve been keen to work with her in an attempt to revive our lost magic.”

“She’s wily,” I said. “I myself was certainly ensnared in her plans.”

“Khainan and I will be fortifying Askon’s borders as best we can in

preparation for any Fae attacks,” Enet said. “We’ll be doing our best to prepare our soldiers. But it pains me to admit... and my husband would never admit this...” Enet sighed and gripped the railing of the balcony. “I simply don’t know if Askon has the military strength to stand against the Fae, should it come to such a thing. It’s been generations since Askon has developed our fighters for anything beyond ceremonial purposes.”

I nodded and steeled my face into careful neutrality. Internally I cursed myself for putting too much truth on the stories I’d read about the jaguars—of their fierceness in battle and their powerful magic. I was grateful to have Enet as an ally, but there wasn’t much she could offer me against the Fae except for advice and knowledge. That would have to be enough.

“So we will offer what aid we can,” Enet continued, “but I fear there may be a time when we must call for it ourselves.”

“And Frasia would answer,” I said. “Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

“We can only hope.”

For a moment we stood side by side in silence, looking out over the treeline. The winter night was brisk, and Enet tightened her shawl around her arms. The cold barely raised goosebumps on my own skin. Perhaps I was becoming more of a wolf of Nightfall than I thought.

“Regardless of what occurs,” I said, “I’m grateful yourself and King Khainan were willing to journey here. And the materials you’ve given us are more valuable than you think.”

“I’m glad,” Enet said. “I trust you’ll keep them private.”

I nodded. Enet had brought maps — extensively detailed surveys of Askon, Osna, and Cruora, beyond anything we had in the Nightfall library. I had yet to pore over them in detail, busy as I was with hosting the jaguars and managing the regular patrols of the borders. But now, as court cartographer, I’d have a reason to spend my days in the library going over the materials.

“I may find myself traveling toward Cruora,” I said. “Our conversations have piqued my interest.”

Enet threw me a small smile. “I thought they might. Again, it’s only rumors.”

“Still, even rumors are better than nothing,” I said. “If the Eagles have a genuine alchemist working with them, that could change everything for us.”

“And for the jaguars, as well,” Enet said. “If the alchemy is real, it could guide us to the recovery of our own magic.”

“And guide the wolves to a victory against the Fae,” I said. “I simply

don't know how we can stand against her magic. It's a terrible thought."

"You can't focus on the fear," Enet said. "If there's anything I've learned in my years as Queen, it's that. Even if the eagles have lost their alchemy, the wolves will find another way."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because you must," Enet said. "There is no other choice."

Her words hung in the air between us. She was right. I'd hoped the jaguars would have some easy solution for handling the Fae, but that was wishful thinking. No one was coming to defend Frasia. It was up to myself and Elias alone.

The next morning, Enet and Khainan departed for Askon as the sun rose over the horizon. The day itself was busy with the responsibilities of running the court: patrolling the borders, hearing grievances, and preparing my study in the library for reviewing Enet's maps. I had no time to sink into my research, however, as there was yet another important dinner planned for the evening.

"You know," I said to my handmaiden Amity, in the quiet of my private dressing room, "I do wonder if most of my life will be centered around fancy dinners."

"Your Highness, you are the only Queen I know who could spend weeks kidnapped by dragons and Fae, and still lament the amount of dinners you must attend." Amity cinched the lace of my rich purple dress a bit tighter, then fastened them.

"Well, the Fae Queen required me to attend a lot of dinners, too," I said. "Granted, I was in my wolf form, and I didn't really have to say much at those..."

Amity laughed and shook her head. "True, you have to do a bit more hostessing at these events." She brushed out my blonde hair, then quickly and expertly braided it into a single plait that ran towards the center of my back. "But, after hearing about what happened in Daybreak, I'm glad to know the Courts are working together to try to fix things."

"Has there been much talk?" I asked. In the back of my mind, guilt chewed at me that I hadn't spoken to my handmaidens Amity and Rue about the takeover more clearly. Truth and rumor both traveled quickly through the kitchens and servants' quarters — surely, they'd heard whispers from the other workers.

"Mm, nothing too interesting," Amity said. "I just hope everyone is okay

back in Daybreak.”

“Me too,” I murmured. I’d speak to Barion before the dinner. He’d remained in Efra since the attempted coup, carefully rebuilding trust with Kodan and our other advisors.

“There you are, milady.” Amity wrapped a bit of ribbon around the end of my plait. “I believe you’re ready for dinner, as much as you may dread it.”

Laughing, I thanked her, and then stepped back into the bedroom. Elias looked up from where he was seated at the edge of our bed and smiled. “You look beautiful as ever.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” I teased. Elias had his dark hair pulled back and was dressed in a plain white linen shirt and dark slacks. He was barefoot, as per usual, but the wolves we were dining with tonight were used to seeing him dress as such. At this point, it was considered less a quirk, and more a reflection of how connected he was with his wolf. His bare feet on the floor were similar to the animal’s paws on the earth. “Shall we?”

Together, we walked down to the main dining hall, where a large table was set up for members of the various courts. There was already a vast spread of food: suckling pig and braised pheasant, fresh bread, roasted vegetables, and flagons of wine. Wine was poured first, and before we took our seats at the head of the table, I caught Barion’s wrist and apologetically pulled him away from what looked to be a fairly one-sided conversation with Giles from Dawnguard.

“Thanks for that,” Barion muttered as a servant topped off his wine glass. “That man sure loves to relive his training days.”

“Before we start,” I said, “I wanted to ask you how things are back in Daybreak.”

Barion fixed me with a soft, curious gaze. “In what way?”

“You’ve replaced Duke Rodthar on the council,” I said.

“Your father,” Barion said. “Yes. Is that a problem?” He tipped his chin down, peering at me, slightly unsure.

“No, no.” I waved a hand. “It’s not that. It’s just...you’re keeping abreast of the goings-on in Daybreak, are you not?”

“Of course I am,” Barion said. “The messaging isn’t as fast as I would like, but I’m in regular contact with the court at home. Is there something wrong?”

“Are things okay?” I asked. “With my father gone, has there been any unrest in the court? Are there still loyalists to Rodthar?”

“Not that I know of,” Barion said. “Hard to say for certain, while I’m still here with Nightfall. But I assure you, Your Highness, things are under control at Daybreak.”

“Don’t call me that,” I huffed, and took a sip of my wine. “From what I know of my father, it won’t be so easy to eliminate his influence within the court.”

“It’s possible,” Barion said, “but the wolves of Daybreak aren’t controlled by old loyalties like that. The court is loyal to the wolves that protect them — and Rodthar had done the opposite.”

“But they would have remained loyal to him had the coup succeeded.”

Barion paused, then exhaled slowly. “Likely so.”

“I worry his influence lingers,” I said. “And that someone in the court will be encouraged to pick up where he left off. To try again.”

Barion nodded. His expression hardened. “I understand why that may worry you.”

“I’m not trying to say that *will* happen,” I said. “Or that I don’t trust you to manage it.”

“Do you trust me to manage it?”

“I do. But I know how difficult that can be while you’re here in Efra, and not in Daybreak.” I took another drink of wine. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Of course,” Barion said. His voice was still blankly serious, more like a guest of the royals than my former tutor and trainer.

“Just tell me if there’s any discord in the court, please?” I asked. “I just want to be aware, so Nightfall can give you any support you need. I’m as involved with this as you are.”

That made the furrow in Barion’s brow smooth out. He nodded again, then offered me a small, familiar smile. “Looks like my student is now the one taking the lead.”

“It’s a part of my job now, I suppose,” I said with a small shrug. “Being Queen requires me to keep these things in mind.”

“Not sure I envy that at all,” Barion joked.

Elias clinked his fork against his wine glass, summoning the members of the courts to take their seats at the dining table. Barion represented Daybreak, while Giles and a few other wolves were there to speak for Duskmoon. Marget of Starcrest was in attendance, as well as Isalde of Duskmoon. All of them had brought a handful of servants and advisors, some who sat at the table with us, and some who lingered at the edges of the room. Fina was in

attendance, seated with Isalde of Duskmorn, but Adora was not. I hadn't expected Fina to be a part of the discussions, but from across the room we locked eyes and smiled. As I looked around the intimidating table, I was grateful for her familiar presence to take the edge off my nerves.

And I still had Elias at my side. As if he could read my mind, he reached under the table and smoothed his hand over my knee, settling my nerves further with his touch.

"As you all know," Elias said in greeting, "we've discovered many portals opening and closing on the south edge of Efra. The return of the portals is a clear indication that the barriers between our realm and Faerie are weakening. The Fae Queen Corinne could return to strike at any moment, and we all need to be prepared for that." He cut into the meat at the table, which prompted the guests to fill their plates as well.

"What exactly do you mean by prepared?" Marget of Starcrest asked. She was an older woman, with fine silver-blond hair and eyes clouded milky white with blindness.

"We need to find where these portals lead," Elias said. "We need to learn why they're appearing, who is creating them, and what she's planning."

"Mm," Marget murmured. "You're like your father. Eager for a battle."

"Eager to defend my pack," Elias said.

Marget sighed. She set her fork down and turned her sightless gaze to Elias. "You know this is not the kind of 'defense' the Court has discussed."

"Now isn't the time, Lady Marget," Elias said, low.

"But these kinds of discussions are key to the future success of the pack," Marget said, undeterred, "and if these are the kinds of risks you see, we should be having these talks now."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What discussions?"

"The King and Queen of Nightfall should have an heir," Marget said. "Continuing the royal bloodline was one of the key purposes for arranging the King's Choice, and I believe it's high time the two of you made that happen."

I snapped my mouth shut. Lady Marget's forwardness stunned me. I suddenly felt small, seated at the table next to Elias — small, and young, and unimportant, just the way I had often felt in the Court of Daybreak.

"That was *your* purpose for arranging the Choice," Elias said. "Not mine."

Marget waved a hand dismissively. "Regardless of intention, it still stands

that the royal couple should have an heir. I don't understand why you're eager to investigate these portals when your attention should be focused at home."

"If we ignore these threats, the Fae will make sure we no longer have a home," Elias said.

"Do you agree, Queen Reyna?" Marget asked.

"With Elias?" I asked.

"No, about bearing children," she said. "Is that something you want?"

The members of the Court stared at me. I felt like a butterfly pinned to canvas. Under the table, I curled my hands into fists on my thighs. I hadn't thought seriously about children at all — despite how much I loved Elias, we had only just been married. There was still so much I wanted to do with my own life. I wanted to travel, and map as much of the realm as I could, and I still wasn't confident as a leader. And now I was supposed to leap straight into motherhood? It wasn't even something Elias and I had discussed.

"That's not why we're here today," Elias growled. The air crackled with magic as his wolf rose to the surface, turning his eyes gold. "You can leave private manners alone or be dismissed from this meeting."

Again, Marget sighed. "You really are just like your father."

"That's enough," Giles said. He drummed his thick, knobbly fingers on the table. "Now, Elias, about these portals. You've said yourself the portals are unstable and transient."

Elias exhaled through his nose, then sat back in his chair, calmer now. Under the table, he folded his hand over mine, gently encouraging me to relax my fingers from the death grip I still held. "Correct," he said.

"If we start sticking our noses around them, we might draw unwanted attention," Giles said. "Our investigation could easily be read as provocation. It's wiser to wait and see what the Fae are doing — they might not be doing anything at all."

"That's quite a risk," Elias said. "Should you be wrong, we'd be caught off-guard."

At his side, Fina took a sip of her wine and then pressed her lips together. I was glad Fina was here as part of the Duskmoon pack, as she'd surely be able to convince Giles that the risk of provocation — unfounded, I thought — was far less than the risk of doing nothing.

"Duskmoon lacks the military might of Daybreak, Dawnguard, and Nightfall," Fina said. "But if the investigation does provoke some sort of

retribution from the Fae, the Duskmooon lands will surely be some of the first attacked.”

“Then Nightfall will come to your aid,” Elias said.

“That’s no promise of success,” Giles said. “If the Fae do come from the south, Duskmooon wolves will suffer.”

“All the more reason to prepare for an attack,” Elias said. “Perhaps it’s best we provoke the Fae to ensure Duskmooon is *not* the first point of attack.”

“Now, let’s not get reckless,” Barion said. “Daybreak has suffered mightily in recent weeks, and I must admit I’m unsure if the pack has the fortitude to jump immediately into a war effort.”

“I speak not of a war effort,” Elias said. His voice was steady, but I could hear the frustration beginning to creep in around the edges. “I speak only of being aware of what could happen.”

“Daybreak needs time to rebuild after the Duke’s betrayal,” Barion said. “Surely you understand.”

“I do, and as a warrior you must realize that an enemy does not wait to strike until it is convenient,” Elias said.

Barion narrowed his eyes. “I do, and I wonder if you are giving this Fae Queen more credit than she is due. If Draunar could keep her locked up without trouble for so long, what makes you think she is so powerful now?”

“Because she is no longer trapped,” I said. “She has her power back, and she’s angry.”

The table fell briefly silent as everyone’s gazes fell on me.

I swallowed, some of my confidence melting away under so many severe and curious looks. “We should be ready,” I said. “If we’re not, she’ll take advantage of our weaknesses.”

Giles clicked his tongue and sat back in his chair. “And what if this does nothing but stoke fear in our communities? Like Barion says, Daybreak has been weakened by the Duke, and the effects of an attempted coup ripple through the other packs as well.”

Elias narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. Anxiety wrapped its cold fingers around my heart. The last thing we needed now was to be fighting each other. This dinner was supposed to be a way for the courts to come together and gain strength, not to start snapping at each others’ throats. I glanced at Fina, and she cringed slightly and gave me a small shrug. I knew what she meant — she had hesitations, but she hadn’t meant for it to escalate into an argument like this.

We needed to be fighting the Fae, not each other.

“I don’t think it’s wise for us to try to take the Fae on alone,” I said. “The jaguars of Askon suggested we speak with the eagles of Cruora--”

“The eagles?” Giles balked. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course, I’m serious,” I said. “I wouldn’t joke about something like this. From the conversations I had with Queen Enet--”

“The Askonians are out of touch,” Giles interrupted. “They’ve spent too much time up in the branches of their little treehouses sipping their kava tea. You can’t be seriously considering taking their advice for potential wartime preparation?”

I met his eyes steadily. “The resurgence of Fae magic suggests the resurgence of magic at large,” I said. “The jaguars are the only earth shifters who have historically maintained access to their magic beyond shifting —”

Giles sucked his teeth and barely suppressed a roll of his eyes.

“—and if we expect to stand against the Fae such knowledge is undoubtedly helpful,” I continued. “Queen Enet suggested we approach the eagles because there’s whispers of them still having use of alchemy.”

“Whispers?” Marget said. “You mean rumors?”

“Rumors start from truth,” I said. Marget’s disbelieving tone made my stomach twist uncomfortably. “We won’t know the extent of the truth until we ask.”

“Alchemy is a myth,” Giles said. “Elias, you can’t tell me you’re taking this nonsense seriously. The Fae are a threat, but this is no way to begin addressing it. Wasting resources on expeditions because a little girl’s dreams will only lead to more frustration within the packs.”

“Now, Giles,” Isalde said in a soft, cool voice, “we both know alchemy’s no myth. Nor is the magic of the jaguars. We should hear the Queen out.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Marget said, “but now is not the time to be chasing rumors. If Nightfall wants to defend Frasia from the Fae, we need to focus our attention at home, not at other kingdoms. This kind of research can wait.”

“Obviously,” Giles said. “Queen Reyna, pardon my straightforwardness, but if this truly is the lead-up to wartime, I believe those of us who have been more experienced in matters of war should be leading these discussions.”

My words stuck in my throat. Giles’ dismissive tone made me feel small and silly. He reminded me of my father in a way, ignoring my ideas and silencing me so the men could get back to their courtly discussions. The

surge of that old pain tangled my thoughts and made me feel like a teenager again. I couldn't seem to do anything that impressed them.

"This supposed straightforwardness veers dangerously close to disrespect," Elias said in a voice low like a growl. "Watch your tone."

Giles said nothing, but met Elias' gaze steadily as he leaned back in his chair.

I cleared my throat, embarrassed. "I understand your hesitations," I said. My voice only wavered slightly. "But if we're worried about provoking the Fae at the portals, wouldn't it be a safer use of resources to investigate this rumor?"

"I'd consider it a waste of time," Giles said.

"But less risk," Fina said. She shot me a tiny smile, and I ducked my chin in acknowledgement.

"I agree," Isalde said.

"If it's a small convoy," Marget said, "it shouldn't cause too much strain on Frasian resources. We can still focus our attentions at home while the convoy travels to Cruora."

"Then what will our attentions be focused on?" Giles said. "Shall we nail that down?"

The conversation turned to the various troubles and desires of the packs of Frasia. As it did so, the mood of the conversation shifted away from the heated arguments and more to the familiar problem-solving I was used to. The logistics were familiar. I was used to navigating these issues, at least more than I was trying to advocate for my own ideas in the face of argument and distrust.

Despite Giles' argument, my instincts were still correct. Queen Enet was right to tell me to go to Cruora — I knew there was something there, something that would help us stand against the Fae. All I needed was a few wolves who believed me, and then the convoy would be on its way.

When the dinner wrapped up, the courts had come to a few rough agreements about the next months. Giles had even agreed to have a convoy travel to Cruora, as long as he wasn't involved at all. I tried to hide my excitement as the dinner wrapped up and we held our glasses up for a toast.

As the wolves stood from the table to pour more wine and engage in private conversation, or leave for their quarters, Fina hurried to my side. Her brows pulled together in concern as we stepped away from the table.

"I'm sorry," she said, low and private between us, "I didn't mean to start

anything like that. If I had known Giles was waiting for an opportunity to bite your head off--”

I laughed gently and shook my head. “That’s not your fault.”

“You know I’ll support anything you decide, I just worry about Duskmoon.” Fina pressed two fingers to her temples and circled them, but it did nothing to abet her concern. “I worry about Duskmoon getting forgotten when there’s so much going on. If the crops are damaged, the effects of my pack getting attacked would be felt throughout Frasia. But until that happens, I know our needs are often not as pressing.”

“You’re right to bring it up,” I said. “And you’re right to think that the Fae would attack Duskmoon first. Not only because of the location, but exactly because of the ripple effects of the crops being damaged.” I sighed. “I wouldn’t put something like that past Corinne at all.”

“I just don’t want you to think I’m poking holes in your plans.”

I squeezed Fina’s shoulders. “These kinds of holes are why I asked you to join the Court,” I said.

“And what a Court it is,” Fina said. “I couldn’t believe they jumped down your throat like that about having kids, too. Pardon me for saying so, but I found it quite disrespectful.”

I sighed. “I did too, but what am I supposed to do? Marget was right — that’s part of the reason the Choice was set up in the first place.”

“She spoke like that’s all you were supposed to do, though,” Fina said. “A Queen’s role is more than just a mother to the King’s heirs.”

“I hope so. I sometimes wonder if I’m cut out for either part of it.”

“Of course you are. King Elias wouldn’t have chosen you if you weren’t.”

I nodded, even as my heart climbed into my throat. “It’s so easy being with him, I sometimes forget the rest of the Court watches us like hawks. It’s unnerving.”

“Perhaps the trip to Cruora will be a balm, then.”

“I hope so,” I agreed. I didn’t want to leave Elias, but being away from the Court might be a nice break. “And I hope you’ll join me there.”

The concern dropped from her face, replaced by a surprised grin. “Truly?”

I nodded. “Truly. We’ve got some research to do.”

A low bark caught my attention. My paws dug into the dirt as I surged forward, racing through the trees as I pursued the sound. It was early evening, and the sky was painted in gold and purple as the day melted into night. The winter air was delightfully cold racing through my pelt as I bolted, chasing the sound and the scent of my mate. Everything smelled crisp and clean, and the stress of the past few days dissipated along with my visible breath as I simply ran.

I'd needed this. The days had been a bustling whirlwind of preparations, with hardly any time for me to breathe, let alone exercise. Elias had noticed how the stress was wearing on me, and cleared our evening schedule to make time for us to run. It always cleared my head. With the way the planning was going, I needed all the clarity I could get.

Another bark sounded, and it was closer this time. I caught a whiff of his scent, too. Animal excitement coursed through me as I ran faster, dodging the trees gracefully.

I burst out of the treeline and into a familiar clearing. The forest opened up onto the banks of a rushing stream. The crystal-clear water poured from a small waterfall, then gurgled over the rocks within the bed of the stream. On the other side of the banks, Elias barked a greeting, then wagged his tail like a pup. He lowered his head playfully, golden eyes encouraging me closer.

Gods, I loved him.

Like this, with nothing but the whisper of the wind and the rush of the creek, it was like we were the only two in the world. The concerns that had haunted me would disappear.

I crossed the stream, paws delicate on the rocks jutting from the bed. The water was freezing cold where it splashed onto my paws, and I pranced quickly onto the other bed.

Elias tilted his head to the side, ears perked forward curiously.

I didn't give him a moment to breathe. I leaped forward, barreled into him, and yipped with delight as we began to tousele on the soft grass. We played like that for a few minutes, grappling for dominance with teeth and paws. Eventually, though, Elias had me pinned, with his solid weight atop me and his teeth nipping gently at my neck. I submitted willingly, slumping against the earth as my tail wagged.

Feel better? Elias's voice said in my head.

So much. I nuzzled closer to him.

Hungry?

As soon as he asked the question, my stomach growled. Elias chuffed a wolfish sound of amusement, then stood up. The air crackled around him as he shifted back into his human shape. "I brought your things," he said. "And some other items as well."

I rolled onto my belly and watched him, ears perked forward, then squinted at him.

He laughed. Even though we couldn't communicate in our minds when one or both of us were in our human shapes, it still felt like he could read my thoughts. "Yes, I brought it the way you showed me."

I yipped my amusement. I'd gotten used to traveling in my wolf shape with a pack, when I had to make my way into Frasia from Shianga in secret, and I'd shown Elias the method of carrying one as well. It wasn't exactly graceful, though, and the thought of Elias racing through the woods with a pack in his jaw was delightful. To think I'd thought he was a big scary wolf when I'd first met him. And to think I'd spent so much of my life not letting mine run free at all.

Elias pulled on a pair of trousers, then pulled the rest of the contents from the pack. He'd brought a blanket, a spare change of clothes for me, a heavy cloak, and a waxed cloth with a small spread of snacks and a canteen of tea inside.

After seeing the clothes, I shifted back into human shape, only a little reluctantly. Immediately the cold air stung my skin, and I shivered and hurried close to where Elias was spreading out the blanket. I tugged on the clothes he'd brought: a pair of thick trousers and a shirt of his own. He'd

even brought me a pair of woven socks.

“Warm enough?” he asked as he placed the heavy cloak over my shoulders.

I snuggled close into his side. He always ran hot, and now felt like a furnace against me. He was completely comfortable with his chest bare in the winter evening. Surrounded by him, in his clothes too, I felt safe. Something about wearing his clothes made me feel even more cared for. I sighed happily and nodded. “This is perfect.”

“Good,” he said, pleased. “Here, eat.”

The spread wasn’t anything fancy, just cheeses and chocolates, but it was perfect to me. I sipped hot tea from the canteen and was soon warm down to my bones.

After a few moments of snacking, Elias combed his fingers through my hair. “Feel better?”

“Much,” I said. I tilted my face up and caught his lips in a brief kiss. “Thanks. I didn’t expect all these meetings would be so...”

“Challenging?” Elias asked.

“It’s exhausting,” I admitted. “In some ways, being kidnapped was a lot easier. At least I didn’t have to try to keep all the different pack leaders happy at the same time.”

Elias laughed quietly. “It gets easier with practice.”

“I hope so.”

“What’s bothering you, little wolf?” Elias asked.

I sighed. “I can just tell that Dawnguard and Daybreak aren’t happy with how the plans are going. Giles thinks I’m an idiot.”

“He doesn’t think that,” Elias said. “He thinks you’re young. Quite different.”

“It feels the same, though,” I grumbled.

“He’s stubborn,” Elias said. “I’ll get through to him eventually. What is it about Daybreak that’s bothering you? Barion seems to be accepting of the plans so far.”

“It’s just a feeling,” I admitted. “I worry about Daybreak in general. Barion has spent so much time here — what if someone back at Daybreak is getting ideas? What if they try to plan another coup?”

Elias stiffened slightly. “Has Barion suggested that’s a possibility?”

“Not exactly,” I said, “and he’d said he’d handle it, but...”

“Then you should trust him.” Elias relaxed again and squeezed me closer.

“Even if someone does consider planning such a thing, Daybreak is vastly weakened now. You can’t lose sight of the real threat.”

“I suppose it’s easier to worry about Daybreak than it is to worry about the Fae,” I said. “It just feels so impossible to take on the Queen. Especially if we only have our wits and our wolves to rely on.”

“Well, that’s where you come in, isn’t it?”

I sighed again, dramatically heavy this time. “Unless Giles is right, and it’s all rumors and nonsense.”

“I don’t think it is,” Elias said. His voice was low.

I pulled away and peered at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“I had my own conversations with King Khainan while the jaguars were here,” Elias said. “I asked him what he knew about these rumors of alchemy in Cruora. He admitted the Askonians scouts at the border between Askon and Cruora had heard word of it as well. One of the scouts even claims to have met a rogue alchemist who attempted to sell him some enchanted goods, but it couldn’t be verified. If there’s rumors, there’s scammers. But to my ears, the story sounded plausible.”

“So you think it’s true?” I asked him. “You think the Eagles have alchemists?”

“I don’t know,” Elias said. “But it’s worth investigating.”

“Why didn’t you say anything in our meeting?”

Elias chuckles. “Because I didn’t want Giles to think it was *too* plausible. If there *are* alchemists in Cruora, we need to ensure that Nightfall reaches them first. Giles has an interest in growing the strength of Dawnguard. If he believed in alchemy, he might try to track them down first.”

I exhaled and flopped backward on the blanket. “Do you think I said too much at the meeting?”

“No, not at all,” Elias said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t step in more.”

“You really think he would do that?” I pushed up onto one elbow and peered at him. “Try to get alchemists for himself?”

“Not really,” Elias said. “He’s a bit risk-averse. But why introduce that possibility if I can avoid it?”

I nodded and chewed on that bit of insight. Diplomacy was like chess, and Elias was playing at a higher level than I was. I hadn’t even considered the fact that someone else might want to seek out the alchemists for their own purposes. And I was already so concerned about Daybreak attempting another coup! “I should’ve been more careful.”

“Reyna.” Elias slid his hand over my thigh and squeezed. “You did wonderfully. You’re at a bit of a disadvantage here.”

“In what way?”

Elias grinned. “I’ve been dealing with these wolves for most of my life. The more you get to know them, the more this will come naturally to you.”

“If you say so,” I said. But my gaze wavered, and Elias caught it.

“What is it?” he asked.

I pushed down my anxiety, focusing instead on the steady beat of his heart, and the comforting weight of his hand on my thigh. “What about what Lady Marget said?” I asked. “About having kids? Has she really been pressuring you about heirs?”

Elias exhaled out of his nose, a sound that was half-sigh and half-anger. “She has been. But it’s none of her business.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the Court was talking that way?” I asked.

“I never imagined she’d bring it up like that,” Elias said. “It was disrespectful to us both. I spoke with her privately to make that very clear.”

“I’m not...that’s not what I’m worried about,” I said. Elias squeezed my thigh again in silent encouragement, as I tried to untangle the mess of thoughts in my mind. “If they’ve been bringing it up, you’ve been thinking about it, too, right?”

“Here and there,” he said carefully. “What are you thinking?”

“We haven’t talked about it,” I said.

“Do you want to?”

I closed my eyes. Despite my anxieties, he always managed to make me feel better. Safer. “I don’t know if I’m ready yet. There’s just...I feel like there’s so much I haven’t done. I don’t know if I’m ready to jump in to being a mother.”

“Is it something you want one day?” he asked.

“Is it something *you* want?” I parried.

He smiled, then nodded. “It is. I want kids. I want kids with you.” He kissed my temple. “But I don’t agree with the way the Court members frame it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“They suggest that it’s important we have heirs in case something happens to us,” he said. “Which is true. Especially with Corinne gathering power, there is a real risk of that. But...I’m more concerned with the safety of the pack at large. If, gods forbid, something did happen to us...the Court

would be able to lead. There's enough authority within the Court that a power vacuum could be negotiated without much damage to the pack."

It was so logical it almost made me laugh, but at the same time, it made my heart swell with affection. The pack always came first. "You don't care about your lineage?"

"There's wolf madness in my bloodline," he admitted. "Some would argue—and some *have* argued-- that it'd be proper to let it die out. So, I've heard both sides of the argument, in terms of other people having stakes in my having children or not. I've decided I won't let it guide my decisions." He squeezed my thigh again. "But you didn't answer my question."

A weight I'd been carrying in my heart eased slightly. "I think I do want children," I said quietly. "I just don't know when. It...it scares me, sometimes."

He smiled, huge and thrilled, and then pulled me into a kiss. "It's a decision we'll make when the time is right," he said. "Not because of the Court's swaying. That much I promise you."

I nodded in agreement. "When the time is right."

"For now, focus on the preparations for traveling to Cruora." He drummed his fingers against my thigh. "I have an odd feeling that whatever is waiting for us there is important."

"Me too," I agreed. "I can't seem to shake it."

"I'll manage the frustrations of inter-pack discussions. We'll have to keep an eye on Dawnguard and Daybreak to ensure nothing is brewing there. I don't want anyone to think war preparations are a chance to attempt another takeover."

"I asked Barion to keep me abreast of any shifts in the mood at Daybreak, but I don't think that's enough," I said. "I think we should have a wolf there."

Elias nodded. "Perhaps a spy in Dawnguard, too. Just to ensure Giles doesn't try to plant any disruptive seeds in the minds of our soldiers."

I sat back up and leaned against him again. "Okay, if you'll manage that, I'll prepare for the trip to Cruora. And I'll be sure to keep things quiet."

"Consider it done."

I turned my head and kissed the curve of his shoulder. "We make a decent team."

Elias laughed again, low. "I can't imagine trying to handle the Fae without you at my side, Reyna." He turned his head and caught my lips in another kiss. "We'll figure this out."

I nodded. “Together,” I whispered against his lips.

He pulled away, only making me pout a little, and then reached for his pack again. “I brought you something else.”

“This wasn’t enough?” I teased as I popped another bite of chocolate into my mouth.

He withdrew a small drawstring bag. He folded it into my hands, and then watched me, with his cheeks flushed — and not from the cold. My heart pounded with affection. Rarely had I seen him look so unsure.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Open it.”

I tugged at the drawstring and gingerly opened the bag. I withdrew a thin chain. On the end hung a wolf’s fang set in ornately detailed silver. I held the fang in my palm and traced the surface of it down to the sharp point.

“I have one as well,” Elias said. From his pocket he withdrew a similar necklace. “A twin. I haven’t worn it yet — it was always meant to be worn as a pair.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I had these made from my father’s teeth after I was forced to kill him, when he was in the throes of the wolf-madness,” Elias said. “I wanted to always have a reminder of what I did to protect my pack. What I did, and what I will always do.”

“Why two of them?” I gazed down at the necklace, tracing the shape repeatedly.

“I didn’t know why, when I first had them made,” he said. “My instincts just told me I needed two of them. It wasn’t until I married you that I realized I had been waiting for you. I want us both to have one — because you’re as strong as I am, and we’ll both do whatever it takes to protect the wolves of Nightfall.”

“Of course, I will,” I said. “Always.”

Warmth surged through me. Even more so than being crowned queen, in this moment, I knew Elias wanted me to be his equal. He trusted me. I wasn’t just a trophy, or a prize, or a bit of arm candy to smile at wolves in meetings. He wanted me to lead — and I wasn’t going to let him down.

I tugged off the cloak, and then turned and swept my hair over my shoulder. Elias took the necklace and gingerly clasped it around my neck.

I turned back around. The necklace hung just to my solar plexus, before the curve of my breasts. He touched the fang with his forefinger and said,

“Reyna, I’m honored to call you my Queen.”

I moved forward and kissed him deeply. I had no other way to express the surge of love I felt for him then — love, honor, and relief. His confidence in me made me feel more sure. More capable. This trip to Cruora would be fine. I could do this—I could be the diplomat and the Queen Nightfall deserved.

I climbed into his lap, so my knees were astride his hips, and wound my arms around his neck. He held me by the waist and kissed me with just as much hunger. He slid one hand under the hem of my shirt — his shirt — and smoothed his palm over my lower back. His touch was so hot it nearly burned. I sighed with pleasure into the kiss, and was met with a low growl.

Then, I set my hands at his shoulders and pushed him backward. As Elias made a surprised exhalation, his torso hit the blanket beneath us. He gazed up at me, grinning, his eyes flashing golden with desire. I leaned over him, forearms bracketing his head, and kissed him again. He reached up and tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind my hear. “What happened to being cold out here, hm?” he teased.

“I’m definitely still cold,” I said. “You’ll have to keep me warm.”

Elias laughed. He tugged me closer, so I was flush against his body, and then rolled us over so I was on my back, his body pressed against mine. I let my hands roam over his spine, the curve of his shoulders and lats, down to his ass, which I couldn’t help but squeeze.

He leaned down and kissed me again, then trailed his mouth over my jawline and the curve of my neck. “I guess I will,” he growled, and slid his hand possessively over my belly.

I sighed at the touch and tipped my head back for more adoring kisses. Heat pooled low in my gut, and all I could think about was how badly I wanted him. How much I trusted him. How much I *loved* him. It was so easy to close my eyes and lose myself in the sensation.

I hardly noticed the cold ground under me with Elias’ warm body covering mine. We kissed for a long few minutes, lazy and indulgent. He drew his lips over my cheek, my jaw, the curve of my neck. I hungered for more closeness, and squirmed insistently against his body. He chuckled, then helped me out of the shirt and trousers before pulling off his own as well. Despite the cold, with the blanket and the cloak underneath, and Elias’ body against me, I couldn’t feel the chill at all. I sighed with pleasure at the sensation of skin touching skin, and tugged him impossibly closer.

The sensation quickly made me shivery with desire, and the heat pooling

lower in between my hips was nearly aching with need. I moaned into the kiss, squirming in an attempt to get even closer.

Elias chuckled at my neediness. He smoothed his hands over all the skin he could touch: my arm, the curve of my waist, down to my thigh. He gripped the muscle of my thigh as I hiked it up over his hip, then he groaned into the kiss as the hard curve of his desire pressed into me. So big, so hot. He rutted against my skin as if promising more. I gasped against his lips and clung to him, and I pressed my fingertips into the solid muscle of his shoulders.

It was too cold to pull apart. I clung to him as we kissed and rutted against each other, needy, desperate, like animals. It was enough for a few minutes, but then I wanted more — I always did with Elias. I could never get enough. Never be close enough to him. I shifted my hips, with one leg still hooked around him. Elias wrestled a hand between us, and guided his hard length to where I wanted it most. I gasped with desire and hunger as the tip pressed against me.

He didn't tease. He just slotted his mouth over mine again and pressed inside of me, in one sure, steady thrust. I gasped at the sensation as pure pleasure ran up my spine. He quickly set a steady, sure pace, and his mouth was never far from mine. There was something particularly sweet and simple about it — perhaps it was the closeness of our wolves, or the woods around us, or the chill of the air, but it was so raw. Animal. The pleasure built in my core as I clung tightly to him, each thrust making me exhale against his skin.

Even with our bodies so close, Elias still managed to get his hand between us again, so he could draw his fore and middle finger to my most sensitive place. The pleasure went through me like a lightning bolt, going from a gooey, melty sensation to something a lot more urgent. I threw my head back and arched up against him as best I could, as he brought me closer and closer to release. He growled at the sight, pleased, the pace of his hips unrelenting as he kissed my neck.

I moaned wordlessly, so lost in the animal pleasure I couldn't even manage the familiar syllables of his name. My voice rang through the forest, carried away by the wind. It only took a few more thrusts of his hips and touches of his fingers to send me plummeting over the edge as release rolled through me.

“Gorgeous,” Elias growled. He sucked a mark just below my collarbone, then pulled back just enough to spill his seed across my hip.

In the afterglow, he cleaned me up, then wrapped me tightly in the bigger of the two cloaks and held me closer. We stayed like that for some time, dozing and enjoying the brief window of privacy we had. With his breath ghosting over my temple, I drifted, my thoughts always returning back to the question of our future.

Maybe it'd be something like this. Maybe we'd go on a run, and fall into each others' arms in the woods, except maybe afterward, we'd have kids of our own.

It was an intimidating thought. It made me nervous, and made me curl closer to Elias. But I couldn't shake it, and I found I didn't really want to.

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“This so exciting,” Adora said, nearly skipping as she led us through the bustling streets of Efra. “This is going to be such an incredible journey. All the way to Cruora! I never even imagined!”

“Let’s not announce it at such a high volume, please,” Fina said with a fond roll of her eyes.

“We don’t even know who will be traveling,” I said. “Nothing has been set in stone.”

“Right, right,” Adora said. She beamed as she turned down the side street that led to the tailor shop. “My apologies. I admit I’m more excited about seeing these Askonian fabrics in person, anyway.” She blinked up at Kodan. “Are you being fitted for anything today, Kodan?”

Kodan looked at me, but I said nothing and just raised my eyebrows at her. Kodan was dressed in her usual plain dark slacks and shirt with light leather armor to mark her as a soldier of Nightfall. She had joined this afternoon as our security detail, but I had my suspicions that she’d leaped at the chance for not-so-professional reasons.

“Ah, no,” Kodan said. “I’ve got everything I need to travel.”

“What about formal wear?” Adora asked. “We simply must freshen up your wardrobe for this trip.”

“That’s not—”

“I insist,” Adora said. She took Kodan by the wrist and dragged her into the tailor shop.

“They’re cute,” Fina said with a small smile. She and I stepped into the shop as well, where Adora was already in brisk conversation with Aerika.

Adora had changed some during her time in Efra. She still wore the finest silk gowns of all of us, and still carried herself with the most poise, but she'd taken to wearing her hair in functional plaits instead of the intricate styles of her pack, Starcrest.

Today, she was dressed in pale blue gown with a plain brown cloak — a far cry from the heavy and intricately decorated gowns she'd worn when I first met her. I liked this version of her better. Ever since we had discovered we were half-sisters, I'd found we were rubbing off on each other a little more.

“Welcome,” Aerika said with a smile. She looked as striking as ever, with her white hair falling to her shoulders and gleaming dark eyes. “We've been working on the requested wardrobes diligently. I think you'll be pleased with what we've come up with.”

I nodded in gratitude. A new wardrobe was functional, certainly, but that wasn't really why I was here.

“I've been in communication with the leather smiths at the barracks, too,” Aerika said. “I believe you'll all be pleased with some of the improvements we've made to the armor.”

That got Kodan's attention. “You have it here?”

“Before we talk armor,” Adora cut in, “I simply must insist that we measure General Kodan for a new set of formal wear. You've been wearing the same old suit for far too long.” Adora set her hands at Kodan's lower back and urged her up and onto the low platform in front of the shop's triple-mirror setup.

“Now, I don't know if all that's--” Kodan start.

Adora clicked her tongue. “I insist. Please, Aerika, could we start with the measurements?”

With a bemused smile, Aerika summoned her assistants out of the back room. A few young women surrounded Kodan as she balked and stammered, beginning to measure her shoulders and waist in a flurry of motion.

“And you were able to obtain the Askonian fabric?” I asked Aerika.

“Yes, it's remarkable. I've never worked with such a delicate textile.”

“I'm terribly curious,” I said. “Would you mind showing me?”

“Of course not,” Aerika said with a smile as her assistants flitted around Kodan like butterflies.

She led me through the curtain in the back of the tailor shop, to the hidden workroom. A wardrobe rack stood near the wall, and hanging from it

was a floor-length gown, sewn from black fabric as inky dark as the night sky. The fabric looked almost like liquid where it hang, as if it had been lifted from dark river water and still maintained its fluidity. Across the work table in the center of the room, reams of the same fabric spilled across the surface.

“It truly is remarkable,” Aerika said. She trailed her fingertips over the fabric. “I asked the Askonian servants for insight on how it’s woven, but no one was willing to give up the secrets.” She threw me a small smile. “I suppose I can’t be too angry about that.”

“About keeping secrets?” I asked as I inspected the sleeve of the dress.

“Something like that.”

Aerika said nothing. I glanced up and saw she had gone still with her hand on the ream of fabric.

“I only hope I can ask you a few questions,” I said quietly. “In private.”

She swallowed. “I’m sure I won’t be of any help.”

“Do you mind if I ask anyway?”

In the main room of the shop, Adora’s laughter cut through the quiet, bright and bell-like.

Aerika’s nervous expression softened. “I can’t promise I’ll have any answers.”

“Have you heard about the portals opening to the south of the city?” I asked. “I’ve been leading some patrols to keep an eye on them, but I must admit I’m unsure of if how much knowledge filters through the streets.”

Aerika nodded. “I’ve certainly heard of them. The rumor mill never ceases.”

“Of that I’m aware,” I said with a smile. “I hoped you might have some insight as to why the portals are appearing.”

“Why do you ask?” Aerika glanced up, her expression carefully blank.

I sighed. I needed Aerika to trust me — I needed to learn whatever she knew. Still, I didn’t know the best way to do that. Certainly I didn’t have the careful manipulative skills Elias did. The only strategy I had was honesty. I could only hope it didn’t come back to bite me.

“You told me when the Fae Queen returned, that you could sense it,” I said. “I know of your Fae heritage, and of your assistants’. I only wish to know if there’s been word of the Queen’s intentions with the emergence of the portals.”

When Aerika had admitted her heritage to me, she’d offered no details at all. When I’d pressed for them, she’d shut down and withdrawn, and told me

no more. I didn't want that to happen again — I wanted her to trust me to keep her secrets private.

“If Corinne had reason for opening portals,” Aerika said with a small smile, “I'm sure I would be one of the last to know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Do you remember when you asked me about my heritage?” Aerika asked.

I blushed. “That wasn't my finest moment.”

Aerika laughed quietly. “You asked me if I would return to Faerie if Corinne summoned the Fae back.”

“I admit I'm still curious about the answer.”

“I am half Fae,” Aerika said. “My mother was a wolf, and my father a high-ranking Fae of the Court.”

I blinked. So there wasn't just a trace amount of Fae blood in Aerika's history — she was a true half-Fae. A dozen questions all rose to the surface of my mind, but before I could ask any of them, Aerika continued.

“Their relationship was a secret, and I was born here, in Efra. When the Court found out about them, Corinne was furious that my father had sullied the bloodline. He returned to Faerie in an attempt to placate the queen and keep her from me and my mother. He used his magic to cut us off from Faerie, shielding me from the Queen's searching. But he was punished for his relationship with my mother. He was killed. I never met him.” Aerika gazed at the fabric, running it idly through her fingers as her gaze went out of focus.

“I'm so sorry,” I murmured.

“I wish I could be of more help to you,” Aerika said. “But I have no knowledge of what the portals mean. I can feel their presence, but nothing more than that.” She smiled sadly. “I'm unwelcome in Faerie. And I have no wolf. I belong in neither place, and neither place welcomes me.”

“Well, the Court of Nightfall welcomes you,” I said. “I hope you'll consider advising me. Having someone who has an intrinsic connection to Faerie could be the edge we need to protect Frasia from Corinne.”

Aerika pressed her lips together. “Your Highness, as honored as I am, I'm just a tailor.”

“I think that's selling yourself a bit short.” I grinned at her, then delicately lifted the inky black dress from the wardrobe rack. “Adora's going to have a fit when she sees this, you're aware of that, right?”

Aerika laughed quietly and nodded. “That's my goal as a seamstress.”

Just as I predicted, as soon as Adora saw the dress she gasped and staggered back like she'd been struck. "Oh Gods above," she said, wide-eyed, "it's gorgeous!"

The rest of the afternoon was a whirlwind of new clothes and delighted spins in front of the trio of mirrors. Fina, Adora, and I all had a few sets of fine trousers and shirts made, better for ease of travel. Kodan was fitted for some fine suits of her own, and then insisted that the three of us get fitted for the new armor, as well. It took a few hours, but as we worked, Aerika's expression grew more open and smiling. Once the orders were completed and the schedule for delivery to the manor nailed down, the four of us left the tailor shop in a flurry of thanks and smiles.

"Fina," I asked as we strolled back toward the manor, "accompany me to the library before dinner?"

"Sure," she said. "Something fun you're planning?"

"The library's always fun to Reyna," Adora teased.

I laughed. "Well, it is! Are you saying you'd like to come too?"

"Absolutely not," Adora said with a smile. She tucked her hand into the crook of Kodan's arm. Both of their cheeks flushed slightly. "I have some swordsmanship lessons this afternoon."

"Don't have too much fun," I teased.

Kodan's red cheeks burned even deeper, then with a slight bow, she led Adora toward the barracks.

Fina and I walked together back to the manor and up the stairs to the library. I didn't tell her what Aerika had told me, but I did tell her I had some ideas about Corinne's possible motivations. Already I was turning over what Aerika had told me. I'd known Corinne was ruthless, but I hadn't expected that ruthlessness would extend to her Fae subjects as well.

I guided Fina to my study on the top floor of the library. On the big wooden table, we spread out the maps and books Enet had given me, as well as all the scrolls about the history of Shianga I could find. I had the archive of Fae items that had been kept in the basement of the manor, and I dug up my copy of Hae Blaylock's *History of the Fae in Frasia*. I summoned a handmaiden, sent her to bring us a pot of black tea, and then I started spreading out the maps.

After a few hours of research and far too many cups of tea, Fina straightened up, her nose in a thin leatherbound book. "Reyna, listen to this."

I looked up, blinking dizzily from where I was peering closely at a fading

coastline of Shianga.

“More attacks today,” she read aloud. “The Fae in the stables broke into the house and slaughtered the Duke and his mistresses. Efforts to stop the uprisings have only made them worse... I fear this will soon become a war.”

“What is that?” I asked. “What are you reading?”

“It’s an old journal from Shianga,” she said. “Someone rich. It was in the things Enet gave you. ‘The Fae are mad,’ she continued. ‘They kill dragons indiscriminately. They do not listen to reason. Even my friends, it’s as if their minds have been taken over by their Queen.’”

Fina kept thumbing through the journal. “According to this, there was a massive attack on the dragons that ended with Draunar’s father and his court rounding up all the Fae they could find and slaughtering them. When Corinne came into Shianga herself, she was caught.”

“Does it say why she was doing that?” I pulled the stack of books closer to me and began to look through them for more oral histories.

“Nope, just that it happened,” Fina said.

“Wait.” A memory hit me like a bolt of lightning, and I turned back to the Blaylock book. I thumbed through it rapidly, trying to find an image I thought I remembered seeing. It had to be here, somewhere, and then —

“Here, look!”

Toward the back of the book was an illustration of a Fae royal with her foot atop a jaguar’s body, as she held its severed head aloft.

“Askonian folklore tells of a battle against the Fae many generations ago,” Reyna read, “as Fae royalty believed shifter magic to be inferior to Fae magic, and primarily of use to enhance their own abilities.”

“Pretty dark,” Fina said, scrunching her nose. “So Corinne thinks shifters are only good for making her own magic more powerful?”

“It’s possible,” I thought. It would explain why Corinne was so opposed to relationships like Aerika’s parents. If shifters were more like a power source to the Fae, it wouldn’t do well to create half-Fae, half-shifter offspring. “It’s not just that she wants to take over the land. She wants to use us to grow her own power.”

Fina shivered.

“I wonder if that’s why the jaguars lost access to their magic,” I pondered aloud. “I wonder if Corinne destroyed it, somehow, to keep them weak.”

Maybe it was never the Fae that were causing trouble, but Corinne herself. If there were more Fae like Aerika, and Fae who didn’t support

Corinne...if the portals were our realms *trying* to heal, instead of remaining separate...if Corinne was the tyrant behind all of this, and we could remove her...the possibilities began to spin out in my mind.

I drank the remainder of my tea and slammed the mug down on the table. "I've got to go speak with Elias," I said. "This is important stuff we've figured out."

Fina blinked, surprised by my excitement. "Okay, well, I'll put all this up for now."

"Thanks, Fina!"

I rushed to the barracks with the new pieces of information rattling around in my mind. If the portals were just a reaction to our realm healing its connection to Faerie, we might have a chance to turn those portals against her. How, I wasn't sure. I'd need to talk to Elias, and Aerika, and perhaps even an alchemist. Potential plans formed in my head as I rushed past the servants and Court members moving about the halls of the manor.

The sun was low in the sky by the time I made it in the barracks. It was a vast timber building with a thatched roof, connected to a dormitory where some of the soldiers stayed. There was a large, open training facility, and even from the street outside I could hear the clashing of swords and the grunts of exertion. I slipped in through a side door and paused in the arched doorway.

The soldiers within the training facility worked in small groups of a half-dozen or so. Two paired off as the others watched, and they slammed their swords together in rhythmic patterns: clank, clank, clank. Their movements kicked up the sand on the floor of the facility. Then the other soldiers stepped forward to critique them, and the whole process repeated again. At the far end of the training facility, Kodan and Adora were engaged in this same process. Kodan stepped backward, grinning as she parried Adora's aggressive blows. Even from across the facility, I could tell the general was delighted with her effort.

I stepped out onto the stand and hurried around the edge of the facility, keeping a safe distance from the training soldiers. "Elias!" I called. "Elias!"

Elias parried sword strike, glanced up, and then looked down just in time to sidestep a quick slash from the soldier he was training with. The soldier noticed me, then, and took a quick step back and sheathed his sword. He was a young man, fresh-faced with curly dark hair.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said as I jogged up.

“We’re wrapping up here soon,” Elias said. He squinted up at the darkening sky. “I’d rather not train by torchlight. Not tonight, at least.” He sheathed his sword as well, and loosed the collar of his white linen shirt. His tan skin was beaded with sweat, and his dark hair was tied back with a strip of leather. He looked good like this — strong and capable, ready to leap into battle. It suited him. He always looked a little more like himself. “This is Private Haulfrun Dunnings,” Elias said.

“Your Highness,” Haulfrun said with a bow.

“He’s an impressive swordsman,” Elias said. “Giving me a run for my money here.”

Haulfrun’s eyes widened. “Well, sir, I wouldn’t say--”

“No arguments,” Elias said with a cheerful wave of his hand. “Dismissed. I’ll have Kodan work with you later this week on some more advanced techniques.”

“Sir! Thank you, sir.” Haulfrun bowed again, still wide-eyed, and then hurried toward another group of soldiers in the facility.

“What is it, Reyna?” Elias asked. “You look like you’ve just uncovered some great new map in the archive.” He tilted his head. “Did you?”

“Something like that. Can we speak privately?”

Elias led me into the narrow halls of the training facility. He handed his sword off to a soldier waiting near the door, and then guided us into a small private changing room. As soon as the door was closed, I leaned against it, just in case any curious passerby thought about trying to rattle the knob.

“I don’t think the Fae are creating the portals on purpose,” I said.

“What makes you think that?” Elias pulled his sweaty shirt up and over his head, then used it to towel off the worst of the sweat from his muscled torso.

“She has a long-standing conflict with the dragons,” I said. “It was when Draunar took her hostage that the connection between our realm and Faerie was severed. Us wolves were always secondary, you know that. The portals are just a reaction to her return to Faerie. It shows that she’s gathering power, but she’s still unstable.”

Elias pressed his lips together. “You’re sure of that?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I think if she knew about them, they wouldn’t be occurring at all. They’re a sign to us that she’s gathering power. She wouldn’t want us to know at all. She thinks shifters are a way for her to gain more power. It’s not just about our lands, it’s about our magic, too.”

Elias nodded as he pulled on a clean shirt. “It’s possible. The portals could be appearing because her attention is focused elsewhere.”

“She’ll go for the dragons first,” I said.

“We can’t guarantee that,” Elias said. “Despite any longstanding conflict...you may have ignited a new grudge by besting her.”

I tipped my chin down and gazed at his bare feet on the floor. “I didn’t think about that.”

“We have no way of knowing exactly what she’s planning,” Elias said, “but what you’re saying about her knowledge of the portals makes sense.”

“This is big,” I said. “It means we have more time. And we know what she wants.”

“We *might* have more time,” Elias corrected. “And we *could* know what she wants. Reyna, we can’t let our guard down here. I have some of my officers testing some new weapons to use against the Fae, but there’s no way of knowing if they’ll actually work.”

“The alchemists could have answers.”

Elias sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know you want this to have a straightforward solution, but there isn’t one,” he said. “Leave the war strategy to me. We’ll get to Cruora.”

Disappointment chewed at me. I’d wanted him to be excited about this discovery, to see the pieces of history slot into place in the same way I did. But, I realized, the *why* of things wasn’t as important to Elias right now. He didn’t need to look backward. He needed his vigilance around him to keep Frasia safe.

I had to put the pieces together. I had to find what they knew in Cruora.

He had to hold the boundaries of Frasia and keep us safe now. I had to use this time to figure out how we would not just survive — but *win*.

Elias pulled his clean shirt on. He placed two fingers under my chin and tipped my face up to meet his. “It’s a good find, Reyna,” he said. “We just can’t try to think of her motivations as fact.”

“I know,” I said. “I just...I’m trying to understand her. Where she’s going to attack first. What she’s waiting on.”

“It’s impossible,” Elias said with a smile. He pulled me into a brief kiss. “All we can do is try to be as prepared.”

I nodded, then leaned heavily against his chest. “Okay. I’ll do my part. You do yours.”

He raked his fingers through my hair. “Exactly, little wolf.”

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“This turned out lovely,” Amity said as Rue unpacked the rest of the things Aerika had sent over. Amity poked curiously at the fine leather armor, embroidered with a gold moon and stars. “It’s so lightweight. Aerika really is a remarkable seamstress.”

“She really is,” I said. “Here, put the new items in the wardrobe, and we can move some of those heavier gowns into storage.”

A knock at the door interrupted the organizing. I opened the door, and a young servant bowed deeply. “Milady, the King has requested your presence in the solarium,” he said.

“I thought he was in meetings this morning,” I said.

“They appear to have wrapped up,” the servant said.

I nodded, then glanced at Amity and Rue. Amity shrugged slightly, and went back to unpacking my new wardrobe.

In the solarium, Elias was seated alone at the table with a cup of coffee and a serious expression on his face as he scratched notes on a small sheet of parchment. “I thought you were meeting with the council this morning,” I said.

“We already met,” Elias said. “Giles is starting to get on my last nerve.”

“Trouble with the strategizing?”

“No, it’s not that.”

Kodan burst into the solarium, in her training clothes, dripping with sweat despite the winter chill. She dropped into a seat at the table hard enough to rattle the dishes atop it and pinned Elias with a look.

“Hope this is important,” she said, “since you pulled me away from

training your soldiers.”

He smirked at her. Kodan was the only person in Frasia who could get away with talking to Elias like that.

“I was hammering out the details of the convoy to Cruora with the council this morning,” Elias said. “Some of them still consider it a waste of time and resources. The agreement is that it will be a small convoy. A very small one.”

“Okay,” I said, “how small do you mean?”

He sighed. “It’s not the way I’d prefer to go about it. But I do believe it’s important that you lead the convoy yourself, since it was your idea.”

“That’s what I’d prefer,” I said.

“I know,” he said with a smile, “but a small convoy is dangerous.”

“Then don’t send her,” Kodan said. “I’ll go.”

“In an ideal world, that’s what I’d do,” Elias admitted, “not because I don’t trust your skills, Reyna, but because I hesitate to send the Queen out traveling when war looms on the horizon.”

“I can handle myself,” I said.

“That’s not in question,” Kodan said. “Could you handle an army who wanted to kidnap you? The truth of the matter is someone like me is less valuable. A loss that wouldn’t risk the stability of Frasia.”

“Kodan!” I said. “You can’t mean--”

“She’s being hyperbolic,” Elias interjected, “but it’s true.”

I leaned back in my chair. “You think the risk is that high?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be sending you at all,” Elias said, “but that doesn’t mean the risk is nonexistent.”

“I still don’t even know exactly what this plan is,” I said. “I’m to go to Cruora?”

“Yes, and soon,” Elias said. “As you said, there must be something to be found there.”

Excitement built inside me, but I did my best to keep my expression neutral. Getting the details was more important than my eagerness to travel. “How small is a small convoy?”

“You and Kodan,” Elias said, “as well as Fina and Adora, and a handful of soldiers of Kodan’s choosing.”

I nodded. That *was* quite small. “The court will hardly notice I’m gone.”

“Oh, they’ll notice,” Elias said. “But that’s part of the reason you’re going. If this trip goes as well as we hope, the others on the Council will no

longer doubt your leadership. You've also been doing the research on the history, and you know Enet's documents backward and forward. You're the best person to send to Cruora because I can trust you to respect their customs and rules, no matter how odd they might seem."

"I'll do my best," I murmured. I still wasn't sure if I could consider myself a diplomat, but I did want the opportunity to try. "What about the soldiers, though? If Kodan is coming to Cruora, who's managing their training to prepare here at home?"

"The man himself, I assume," Kodan said with a grin.

Elias nodded. "I'll take over the training duties. Kodan has identified the strongest new recruits--"

"Like Haulfrun, who you met," Kodan said with a nod.

"—and I'll be leading them. It'll be good for the soldiers, too, to train directly under the King."

"It'll build loyalty," I said with a nod. "That's wise."

"Exactly," Elias said. "Strengthening Nightfall is another way we can ensure Frasia's stability."

"We'll leave in two weeks," Kodan said.

"Two weeks?" I asked. "Shouldn't we leave sooner?"

"There's much to prepare," Kodan said. "It's a long journey. And it's not good manners to show up unannounced — we should send word to Cruora of our intentions."

"The Court needs to prepare for the Queen's absence, as well." Elias smiled. "As much as I wish we could just pick up and leave, it's not so easy for the royal leaders."

I nodded. "I'll gather the necessary documents as well. I'll be well-prepared to represent Frasia."

"I have no doubt," Elias said.

"Might even be fun," Kodan said. She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms across her chest. "Nothing like a mildly dangerous diplomatic mission to get the blood pumping."

"It wouldn't be happening without your inclusion, Kodan," Elias said. "Thank you."

Kodan blinked, slightly surprised. "No need to thank me. This is part of my duty."

"Duty and trust are two different things," I said. "I don't know if I'd be doing this either, if I didn't trust you."

Kodan nodded. Her cheeks colored slightly. Then she cleared her throat, and conversation turned to the logistics of the upcoming preparations.

I smiled and scooted my chair a little closer to the table. Kodan was a soldier first, as was Elias, and she clearly wasn't used to open conversations like this. At least not when she was off the battlefield.

As we laid out the necessary preparations, the messages that needed to be sent, the meetings that needed to be rescheduled, the supplies that needed to be made and gathered, I began to feel excited, but anxious. This was really happening.

But with the three of us working together...it'd be fine. This was my chance to prove to the Court and to Elias that I could be a Queen both at home, and abroad.

The rest of the day passed in a flurry of activity. Elias spent the day at the barracks with Kodan, preparing to adjust the training schedule to ease her off it so she could get ready for the journey, while I met with the staff in the library to prepare the notice to Cruora in advance of our travels. It was late by the time I made it back to my chambers. I took my time in the bath, dismissing Amity and Rue early so I could soak away the stress of the day in private.

I was still in the bath when the door to our chambers creaked open, and familiar soft steps padded across the door. Elias stepped into the bathroom. I kept my eyes closed, my head resting on the edge of the tub, but my lips curved into a smile. I didn't need to see him to recognize his presence — my wolf knew his scent even in my human form.

"Hello, little wolf," Elias murmured as he stepped into the bathroom. He knelt at the tub, then dipped his hands into the warm water and squeezed my shoulders. The pressure felt good on my aching muscles, and my lips dropped open around a small inhale. "Feeling okay?"

"Better now," I said.

Elias hummed and pressed a kiss to my temple. "Good work today."

I laughed. "You don't even know what I did."

"Mm, I don't have to know the details to know you did well."

My heart thumped in my chest. Knowing Elias believed in me — it was a gift I couldn't quite comprehend, not yet. It only made me more determined to prove his belief wasn't misplaced. "You too, then." I sighed. "I wish I was as confident in myself as you are in me."

"What has you worried?" he asked as he worked the tension from my

shoulders.

“Well, my last diplomatic mission didn’t exactly end well,” I admitted. The events that had occurred in Shianga still weighed heavily on my mind. Draunar had asked for my hand in marriage as part of a treaty deal, and I’d thought I was being a wise noble by agreeing to it. That had led to my abduction, first to Draunar’s hoard and then to Faerie. “I’m just worried I’ll make another mistake and ruin everything again. Or make things worse.”

“There’s always a chance,” Elias said. “But that’s true of any diplomatic mission, not just yours.”

“I’m not sure if that makes me feel better,” I said, half-teasing.

“Well, know this,” he said, “I know if you learned anything in Shianga and Faerie, it’s not to make such decisions lightly. You know the risks now — intimately. So I have no doubt you’ll be a touch more suspicious than you may have been in the past.”

I laughed. “Well, I guess that much is true.”

“Trust your wolf,” Elias said. “And lean on Kodan for assistance. I know you’ll excel.”

“You’re too sweet to me,” I murmured. I folded one hand over his.

Elias slid his callused hands over my shoulders and across my chest, just above the swell of my breasts. He trailed his lips over my cheek, down to my jaw, until I turned my head and caught his lips in a searing kiss. Desire rolled through me, warm and molten.

“The hardest part,” Elias murmured into the kiss, “will be being stuck here in Efra without you.”

“I find it hard to believe a King is ever stuck,” I teased.

“Curse these responsibilities.” Elias slid his hands lower, curved his fingers around my ribs, and then smoothed his hand over my breast. He traced the pad of his forefinger around my sensitive nipple, making me gasp into the kiss. “Can I convince you to leave the bath and come to bed?”

“You already have,” I said.

He helped me out of the tub, then wouldn’t let me towel myself dry. Instead, he took the fluffy towel and gently patted it over my skin, then wrapped me up in its warmth. Then, before I could even take a step, he scooped me up into his arms in an easy bridal carry. I squeaked in surprise and flung my arms around his neck. “Elias!”

“Can’t help it.” I felt the curve of his smile against the crown of my head. “You’re just the perfect size for carrying.”

I kicked my feet, jokingly fighting against him. “I’m perfectly capable of walking.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to,” he said. He strode into our bedroom, then deposited me into the center of our four-poster bed on its dark silk sheets. My towel fell open, revealing my bare skin. I still felt shy, even after all the time we’d spent together, but resisted the urge to cover myself.

“Gorgeous,” Elias murmured. His eyes flashed golden with desire.

“It’s feeling a bit unfair,” I said. “You’re still dressed.”

Elias undid a few buttons at the top of his fine dress shirt, before pulling it up and over his head with such speed I thought I heard a button pop off. He shook his dark hair loose. My mouth watered at the sight of his body: his broad shoulders and defined torso, the dip of his waist, the dark hair dotting his chest and leading in an enticing line to the waistband of his trousers.

He was so gorgeous. I reached toward him, my hands itching with the desire to touch.

Elias didn’t make me wait. He crawled onto the bed, caging me in, his knees astride my thighs and his elbows on either side of my head. Dark locks fell around his face like a curtain. The rest of the world melted away. I lost myself in the rich gold of his eyes, the curve of his smile, and then — finally - the heat of his kiss. He caught my lips in a slow, hungry embrace, his tongue pressed deep into my mouth and his teeth grazed over my lower lip. It was possessive. It was perfect. The desire that had been moving slowly through me suddenly became hot and demanding. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my fingertips into his back, needing him closer.

But he was so strong. Even when I pushed insistently at his back, he didn’t move. Instead, he just smiled into the kiss. “What do you want, little wolf?”

“You,” I said immediately. Heat pooled between my hips — I wanted him so badly, his hands and his mouth and his perfect cock. I wanted him so badly it felt like a need. It was as if now that he’d said it, my wolf also realized we were soon to be parted, and needed as much closeness as possible to survive the separation.

Elias hummed in pleasure, then his lips traveled over my cheek to the curve of my jaw. He kissed my neck, my shoulder, the curve of my collarbone. Then, lower, just over my heart, he kissed with enough teeth that I gasped and arched into his mouth. It wasn’t hard enough to draw blood, but it was certainly enough to leave a mark. It only made me cling harder to him.

He pulled back just enough to smooth his palm over the pink mark, where it'd be easy enough to hide under my dresses, but I'd know it was there.

"Gorgeous," he growled.

I never wanted it to fade.

Elias took his time after that. He kissed over my breasts, my ribs, my quivering belly, all while his hands roamed possessively over whatever skin he could touch: my arms, my hands, my thighs. The attention made me shift and moan. It was overwhelming, but at the same time, it wasn't enough.

He kissed my hip, then looked up at me, golden eyes bright with amusement and pleasure.

"Please," I whispered as I carded my fingers through his dark hair. I couldn't ask — but I did spread my legs wider, inviting him closer to my center.

Elias dug his fingers into the soft flesh of my thighs. He exhaled a sound like a low growl, and I knew from the tiny crackle in the air that his wolf was close to the surface. The knowledge raced through me. Just being close to me could draw the animal out. It made me feel powerful, connected to him — and it made me feel *desired*. I loved seeing him want me. As I met his hungry golden gaze, I knew this memory would sustain me during lonely nights in Cruora.

He growled my name, then laved his tongue over my belly. I shivered and rocked my hips minutely. I throbbed at my center, where I was slick and wet with desire. Elias adjusted himself so he was between my legs, then scooted closer. He used his grip on my thigh to tug one of my legs over his shoulder, then kissed my other thigh.

I sighed out a shaky moan and kept my hand tangled in his hair. He kept kissing my thigh, licking up the sweat beading there and even nipping at my skin gently, possessively. I was so sensitive, and each kiss sent a ripple of pleasure all the way to the crown of my head. I tugged at his hair gently. "Please, Elias," I said, already halfway to begging. "I *need* you."

He exhaled hard, and his warm breath washed over my sensitive skin. Then, finally, he stopped teasing. He dragged his tongue up my inner thigh, and then exhaled right over my center, where I was wet and waiting for him. I moaned aloud and tried to rock my hips again, to take what I so desperately wanted, but with one hand on my hip, he easily held me in place. Being pinned like that only sent a fresh rush of arousal through me.

Then he kissed me. That's what it was — not a lick or a suck but a *kiss*,

wet and open-mouthed. His mouth on my folds made me cry aloud. He devoured me, his tongue working expertly up the length of my pussy to find my most sensitive place and *bear down*.

I lost myself in the sensation. He played my body like an instrument, keeping one hand on my hip, while the other was pressed gently on my belly. The pressure kept me pinned in place and added another layer of pleasure, as ecstasy built up in my core. He found the perfect rhythm, and I gasped out my approval as I tightened my grip in his hair. I was already so wound up, it didn't take long. The pleasure built and built inside me like a coil pulling tighter and tighter, and then Elias moved his tongue just right, and the coil snapped. I pressed my hips hard to his face as I came. My orgasm rolled over me like a wave, and Elias licked me through it until I pulled him off, shivery with overstimulation.

I guided him forwards so he was lying on top of me. I melted into the mattress, boneless in the afterglow, and kissed him. The kiss was slick and wet and dirty, and so perfect, but I couldn't seem to get close enough. His length pressed against my hip, hard and promising, still trapped in his slacks.

"Come on," I murmured into the kiss. I wrestled with the button on his slacks, but my fingers didn't work quite right. My struggles made Elias laugh. He took over, then pushed his slacks down just enough to free himself. "Need you."

Elias growled again, then broke the kiss, only to gasp into the curve of my neck instead. He hitched my leg up around his hip, and gently guided himself inside me.

I moaned with pleasure, then wound my arms around his neck and pulled him impossibly closer. As badly as I wanted to travel to Cruora, I knew I'd miss this, too — his kiss, his touch, his low growl as he brought me to another gasping orgasm.

“I’m so nervous,” Adora said as she twisted her plait into a tight bun and fastened it with a few hairpins. “I’ve only been practicing in private. I’m going to completely choke out there.”

“All the more reason to start practicing now,” Fina said. She tightened the buckle of her belt. “Don’t want you choking on the battlefield.”

“I have to admit, I hope there aren’t any battlefields in my future at all,” Adora admitted with a cringe.

The three of us were putting on the last of our gear in one of the training facility’s private dressing rooms. It was midday, and most of the soldiers had left for lunch, though they’d likely return to keep drilling before we were finished with our training ourselves. At my request, Fina and Adora had officially agreed to join me on the journey to Cruora.

Kodan had insisted the three of us brush up on our combat skills before we leave. “You can’t only be reliant on the security detail for everything,” Kodan had said. “You need to be able to hold your own.”

I agreed with her. Today’s training session doubled as a wardrobe test as well. The three of us were in the new wardrobes Aerika had made: cotton slacks and plain shirts, with fitted canvas jackets and light leather armor. We didn’t look like nobles. Perhaps a bit wealthy, but no more than the average merchant. That was intentional as well. We wanted to attract as little attention as possible as we traveled. Kodan considered bandits to be as much of a risk as the Fae. I tightened the laces on my boots, then checked the buckles on my belt as well.

“How is this different than the training you’ve already been doing?” I

asked.

“It’s just more serious!” Adora said. “It was fun, and educational, but this is much more...I mean, I never thought I’d actually *use* any of it.”

Fina laughed. “Well, hopefully we won’t. But we’ll be ready.”

Adora cringed. “I don’t know about ‘we.’” She sighed. “What about you, Fina? Has Giles chewed you out for agreeing to travel yet?”

I glanced at Fina, brow furrowed. “He didn’t want you as part of the convoy?”

“Mm, he’s just being difficult,” Fina said. “He’s not particularly invested either way, but I think he had a vision of Duskmoon abstaining from this mission all together.”

“I see,” I said. “Is that causing any problems I should know about?”

Fina shook her head. “I’d tell you if they were. I think he’s in denial. There’s been word of portals opening up closer to Duskmoon’s borders, and it’s making the wolves of the pack nervous. I’m hoping this will convince him to stop being so contrarian — and that we’ll figure out what’s going on. Duskmoon’s safety is my priority right now.”

“Good,” I said. I set a hand at Fina’s shoulder and squeezed. “Just keep me informed if anything changes, okay? I don’t want this diplomacy to cause any internal tensions in the Duskmoon court.”

Fina smiled softly. “Thanks. Really.”

“Let’s go, ladies!” Kodan called from outside the training facility. “Not getting any younger out here!”

“That’s our cue,” Adora said. “You go first.”

Laughing, I acquiesced. Out on the training facility grounds, Kodan waited with her wooden training sword in hand. She grinned when she saw us and waved us over. At her side stood another of Elias’ soldiers, an unfamiliar older wolf with greying hair and a gold tooth, and Barion of Daybreak.

I was surprised to see Barion, and even more surprised by how my heart stumbled over itself in my chest. I hadn’t trained with Barion in ages, and the thought of doing so now filled me with an odd mix of nostalgia and dread. The dread was rooted in memory — memory of waking up at dawn to Barion’s demanding shouts, hauling myself out into the humid morning to run exhausting sword drills for hours before the rest of the manor had even started their day. It made me feel like a teenager again.

“Your Highness,” Barion said with a sweeping bow as I approached. “I hope you don’t mind my inclusion in the training preparations.”

“Not at all, Barion,” I said. “I can only hope I can still keep up with you.”

“Likewise,” Barion said.

Kodan paired up with Fina, Adora (much to her chagrin and dismay) with the unfamiliar soldier, and I was with Barion. Barion and I crossed the training facility to have some space. He didn’t have a training weapon though. Instead he had his usual sword: plain, sharp steel. I had mine as well. Just like old times.

“Anything in particular you’d like to work on today?” Barion asked. “Or shall we just spar?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” I teased. “How long has it been since you’ve had a plain old training day yourself?”

“Ah, so a sparring session it is,” Barion said with a grin.

“I suppose we can start there,” I said, “as I’m sure you’ll be able to find flaws in my technique as soon as we begin.”

“It’s why they keep me around.”

I unsheathed my sword, then stepped into my familiar training stance.

Barion did the same. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I exhaled, tightened my grip on the hilt, and then surged forward.

Barion parried my first blow with effortless ease, then struck back with one of his own. I sidestepped it, then knocked the flat of my blade against his flank like I was scolding an unruly horse.

“You’ve improved,” Barion said, impressed.

“I’d hope so,” I said with a grin. “I’ve put in a lot of work.”

We fell into the familiar rhythm of sparring. It was like a dance, and my body still knew the choreography — I could read his movements and match his attacks as easily as take a step. I hardly had to think at all. I focused on my breathing, my heartbeat, and the familiar clash of steel against steel as we moved lightly across the sandy ground of the training facility. Long minutes passed.

“Break!” Kodan shouted. “Switch!”

I took a step back and bowed respectfully to Barion. He grinned. Sweat had beaded at his hairline and temples, and his breathing was quick and shallow as he gathered himself. “You’ve done well, Reyna.”

“Thank you.” I could count on one hand the number of times Barion had told me I’d done well. Pride swelled within me. Some aching teenage part of me still longed for his approval.

Because his approval was always the closest thing I got to my father’s.

The memory slammed into my mind like an unwanted vision: my father, the Duke of Daybreak, standing with his arms crossed over his chest and eyes narrowed, as he watched Barion and I spar in the center of the manor gardens. I hadn't noticed he was there at all until we finished the session. I couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen. As soon as I'd realized he was watching, I'd leapt to my feet and rushed forward to greet him and bow. I'd never been supposed to prioritize training — it was something my father had turned a blind eye to.

As he led me back to the manor with a hand firm on my shoulder, I'd expected him to chastise me or send me to lessons in a cold voice. But he'd simply said: "You fight well, Reyna."

It was the only time my father had ever said anything about my training at all. I kept the memory like a cherished but useless amulet. There was no reason for me to miss my father at all, not after all the horrible things he'd done to me and to the wolves of Nightfall — and yet still the memory made my chest ache. The memory of the one time my father might have been proud of me.

"Go easy on me, please," Adora said as she moved closer to Barion with the same hesitation as one might have as you approached a bear.

"Not easy," Barion said, grinning, "but fair, sure."

I was with the unfamiliar soldier, then, who introduced himself as Artin from Siena. "Oh, Gods above," I said, sweeping into a bow. "I'm terribly sorry, General, you must forgive my rudeness."

Artin laughed. "I didn't expect you to recall our brief meeting at all, your Highness. Those days were...challenging."

I nodded. We'd stopped in Siena on the way back to Efra, on our way to retake the throne from my father's attempted coup. Thaddeus, the leader of Siena, had welcomed us, and I'd briefly met his general during those busy, exhausting talks. "I'm glad to see you've found your way to Efra."

"And I'm glad to see the bond strengthening between Siena and Efra," Artin said. "It's long overdue." He lifted his wooden training sword with an arched brow.

"Please," I said, nodding toward his sheathed sword, "I prefer to work with the real thing, if you'd find that acceptable."

Artin grinned. "If the Queen insists."

Then we nodded each other and launched into our sparring session as well. It wasn't as seamless as with Barion. Artin hit harder, and moved with

surprising quickness despite his bulk. I was unfamiliar with his patterns and struggled to dodge his blows. By the end of our session, we were both visibly exerting effort, and he bowed before each of us switched partners again.

Kodan greeted me with joking salute. She was covered in sweat, her exposed arms gleaming with it, and her pants were streaked in sand and dirt. I pointed. "Who knocked you over?"

"Adora," Kodan admitted. "I let her do it."

"Of course you did," I teased.

Kodan scoffed. "What are we working on?"

"I need to develop a quicker riposte when my weight is on my back foot," I said. I'd noticed it more with Artin. "Watch me and help me figure out where I'm getting stuck."

Kodan had a keen eye for this kind of detail work, and instead of sparring, she helped me pinpoint a better way to shift and turn to speed up my defensive maneuvers.

"I like to see those adjustments!" Barion called from where he and Fina were taking a break. "You need to be on your game more than ever!"

"I'm taking care of it!" Kodan called back. She rolled her eyes at me. "Men. Always trying to get in my training business."

"He's right, though," I said. "If there's only going to be a few of us in this convoy, we all need to be ready."

Her expression hardened slightly. "I know. We will be. But stoking fear is not the method to do it."

While Fina and Adora finished up, Kodan and I launched into a quick round. Kodan was the fastest of the three of them, and potentially the strongest. Her sword moved with lightning speed, and she danced out of range of my counterattacks with bird-like ease. She caught me multiple times with a tap to the shoulder, the waist, the thigh. All blows that would've killed me, were this a real battle.

But despite that, Kodan looked pleased at the end of our session. "You're doing well," she said. "You parry wisely. You have good counters, and you don't telegraph them."

"What's the bad news?" I asked. I sheathed my sword and wiped my sweaty forehead. Overhead, the sun was high in the sky, and even in the cold winter air, it felt warm beneath the rays.

"You're slow," Kodan said. "You could do a lot more damage if you were just a bit faster."

I nodded. “How do I fix that?”

“Get stronger.”

“Great,” I said, “because we have so much time to develop a strength regiment.”

Kodan laughed. “I’ll get you whipped into shape. Don’t worry.”

Fina, Adora, and I trudged to the dressing room. Fina moved quickly, rushing to put her weapons away.

“What are you in such a hurry for?” Adora asked.

“I’m having lunch with General Artin,” Fina said.

“Ooh,” Adora said. She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Fina has a suitor?”

“Um, no,” Fina said blandly. “I didn’t realize he was a Sienan general. This is a good opportunity for me to make some new connections for Duskmorn. Gods know Giles isn’t going to do it.” She threw us a wave. “Wish me luck!”

Adora sighed as Fina scurried out of the door. “I still think he could be a suitor. They’d be cute together.”

“You think that about any two people who stand next to each other,” I teased. “Come on, let’s get lunch.”

As we left the training facility, I led the way — toward the winding path that led through the gardens and grounds of the castle, instead of the shortcut leading directly back. Adora glanced at me, confused, but followed. She took down her blonde hair and loosed the plait as she walked, until it fell in loose waves nearly to her elbows. It struck me at unexpected moments like this, how similar we looked. We had the same nose, the same hair, the same high cheekbones. Adora was still curvier than me, and the slight muscle she’d put on from training had only accentuated her hourglass shape.

“You’re not hungry?” she asked. “Does Kodan not push you hard enough?”

“Oh, she definitely does,” I said with a shake of my head. “We just haven’t had a lot of time to ourselves, you and me.”

“That’s true,” Adora said. “It’s to be expected, though, what with how busy you are with your royal responsibilities.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t want to see my sister sometimes,” I said, and knocked my hip against Adora’s.

She smiled. We took our time moving through the gardens outside the castle, past the finely carved topiaries to the well-tended rosebushes. “What’s

on your mind, Reyna?” Adora asked as we walked. “I can practically hear you thinking.”

I sighed. “You know the King is planning on inviting more members of the Courts to Efra to discuss preparations.”

Adora nodded. “I’ve gotten word, yes.”

“I assume Lord Ealric will be coming?”

“My father wouldn’t miss the chance,” Adora said. “I’m sure he’ll bring his finest advisors with him.” She glanced sidelong at me. “Is that acceptable to you?”

“Of course, of course,” I said. “It’s still just...it’s a lot to absorb.”

“I’d imagine so,” Adora said.

I’d barely had time to process what I’d learned — that Adora’s father Ealric of Starcrest was my biological parent, not the man who’d barely raised me. Adora and I were half-sisters, but we hadn’t had much time to develop that new bond.

“He wants to be part of your life, you know,” Adora said. “He’s told me as much. I don’t know if that’s possible, of course, with your duties — or if it’s even something you want.”

“I don’t know either,” I said. “Everything’s changing so fast. It’s hard to keep up sometimes.”

Adora placed a hand on my forearm and squeezed. “I know. That’s why I’ve told him to mind his business, for now, and keep your discussions focused on royal needs.”

I laughed, bright and surprised. “I would’ve loved to be a fly on the wall for that discussion.”

“He’s a reasonable man, my father,” Adora said with a grin. “He sees you as a daughter. He just wants to develop that relationship, if that’s something you want.”

“Did he put you up to this?” I asked, half-joking. I’d brought the conversation up, but this wasn’t the direction I’d thought it would go. Something about Ealric considering me a daughter made my chest ache — was that something I wanted?

“Of course not,” Adora said with a laugh. “He comes to me for advice sometimes, that’s all.”

“Then, can I ask you something?” The question had been itching at my mind since I’d found out the truth, but it’d taken time for me to work up the courage to ask it.

“Anything,” Adora said.

“Did he know about me?” I asked. “When I was growing up in Daybreak. Did he know he had a daughter there?”

Adora sighed, then pressed her lips together. “I wish I could answer that.”

“You can’t?” I asked. “Or you won’t?”

“I don’t know the answer,” Adora said. “Of course, I’d tell you if I did. If he knew about you, he never mentioned it when I was growing up. But that doesn’t mean he didn’t know.”

Disappointment sat heavy in my gut like a stone. “I suppose it’s not the kind of thing you’d drop casually in conversation.”

“To say the least,” Adora said. “I wish I had a better answer for you.”

“It’s just strange to think about,” I murmured. “Strange to think how different my life would’ve been if I’d grown up in Starcrest.”

“*Our* lives,” Adora said. “I would’ve loved to have had a sister.”

I wasn’t just thinking about growing up in Starcrest, though. If Ealric had learned about my existence when I was a young girl, maybe he would’ve come for me. I could imagine it with startling clarity: Ealric leading the wolves of Starcrest through the gates of Daybreak, flags aloft, then making a formation in the town square as Ealric demanded my release.

Maybe then, I wouldn’t carry these old nostalgic memories about my father making one offhand remark about my fighting. Maybe I would’ve been raised by someone who, it seemed to me, would’ve listened and cared — someone who would’ve supported my training, my education, my dreams of traveling and seeing the world.

And yet, if that had happened, maybe I never would’ve found my way to Efra for the King’s Choice. Maybe I’d be in Starcrest, and Adora would be Queen.

It would’ve been nice to grow up with a father like Ealric. But I wouldn’t change anything about my youth if it meant giving up my life with Elias.

“I can hear you thinking again,” Adora said. “You all right?”

I smiled, then linked my arm with hers and guided us back toward the manor. “I think it’d be nice to be a bit closer to Lord Ealric,” I said. “But we should focus on handling the Fae first.”

“I won’t say anything,” Adora promised. “I’m grateful to have you as a sister, regardless of your relationship with him.”

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it.

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The wolves of Starcrest arrived just days later, much to the delight of Marget, who was grateful to spread some of her duties to the advisors.

We prepared a welcome dinner, as we did for all visiting courts, though this one wasn't quite as large as some of our other balls. A band played in the corner, and the spread of food across the table was impressive as ever, but there were fewer guests, and it was a quieter affair than usual.

"We're grateful you've joined us," Elias said to Ealric, as he poured more wine into his cup, then my own. I was seated between the two of them at the head of the table. The conversation surrounding us was low and serious, lacking the usual jovial atmosphere that accompanied a welcome dinner. The potential for war weighed heavily on all of us.

"Of course," Ealric said. "Starcrest is pleased to support Nightfall in these times. I'd rather be overprepared than under for any Fae attacks, after all." He nodded. "And I hear that there's research occurring, as well." He nodded at me. "With Adora as part of the convoy?"

"Yes, we're looking forward to it," I said. "Of course, there's no way to know if we'll gain the knowledge we're hoping for — but it's better to explore all the options we have, while we still have time."

"I agree," Ealric said. "The eagles have always been kind neighbors. The border's quite close to Starcrest, as you know."

"Have you had much interaction with them?" I asked.

"Not personally. My scouts and theirs are friendly, as far as I know." He smiled. "I've heard rumors of some card games and irresponsible bets, here and there. But mostly, the eagles keep to themselves."

“They seem to be a private folk,” I said. “I only hope our visit won’t step on any toes.”

“Private doesn’t mean unfriendly,” Ealric said. “Perhaps this visit will open Frasia to a new age of diplomacy with our neighbors.”

“But no pressure,” Elias teased.

“I’ll be pleased if they don’t turn me away at the border,” I admitted. “I’m a bit nervous.”

“Ah, well, if they do, just turn it into a visit to Starcrest,” Ealric said. “I’m sure Adora would love to show you around.”

Conversation flowed as easily as the wine, and soon the dinner wound down and the guests departed to their chambers for the evening.

“Reyna?” Ealric asked as he stood from the table. “Might I have a moment in private?”

I nodded. Elias did as well, and stepped courteously aside to chat with a Starcrest general.

I walked with Ealric side-by-side toward the balcony of the grand hall. As we stepped out onto the stone structure, I couldn’t help but stifle a small chuckle.

“What is it?” Ealric asked. “Something about the view?”

“No, it’s just... It seems like I spend a lot of time out on these balconies,” I said. “No one tells you how much of leading involves after-dinner conversations.”

He sipped the last of his wine and smiled. “Well, I hope I haven’t bored you too much.”

“No, no, it’s not that—”

“I’m just joking,” Ealric said easily. “Actually, what I hoped to discuss was less related to the business of the Fae.”

I steeled my expression into careful neutrality. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to hear what Ealric had to say, but I didn’t have the language to express that, either. “I see.”

Ealric reached into his pocket and withdrew a small wooden box. “Here.” He opened it and turned it toward me. Inside the velvet-lined box was a thin silver ring, inlaid with three moonstones in a row.

“I’ve had this for a long time,” he said. “I had it made for your mother. I’d intended to propose, before she was taken from me.” His gaze went distant as he looked out towards the horizon. “There’s many things about the past I wish I could change. But the least I can do now is offer you this. She

would've wanted you to have it."

I took the box from him, then gingerly lifted the ring from the velvet. The stones glittered in the moonlight, its silvery beams reflecting off the pale surface and revealing the prisms of color within as only the moon could. "It's beautiful."

He nodded. "The finest craftsmanship in Starcrest. I hope you'll wear it on your journey. Not just as a token but...my pack does believe in the protective qualities of moonstone."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll treasure it."

I would — that much was true — but I was shocked by how shaken I was, how the wooden box in my hand seemed to weigh as much as a boulder. The ring represented what could've been: a marriage based in love, a different childhood for me.

Maybe even a mother who was still alive and wearing this ring.

I closed the box and held it in both hands. "And I'll wear it during my travels."

Something in Ealric's expression softened the barest amount. "Good," he said. "I'm glad to hear that."

The question was on the tip of my tongue. *Did you know? Did you know about me when I was just a girl in Daybreak?*

I couldn't bring myself to ask it. I didn't know which answer would hurt more. The knowledge wouldn't change the past. He'd made it clear there were things he wished had gone differently. I didn't need to know what they were.

At least, not now. Not when my energy was better served looking forward, not backward.

Ealric and the Starcrest convoy left for their chambers, and Elias and I went back to ours. In the privacy of our room, Elias gently unlaced the back of my dress. "Everything all right?" he asked.

"People keep asking me that," I murmured.

He chuckled. "Is it a crime to be concerned?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Ealric gave me a ring he intended to give to my mother."

Elias' hands stilled briefly on the laces. "Well, that's something."

"Adora says he wants to be closer to me," I said. "To be something closer to a father."

He resumed loosening the laces. "How do you feel about that?"

“It’s strange,” I admitted. “When I was in Daybreak, even though I was surrounded by my pack, I never really felt like I belonged. And here, in Nightfall...”

When the laces were undone, Elias paused. He slid his hands over my hips, then pressed his chest to my back. I leaned my weight gratefully against his strong body and tipped my head back against his shoulder.

“It makes me realize how I didn’t really have a family in Daybreak,” I said. “Not the way I do here. I finally have a man who actually wants to be my father, and a sister, and you.” I folded my hand over his as he pressed soothingly against my hip. “It’s wonderful. But it’s overwhelming too. Like I don’t have space in my heart for all of it yet.”

Elias kissed my temple. “I don’t doubt it,” he said. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“You don’t think I’m ungrateful?” I asked. “When he gave me that ring, it mostly made me...sad. Like there was this whole other life I could’ve had, with parents who loved me. I feel like I should’ve been happier. Or it should be easier. Easier for me to want to get close to him. I just...I just don’t feel ready.”

“Take all the time you need, little wolf,” Elias said. “I don’t think Ealric is going anywhere.”

I sighed heavily. “Good, because I don’t think I can even really think about it until we figure out what is going on with with the Fae.”

“He knows that, too. There’s no need to rush things, Reyna.”

I turned over in his arms and looped my own around his neck. His brow was furrowed in concern, and he set his hands at my lower back, holding me closer to him.

“You’re sure?”

That made him smile. “Yes, I’d say so. I think I make the rules around here.”

“Some of them,” I said.

“Tell me,” he said. “Is that something you wish you had? A childhood in Starcrest?”

I sighed. “I thought about it when he gave me the ring,” I said. “But if that had happened, I don’t know if I would’ve met you. There’s nothing I want to change. It’s just...I’d never even considered the possibility.”

“As long as you’re happy where you’ve ended up,” he said. “Here, with me.”

I pulled him down for a kiss. “Happier than I’ve ever been.”

His strong, callused hands wandered over my shoulders and arms. He gently pushed the silk gown down. It flowed like water over my skin and puddled around my feet. Then he drew his hands over my back, to the dip of my lower waist, and pulled my bare body flush against his. He hummed against my lips, deepening the kiss. Then he trailed kisses over my cheek, my jawline, the curve of my neck, down to my shoulder.

“Elias,” I whispered. I tipped my head back, my blonde hair tumbling down, to show more skin for him to kiss. He obliged me, and I clung to his waist to keep my knees from buckling.

“Love hearing you say my name,” Elias murmured in response. He dragged his tongue over my collarbone, then followed it with the barest hint of teeth. My wolf roused inside me, lured by the possessive touch.

“I love saying it,” I teased. Heat rolled through me, warm and lazy. He always made me feel so good —so cherished. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” Elias said. He lifted his head and kissed me again, deep and hot and wanting. I tugged at his shirt, wanting it gone, but unwilling to break the kiss. His lips curved into a smile against mine, and he broke away only long enough to pull it up and over his head. Then he pulled me flush against him again, all that muscle and soft, warm skin, and I sighed with pleasure as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

He guided us back to our enormous shared bed and its soft, dark sheets. In between kisses, I climbed onto the mattress, then hooked my fingertips into the waistband of his trousers and tugged at him in encouragement. “Off,” I insisted.

He grinned, then hummed in assent. Quickly he shucked off his trousers, then climbed onto the bed with me. I tugged him down so that he was pressed flush to my body, bare skin on bare skin, and the familiar muscular warmth of his body sent a rush of desire and heat through me. I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him deeply, then let my lips travel over his neck and the curve of his shoulder.

His hands roamed over my body, my chest, to the curve of my waist, then over my thigh. His grip was firm, but not bruising, as he guided my leg to wrap around his waist. I rocked my hips up with a sigh. I needed him — needed his touch, his kiss...I needed the closeness. I ached with a need deep in my core, between my hips. Somehow, Elias could sense it. I knew he could in the way he mouthed at my neck, his breath warm and his teeth sharp against my skin. I tipped my head back against the pillows with a gasp.

He didn't make me wait. He needed it as much as I did. When he pressed inside me, we shared a gasp of pleasure, and then shared our breaths. My world soon narrowed until there was only Elias, my mate — his touch, his kiss, the rich, rolling pleasure running through my body with each roll of his hips. There was no desperation or urgency in our movements. It was easy. Comfortable. A bone-deep pleasure. This was where I felt most loved, safe, and at home — here, in our bed, in his arms.

In the afterglow, I pillowed my head on his chest and listened to the steady heartbeat.

He combed his fingers through my hair, a gentle, repetitive motion that made me feel deeply relaxed, like I was floating in a warm bath. It was the relaxation, and the half-asleep state, that made the question bubble up in my mind.

“Elias?”

“Hm?”

“Do you imagine what it might be like to have kids?”

His hand stilled briefly, then resumed the relaxed combing motion. “Sometimes.”

I smoothed my hand over the natural curve of his waist. “What do you imagine?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Nothing concrete, really. I mostly imagine it when we're running.”

That surprised me. I drummed my fingers against his skin. “What do you mean?”

“When we're in the forest, running, chasing each other... It's easy for me to imagine what that might be with pups.” He smiled to himself at the thought. “What they might look like. Maybe one with a white coat like yours, and another with a dark coat like mine. Young, and fast, but clumsy. Easy to imagine them tripping over each other and falling into the stream when we're crossing it.” He chuckled.

The image made me smile, too. “You only imagine them as wolves?”

He shrugged, the motion jostling me slightly on his chest. “I suppose it's easier to give into the fantasy when I'm in my wolf shape.”

It was easier, I knew, to lean into my emotions when I was in my wolf form. It didn't shock me to hear it was the same for him, too. “It doesn't have to be a fantasy,” I murmured.

He pulled me closer. “I know. But we have other things to focus on now.”

He was right, yet as I drifted toward sleep, the image of two pups, light and dark, gallivanting through the forest, circled about in my thoughts.

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Over the next week, the other packs of Frasia sent convoys of soldiers, as many as the packs could spare. From Dawnguard, a battalion marched through the gates and took residence in the barracks alongside the Nightfall army and the Starcrest soldiers. Duskmooon sent the few they could spare, and Daybreak the same.

“Not as many as I would’ve hoped,” Elias said as he surveyed the soldiers filing into the training facility and the barracks, “but a decent start.”

We were standing in the stands of the training facility, looking down at the soldiers. “Do you think some of the packs are withholding?” I asked.

“Duskmooon almost certainly,” he said. “Daybreak, I’m not so sure. We may be able to hold Efra with this army, but not for long. If Cruora won’t support us, we’ll have to reach out to the jaguars again. I hate to reach out in desperation, but without more support, we won’t stand much of a chance against Fae magic.”

“We’ll figure something out,” I murmured.

In the center of the facility, Kodan stood with Artin at her side, speaking to the assembled soldiers. From this distance, I couldn’t hear them, but I could imagine the rousing speech she gave. She gestured to the side of the training facility, and from the wings stepped the young man I’d seen her training, Haulfrun. He bowed to the group, and then he and Kodan immediately launched into a sparring demonstration. Haulfrun moved with cat-like speed and grace, and the clash of their swords, even when choreographed, was loud enough to ring in my ears.

The soldiers hooted their approval and banged their fists against their

breastplates.

Elias grinned, pleased. “At least we know the soldiers themselves will be inspired. Are you attending the luncheon?”

I shook my head. “Ealric has asked me to accompany him to the gardens, and then perhaps join him on a run.”

“Leaving me to entertain the generals again, I see,” Elias said.

“That’s for the best,” I said as we left the facility. “Weren’t we supposed to be splitting the planning labor?”

“Mm, yes, but I prefer having you at my side.” He wrapped his arm around my waist and squeezed. “You’re comfortable running with him?”

“The girls will be joining us,” I said. “That’ll make it easier.”

I’d never run with my father in Daybreak, not as a wolf. The only person I’d ever spent time with in my wolf form there was Griffin. The thought of running with Ealric, Fina, and Adora filled me with nerves and anticipation both.

“I’m jealous,” Elias said. “You’re out for a run, while I’m stuck reviewing defensive formations with a bunch of old codgers from Starcrest and Dawnguard.”

I laughed. “Don’t lie. You love reviewing defensive formations.”

He pulled me close and kissed me briefly. “You’re right. But don’t tell anyone. Especially Kodan, or she’ll ask me to do it more often.”

We parted ways. Elias made his way to the solarium, where the generals awaited his presence and wisdom, and I made my way down to the gardens where Ealric waited for me.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness,” Ealric said, sweeping into a bow as I approached. He was dressed in fine plain cotton, with a pale cloak over his shoulders against the cold. “I appreciate you joining me.”

“Of course, Lord Ealric,” I said. “It’s a gift to have the leaders of Starcrest so close.”

It was a gorgeous, cool day. It was still strange to be standing at Ealric’s side — strange, like I was seeing shadows of the life I could’ve had. He offered his arm, and I set my hand at his elbow and let him guide the way. The gardens were quiet, and gorgeous, with only a few staff members tending the rose bushes and the topiaries. He guided us slowly down the winding path.

“You know, Lady Reyna,” Ealric said, “I feel like there’s so much to catch up on, I admit I’m not sure where to begin.”

I sighed. “I feel the same way.”

“Is there anything you wish to know?” Ealric asked. “Anything you find yourself curious about?”

“Of course, there is,” I said with a small laugh. “But I’m not sure how much I want to know. With so much going on in Frasia, I...I can’t spend too much time on myself these days.”

He hummed in understanding. “Certainly. Such are the demands of leadership. That much I know.”

“I would like to know about my mother,” I admitted. “In Daybreak, my father—Duke Rodthar never spoke of her. It was as if she never existed.”

“Well, she certainly did,” Ealric said. “Jozica was the love of my life.”

“Perhaps you could just tell me a story about her,” I said. “How did you meet?”

Ealric smiled. He gazed out toward the horizon, eyes distant as he traveled through memory.

“Your mother was a troublemaker,” he said with much fondness in his voice. “She wasn’t poor, but she wasn’t in the upper echelons, either. She came from a family of musicians, and they often performed in the Starcrest manor. When I first met her, her parents were playing in the royal band for a ball. It wasn’t a ball for anything in particular — a harvest celebration, if memory serves.”

He sighed as we walked, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Why was she there?” I asked.

“To cause trouble, I assume,” he said with a wink. “She was young when we met. Just turned twenty. I remember I saw her in the middle of the dance floor, wearing a plain blue gown, dancing by herself amid all the couples. When she spun, the skirt of her dress revealed a silver petticoat. It was like she was dancing atop an icy lake. Gorgeous.”

“She sounds like it.”

“You look a lot like her, actually,” Ealric said. He glanced at me, a slightly pained expression flickering across his face, but it was gone nearly as quickly as it had arrived. “That ball... I was there with a date of my own.”

“You already had a date that night?”

“More than a date. She was technically my fiancé.”

“Lord Ealric!” I said, faux-scandalized.

He laughed. “We didn’t really like each other. She was the daughter of a rich family, and her hand had been offered to me by her father to better align

the two houses. It was an economic arrangement. During the ball, we both ended up dancing with other people — and I danced with Jozica for the first time.”

“She didn’t realize you were there with your fiancé?” I asked.

“If memory serves, I think I may have...withheld that information.”

I laughed. “You dog.”

“Not my finest moment. But I would’ve said anything to learn more about her. Something about her just drew me in.”

“So what happened?” I asked. “You danced all night?”

“Not just dance,” Ealric said. “We may have had a bit too much champagne. We snuck out of the ball and went running in the snowy woods behind the manor. She was a small, quick wolf, but strong. We ran all the way to the river, and we were wrestling — and she pushed me in!”

I broke into another laugh. “Into the river? In the middle of the ball?”

“I had to sneak back in soaking wet. I tried to make it back to my quarters unnoticed, but I was caught. Jozica thought that was just hilarious. We both got properly chewed out for that.”

“And yet you were still allowed to see each other?” I asked.

“Certainly not,” Ealric said. “We saw each other in secret. Couldn’t stay away. I had plans to leave my fiance and marry her...but my own parents discovered the scheme, and she was sent away to Daybreak.”

The amusement drained away. “I see.”

“I wish things had gone differently,” he said quietly. “If I had known...”

“Known what?” I asked. Anxiety gripped my heart.

“I didn’t know she was pregnant,” he said. “If I had known, I never would’ve left you in Daybreak. Never.”

I closed my eyes. Relief crashed through me, relief and a sadness so overwhelming I had to pause in our walk and catch my balance. Though I said nothing, Ealric seemed to understand, and steadied me gently.

After a few moments, I caught my breath. “I wish I could’ve known her.”

“Me too, Reyna,” he said quietly. “Me too.”

We made our way to the tree line. I touched the moonstone necklace I wore which allowed me to shift without tearing my fine clothes. Then I stretched my arms overhead, and with a sigh, I let my wolf surge forth.

Ealric, by my side, did the same. He was a big, broad, gray wolf, with a thick pelt and shining blue eyes. He shook out his coat, and I did the same. We took off running through the woods. The cold winter air felt refreshing as

it moved through my fur, and the earth was soft and giving under my paws. It was different than running with Elias. Ealric ran at a loping, comfortable pace, none of the powerful sprinting I did with Elias. It was nice. It was relaxing. A musical howl sounded from up ahead, and Ealric's ears pricked forward. He howled back in a similar lilt.

In the clearing ahead, Adora and Fina waited in their wolf forms. Adora's wolf was white like mine, but shot through with gray. Fina's was a rich caramel brown with hints of white. They both yipped in greeting, tails wagging.

Ealric nodded, and then we took off through the woods again.

I'd never felt anything like this. I was running with my *family*, with my pack. I wished Elias was here — I wished we could all run together, just for a while, to slough off the responsibilities for an hour and let our wolves roam free.

I thought of the dream Elias had told me, under cover of darkness: two pups, light and dark, leaping over the streams and yipping in delight as they chased each other. The thought ran warm through me, like a promise instead of a fantasy. They'd fit right in.

Just like I finally had somewhere I truly belonged.

But then, as we ran, a long, familiar howl carried on the breeze.

I skittered to a stop and whipped around. My ears pricked forward, and I lifted my snout, trying to catch a hint of any scent on the breeze, but there was only the rich earthy smell of the woods.

The howl sounded again. Distant. From the castle. *Elias*. I'd know his voice anywhere.

I took off at a sprint back toward the manor. He wouldn't call us if it wasn't urgent. I felt my pack behind me, and their energy at my back only urged me to run faster.

I burst through the doors of the main room, panting, then shifted into my human form as effortlessly as breathing. Ealric, Fina, and Adora were behind me — somewhere -they didn't have the same moonstone tools I did, so shifting took slightly more effort with the trappings of royal wear.

Elias was seated at the head of the table. At his side, a young messenger was seated, tearing into a leg of lamb like he hadn't eaten in weeks. He was scrawny, with dirt on his face and wearing leather armor. He couldn't have been more than fifteen.

"What is it?" I asked. I was slightly out of breath, and my blonde hair

stuck to my temples with sweat. “What happened?”

The messenger looked up. He widened his eyes, then scrabbled at the table in a hurry to stand and bow. Elias put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and pushed him back into his seat. “Sit. Eat.”

The boy still stared at me. I nodded at him, and with some hesitation he returned to his meal.

“Word from Duskmooon,” Elias said. “Corinne has attacked.”

I joined them at the table. “Attacked? What do you mean, attacked?”

“Fae soldiers came through the portals outside Duskmooon,” Elias said. “A scouting mission, it seems, at least from the messenger’s tale.”

The boy nodded in agreement.

“What happened?” I glanced between them, desperate to hear the story. My heart was cold with fear. “How is the city?”

“Damaged, but the Duskmooon wolves were able to beat them back. Corinne will surely strike again, though.”

“It’s just as Fina feared,” I murmured. “She strikes at the weakest defenses.”

“You must go to Cruora,” Elias said. “The sooner the better. I’ll have Kodan gather the supplies and the soldiers. The staff will prepare the carriages. You get what you need.”

“I’ll leave tonight,” I said. The cold fear in my heart was melted away by white-hot determination. We couldn’t wait any longer — the timeline was even shorter than I had feared. If Corinne had attacked once, it wouldn’t be long before the next attacks came. She’d try to take Duskmooon for herself, or try to lure us to focus on Duskmooon, and then strike at Efra.

We needed all the defenses we could get our hands on.

“She’s planning for war,” Elias said.

I nodded. “And we’ll be ready.”

But there was one thing I needed first.

My afternoon was lost to a flurry of activity. Amity and Rue packed my suitcases, and then worked with the staff to prepare all the necessary goods for a few hard weeks of travel.

I quickly changed into a pair of plain slacks and shirt, then laced up my boots. "I'll be back shortly."

"Where are you off to, milady?" Amity asked with her brow furrowed. "There's still much to do to prepare."

"I know," I said. "This is important. It won't take long."

She sighed, but nodded. "Hopefully we'll be nearly ready to depart when you return."

I saluted her with a smile. I could always count on Amity and Rue to make a tight schedule. I rushed out of the manor and into the bustling streets of Efra. I was dressed plainly so I didn't garner too much attention, but my blonde hair always got a few extra looks as I hurried through the streets. I made my way to the tailor shop.

I knocked on the door and was briskly welcomed in by the staff. The shop was quiet, dimly lit, with gorgeous silk gowns hanging from garment racks lining the walls. There were no patrons inside, and the curtains were drawn around the trio of mirrors where the fittings were done. A young woman stood at the desk on the side of the wall, reviewing an order with her brow pinched in concentration. She looked up, and then her eyes widened.

"Your highness," she said, "I—I don't believe we were expecting you, unless there's something--"

"No, no, this is an unannounced visit," I said with a smile before the girl

went into a crisis about having forgotten an appointment. “I was hoping to speak with Aerika.”

“I certainly hope there’s nothing wrong with your order?” the woman asked.

“Not at all. Now, please, I’m in a bit of a hurry...”

“Right, of course!” She bowed briskly and then rushed into the back room.

A few moments later, Aerika stepped out. She looked as beautiful and ethereal as ever, in her plain work clothes and white hair pulled back into a high bun. “Your Highness,” she said. “It’s always a pleasure.”

“I hoped to have a moment of your time,” I said. “In private.”

Aerika nodded. “Of course.” She turned to the young woman. “Run to the tea shop and fetch some for yourself.”

The woman nodded, then curtsied to me, and rushed out the front door. Aerika strode behind her, then turned the ‘open’ sign in the window to ‘closed,’ and locked the door. Then she gestured for me to join her on the couch near the curtained mirrors. “As much time as you need, milady.”

“Hopefully it won’t be too much,” I said. “I have a request.”

Aerika tipped her head to the side curiously.

“I’d like for you to travel to Cruora with myself and my companions,” I said.

Her eyes widened. “Cruora?” she asked. “Forgive my confusion, milady, but why?”

Word from Duskmooon was still private knowledge, but I knew if I wanted Aerika to see the urgency of the situation, I needed to be honest with her. “We had a messenger from Duskmooon arrive in Efra today,” I said. “Fae soldiers attacked the city. It appeared to be a scouting mission — and a warning.”

“Gods above,” Aerika said. “The Fae are already attacking?”

“And it will worsen,” I said. “This is just the beginning.”

“Then why Cruora?” she asked. “Why me?”

“The royal jaguars of Askon believe the eagles of Cruora still hold access to powerful alchemy,” I said. “Old magic. The kind that might help us hold our own against the Fae, when it comes to that. It’s a long shot, but we need to activate all the defenses we have.”

She nodded. “As much as I hate to say it, it’s true...shifters are not the strongest against Fae magic.”

I remembered how easily Corinne had forced me into my wolf shape and kept me there against my will. I cringed at the memory. “I know.”

“If the eagles have it, will they be willing to share it at all?” Aerika asked.

“I don’t know. But we have to try. And we have to get there soon. I’m leaving tonight.”

“Tonight.” Aerika pressed her lips together. “Still, your Highness...why me?”

“I trust you,” I said. “And if we’re trying to find a way to defend against Fae magic, we need someone with us who understands Fae magic. Someone who knows the Fae better than we do.”

Aerika cut her gaze to the side, clearly unsure.

“It will be dangerous,” I said. “We’re traveling in a small group to move quickly and hopefully avoid notice from any Fae who are sniffing around the existing portals. Cruora is expecting us, but I’m not sure what our welcome will be. It may be a waste of time. The alchemy may be a myth, or they may refuse to share it with us at all. But I have to try.”

“What happens if Corinne is defeated?” Aerika asked softly.

I blinked. That wasn’t exactly the question I was expecting, and I turned it over in my mind for a moment before I answered.

“I don’t know,” I admitted after a long moment. “I hope...well, I see how the portals have brought more fertility to the land here on our side. It seems like keeping the realms separate is...a challenge, in a way. If there’s a way to heal the relationship between the Fae and the shifters, once Corinne is dealt with, that’s what I’d like to pursue. But obviously I can’t promise anything. I can’t even promise we’ll defeat Corinne. And we don’t know how deep her influence runs in Fae, and if others will rise up to take her place. But...I’d like to push for a new age in Frasia, where the Fae and the shifters can live together in peace.”

Aerika folded her hands in her lap. She looked around the shop for a long moment, then sighed and stood up. “Okay,” she said. “I’m honored to travel with you to Cruora, if you believe my presence will aid you.”

I grinned and leaped to my feet to join her. “Wonderful!” I said. Before I could think better of it, I surged forward and wrapped Aerika in my arms, pulling her into a tight hug. “Thank you. Really.”

She was frozen for a moment, surprised, before she gently returned the hug. When I pulled back, I smiled widely at her. “We’re preparing all the necessary provisions. All you have to do is gather your personal goods.”

“I will,” she said. “Your Highness...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s just...I’ve dreamed for a long time that there could be peace between the realms again.” Aerika’s face looked wistful. “For a long time, it didn’t seem possible. Like it would never happen in my lifetime. So to hear a leader even say it’s something that’s being considered...” She smoothed the fabric of her skirt down and sniffed, as if she was nervous. “I’ll do anything within my power to support it.”

“I don’t know what will happen,” I said, “but I’ll do whatever I can to work in that direction.”

Aerika nodded. “I’ll come to the manor as soon as I’ve gathered my things.”

As I arrived back, the sun was falling low in the sky. Amity and Rue were loading my trunks into a plain carriage, and the horses pawed and tossed their heads, eager to travel. I hurried through the chaos and up the stairs to my bedroom.

Elias was there, waiting for me, seated at the desk by the window and scratching away at a letter. As soon as I entered, he stood up from the desk and smiled. “You got everything you need?” he asked.

“Aerika agreed to come with me,” I said. “We’ll have someone with knowledge of Fae magic with us. Surely she’ll be able to help us understand the alchemy — if the eagles have it at all.” I tried to tamp down the excitement building inside me, but it was hard to resist. All the pieces were coming together. If Queen Enet was right about the eagles, this could be the turning point we needed. And I was going to figure it out before Corinne struck again.

I had to. This was my chance to prove myself, and I wasn’t going to screw it up.

“Good,” he said. “You’re ready?”

“Not quite,” I said. “Help me?”

I stepped over to our dresser and retrieved the necklace he’d given me. The fang was cool and weighty in my palm. Then, from the same velvet-lined jewelry box, I picked up the moonstone ring Ealric had given me.

Elias stood behind me and smoothed his hands over my hips. “Your mother’s ring?”

I nodded. “It feels like I should keep it close.”

“You should.” Elias took the ring from my hand, and then the necklace.

He slipped the ring onto the chain, so it hung beside the fang. The ring looked like it belonged there, the moonstone glinting in the light, the same shade as the ivory of the fang. I swept my hair aside, and Elias carefully clasped the necklace. He smoothed his hand over my nape, then leaned down and kissed the side of my neck. "It looks perfect."

"I won't take it off," I said.

"Nor I," he said. "I'll wear mine as long as you're traveling."

"It'll be like we aren't parted at all," I said with a smile. I turned around in his arms, and then pulled him down for a kiss. It was only now, standing in our bedroom, that the full reality of what I was doing hit me. I was leaving *tonight*. I didn't know when I'd be back either. It felt like I'd only just found my way back to Efra, to *Elias*, after being trapped in Shianga and Faerie for so long.

And now I had to leave him again. I wound my arms tightly around his waist, then tucked my face into the side of his neck and inhaled his warm, familiar scent.

He kissed my temple gently.

"What about you?" I asked as I pulled back. "Are you ready? Ready to rule without me and Kodan here to reign you in?"

It was a tease, but Elias' soft expression showed he knew what I was really asking. *Am I ready? Can I really do this without you?*

"I'm a little worried," he admitted with a small smile. "Sending you off on this kind of journey, after everything that's happened...it's not my favorite thing to do."

I nodded. I understood that — I was equal parts terrified and excited.

"But I know you'll do wonderfully," Elias said. "I trust you. You're the best wolf we have to send on a mission like this. You have the most knowledge of the eagles, and you know what you're looking for. There's no one better to send."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"I know you will." He kissed me again, soft and lingering. "You'll get what we need, and then you'll come back home." Gently he squeezed my waist, like he was reassuring himself as much as he was reassuring me. "Now, we have a send-off to do. You need to get on the road."

It was odd to descend the stairs of the manor in my plain travel clothes, made with care by Aerika and her team. The activity was still bustling as servants finished readying the carriages, and court members rushed by with

well-wishes and words of encouragement.

Fina and Adora waited by the carriages. They were both dressed in their plain travel clothes. Fina grinned as I approached and Adora waved, though she looked more than a little nervous.

“All packed,” Adora said. “I can hardly believe we’re doing this.”

“Your Highness,” Aerika said. She approached sheepishly with a rucksack in her hands. “I believe I’m ready as well.”

“Aerika!” Adora squealed. “How wonderful! Come, you must ride in the carriage with me. I’ll show you where to put your things.”

Adora hauled Aerika toward the back carriage, and she went, looking even more wide-eyed than usual.

“I suppose that’s one way to be welcomed,” Elias murmured. I laughed, watching as Adora pointed out all the fancy accoutrements in our carriages.

“Lady Reyna?”

I turned around to see Ealric striding through the main hall. He was dressed in silk finery again, and carried a short sword in a plain leather scabbard.

“Lord Ealric,” I said with a small bow. “I hope you’ll forgive me for my rudeness earlier, taking off like that during our run.”

“Please, no apology necessary,” Ealric said. “It’s your duty as Queen. I’m only grateful I caught you before you departed.” He held out the sword. “Please, take this with you on your journey.”

“My Lord, Kodan has stocked us with plenty of weaponry—”

“This one’s different,” he said. “Look here.”

I turned the sword over in my hands and followed his gaze down to the ornately carved hilt. It was carved in the shape of a wolf’s head, its mouth open around the base of the blade. The carving was inlaid with moonstone, similar to the ones on the ring that rested against the sternum beneath my shirt.

“Use this,” he said. “It will help you if you encounter any Fae.”

“What do you mean?” I smoothed my thumb over the engraving. “It’s beautiful.”

“Dad!” Adora hopped out of the carriage and ran forward. She pulled Ealric into an embrace, and he laughed and swung her around.

Aerika stepped off the carriage as well. “Quite a sword,” she murmured, gazing at the hilt.

Before I could ask her what she meant, Adora said, “I’m so glad you

came to see us off. We won't be gone too long, I'm sure of it."

"I know Lady Reyna will take care of you," he said, "As will her companions." He nodded at Aerika, with a look of mild confusion. She gave a brief bow and stepped back toward the carriages.

"My finest general rides with them as well," Elias said. "The Court of Nightfall does not take this diplomatic endeavor lightly."

"Thank you, your Highness." Ealric grasped his hand tightly. "Some fine diplomats you have on this court."

Elias grinned. "I hope so."

"It's going to be great," Adora said.

Ealric nodded. He hugged Adora tightly, and then when he released her, he looked to me. I stepped forward and let him embrace me. It was easier to face the stakes of this trip, knowing I had family in Efra supporting me. A knot that had been in my heart for a long time started to loosen.

"Time to head out!" Kodan called. She leaned out of the front carriage with a broad grin. "I want to cover some distance before it gets too dark. Let's go!"

Ealric bowed goodbye, then turned to walk Adora back to her carriage. As the last of the provisions were loaded and my companions climbed into the carriages, Elias and I were briefly alone amid the chaos.

We faced each other, not as husband and wife, but as two royals standing tall as our subjects bustled around us. His confidence begot my own, and I met his gaze steadily and smiled.

Despite the nerves still twisting in my gut, I felt confident.

I could do this. I *would* do this. I'd gather whatever knowledge the eagles had — and I'd come back home and defend our nation from Corinne.

Then, Elias kissed me briefly. It was soft, but burning, like a promise. "Travel swiftly, my Queen," he said. His eyes flashed gold when he pulled back. "And make our nation proud."

We traveled all night, over the hard-trodden roads outside Efra, northwest toward the distant land of Cruora. It'd be days before we arrived. I had no idea if we'd be accepted, or if we'd be turned away at the gates by the eagles. Maybe they'd want nothing to do with us. Maybe like the wolves of Duskmorn, they would only be willing to consider the threat when they saw it for themselves. And by that point it might be too late.

As the sun crested the horizon, we stopped outside a small inn just before the mountains outside of Efra. "We'll cross at dusk, when there's still light, and continue on in the evening," Kodan said. "It's safer to travel in the darkness."

I nodded in agreement. We climbed out of the carriages, stretching our arms overhead. Our small crew of soldiers pulled our coaches to the back of the inn, where there was a small shed for the horses.

The inn itself was unremarkable. It was a modest two-story wooden building, with shuttered windows muffling the sounds from inside. Kodan led us in. She pushed through the heavy wooden doors, then cast her gaze discerningly around the room as she always did, on the alert for any threats. The five of us were unassuming in our traveling gear, looking like a pack of merchants more than a pack of members of the Nightfall Court. There wasn't much to be worried about, though. The inn itself was quiet. The floors were hardpacked earth under my feet, and the few roughly hewn wooden tables hosted only a few other travelers. The innkeeper prodded the fire in the great stone hearth, then adjusted the kettle hanging over it. He looked up at Kodan curiously, almost suspiciously, but any distrust washed away when Kodan

offered him a handful of coins for our stay.

The innkeeper guided us up the stairs to the accommodations. He was unconcerned about our staying there during the day. It was common for wolves to travel at night, especially ones that were dressed like us, in plain, rough clothes, armed with money and goods.

“You’re wise,” the innkeeper said as he counted the money, “sticking to traveling in darkness. Especially if it’s just you girls. I’ve heard word of more bandits roving along the plains. Keep your wits about you.”

“Always do, sir,” Kodan said with a grin. “You say it’s more than usual?”

“Mm.” The innkeeper tucked the coins into his pocket. “Hard times create desperate folk. It’s nothing to be too worried about. I’ll have stew available around midday if you’re hungry.” And with that, he left.

Kodan closed and locked the door behind us. It was just the five of us in this room, and our staff was next door. There were four hammocks hung between posts, like bunks, and then a thick straw mat was spread out in front of the hearth. Adora set about making a small fire. I set my rucksack down, then climbed the ladder leaning against the post and clambered awkwardly into the top hammock.

“Don’t fall on me, please,” Aerika said from below me.

“No promises,” I muttered. I squirmed in the hammock. The novelty of it was fun, unfamiliar but oddly comfortable. I pulled the blanket around me and sighed. It wasn’t like being in my bed with Elias at my side, his soft, even breathing lulling me to sleep, but it was nice. Especially after a long night of hard travel, the carriage rattling over the road, it felt good to relax my aching muscles.

Kodan opened the small window and the cold winter air rushed in.

“Hey!” Adora scooted closer to the fire. “You’re letting the heat out!”

“Just give it a minute,” Kodan said. She withdrew a pipe, packed it with sweet-smelling tobacco, and then lit it with a small match from her pocket. She sighed with pleasure as she breathed in, then exhaled the fragrant smoke out the window.

“Fine,” Adora said, “but share.”

Kodan laughed but offered her pipe. Adora took a long pull off of it, then smiled as she exhaled. “That’s good.”

“Only the finest,” Kodan said.

Fina set her rucksack under her hammock, then carefully climbed in. She sighed, gazing up at the empty sack above her. “What did the keeper mean?”

she asked.

“What, about the bandits?” Adora asked.

“No, he said it was best we travel at night since we don’t have a man with us,” Fina said. “Is that true?”

Kodan waved a hand dismissively. “Ah, he probably thinks we can’t fight,” Kodan said. “Especially since we look like merchants.”

“You still look strong, though,” Adora said. “He really thinks you can’t fight?”

“Oh, I look strong?” Kodan grinned at Adora.

Adora flushed deeply red and turned her attention to the fire. “No, I mean, the rest of us look like merchants, but I mean, even in plain traveler’s clothes...I mean...” She glanced at me for help, but I just raised my eyebrows. “You look like a fighter,” Adora finished lamely.

Having watched Adora fumble through that sentence, Kodan’s eyes sparkled with mirth. “Some men don’t think women are capable of defending of themselves regardless of how they look,” she said. “You get used to it.”

I peered down from my hammock. Kodan took another long pull of her pipe, then glanced up at me, one brow raised curiously.

“Is that something you came across a lot?” I asked. “When you were training to become a general?”

Kodan sighed. She gazed out the window, pipe in hand.

In front of the hearth, Adora pulled her knees close to her chest. “I never thought about that,” she said. “But I haven’t seen many female soldiers. At least not in Starcrest.”

Kodan laughed, but there wasn’t much humor in it. “Because there aren’t many of us. And even fewer of us in the higher ranks. If I weren’t Elias’ friend, I doubt I would’ve made it as far as I did.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The training program isn’t easy. The few women who are interested in becoming soldiers often get pushed out of the program early.”

“On purpose?” Adora asked. “Why would they do that?”

Kodan huffed a laugh. “A lot of soldiers aren’t too keen on getting their ass kicked by a teen girl. And when I started training, I was kicking a lot of ass. A lot of the guys didn’t like that. I didn’t have any friends — I wasn’t even allowed to stay in the same barracks when I was young. I slept in the servants’ quarters.”

“Gods above,” Fina said. “Sounds like they were a bunch of assholes.”

“That’s an understatement,” Kodan said. “I had to train three times as hard to climb up the ranks. If Elias hadn’t stuck with me, I would’ve given up a dozen different times. He stood up for me against the other soldiers. And when I was passed up for promotions, he went to bat for me.”

“Why stick with it?” Adora asked. “Why stay in the training program if it was so miserable for you?”

“Because I love being a soldier,” Kodan said with a small smile. “It’s what I was born to do. I’m good at it, and I love doing it. Whenever I thought about trying to pursue a different line of work...” She shook her head. “I couldn’t even imagine it. Dealing with the bullshit is worth it, because I get to do what I love.” She gestured around the room. “Traveling. Adventuring. Training the next generation. Protecting my pack.”

“And so you became Elias’ top spy,” I said.

“That part wasn’t on purpose,” Kodan said. “But I’m good at it. And I do better when I’m allowed to pick my own soldiers. Makes it so I don’t have to deal with some of the more frustrating men in the battalions.”

“What’s it like?” Adora asked. Her eyes were wide with curiosity. “The spy missions. What do you do? There’s never any word of them in Starcrest...I didn’t even know it was a part of our diplomatic tactics until I was in the Nightfall court.”

“That’s intentional,” Kodan said. “We don’t exactly want our tactics being revealed to anyone who asks.”

“I think it’s wise to have a spy with us,” Aerika said from her hammock. I almost started at the sound of it — she was so quiet, I’d nearly forgotten she was here. “Your skills will help us travel safely, will they not?”

“That’s the idea,” Kodan said.

“How much spy activity is involved in our diplomacy?” Adora asked. “Truly, I’m so curious.”

“It’s not as glamorous as you’d think,” Kodan said. “A successful mission is one that seems to have no effects at all. I’m not sent out to gain knowledge, usually — we have others for that -- I’m deployed to stop things from happening.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Kodan peered up at me. I could see her deciding how much she wanted to tell me, especially in a room with four others. I was Queen, after all, but her missions were still secretive.

“I’ll tell you a story,” she said after a long moment. “From when I first

began to run missions out of Efra.”

All four of us perked up. Kodan gazed into the crackling fire. “I was still young. I wasn’t a general yet. Still trying to find my place in the Nightfall army. Our scouts had brought word back from the coast, just north of Starcrest. There was word that the sharks of Osna had been coming closer to Frasia, and a few of them had emerged from the bay and snuck in. Communication was sent to Osna, but the Court denied any knowledge of scouting missions or rebels – but the reports kept coming.

“So me and one other soldier were sent to investigate the reports. We went north of Starcrest, nearly all the way to the coast, and made camp high on a cliff, where we could watch the sea. And true to the reports, there were sharks in the water. They only appeared at night, and they moved carefully along the coastline — like they were mapping it. It was clear they were planning something. Osna was hungry for territory. The more we watched them, the more obvious it was that Osna was scoping out the best place to launch a real scouting party as close as they could get to Starcrest.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Fina asked. “The other soldier?”

Kodan’s gaze went distant. “Yes. Josiah. He was a friend of mine.” She sighed.

Was. What happened to him? I curled my fingers tighter in the blanket pulled around me.

“We couldn’t stand by and let the sharks behave so audaciously. So we kept watch. And finally, one night, under the light of the moon, four of them climbed out of the sea and began to make way to a cavern on the cliffside. Preparing to build a camp. Josiah and I made our way down there silently. He crept into the cave first.

“But there weren’t just the four sharks in there — it was at least a dozen. They had arms in the cavern already, and they were preparing some kind of mission. Whatever it was, we were instructed to thwart it, so thwart it we did.”

She took another long inhale on the pipe. This time, no one interrupted with questions.

“Josiah went in first. He dispatched half of the sharks himself. But sharks aren’t to be underestimated. One caught him by the arm, dragged him out of the cavern, and drowned him. I didn’t even see it happen. I was busy fighting the remaining sharks, turning the low water in the cavern red with their blood, and when the last shark returned it was with Josiah’s body in tow.

“I don’t remember much of what happened after that. I killed all the sharks except the one who had done the drowning — that one, I hurt. I hurt him badly, and then I told him to go return to Osna with news of what two wolves of Nightfall had done to their scouts. And to warn the Court that if any sharks appeared in our waters again, I’d turn it all red.” Her expression hardened. “I was injured too, my shoulder dislocated and some nasty gashes, if I’m remembering correctly. I buried Josiah at the campsite and recovered there, keeping an eye on the coastline for any reinforcements that might appear. But none ever did.”

Silence descended over the small room. Kodan finished her pipe, put it out, and then closed the window. The chill remained.

“I remember that,” Adora whispered.

Kodan turned to face her, eyes wide. “What do you mean?”

“I remember rumors of the sharks along the coast,” she said. “But I thought it was just that — rumors.”

Kodan smiled, but there was no joy in it. “That’s exactly as it should be. We dealt with them. And then the real threat becomes just another story meant to scare the royal pups before bedtime.”

“I’m sorry about your friend,” I said.

“It’s the risk we take in this line of work,” Kodan said. “He was a good soldier. Could’ve been a general himself.”

After a few moments, Fina, Aerika, and Adora slipped out of the room to go clean up in the washroom at the end of the hall. Kodan was preparing to join them to do the same, but before she left, I clambered out of the hammock and caught her by the elbow.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked.

“Of course,” Kodan said, with her head tipped curiously to the side. “What is it?”

“I don’t mean to be invasive,” I said. “And you don’t have to answer this at all.”

She chuckled, then sat down by the hearth and motioned for me to join her. I folded my legs underneath me and gazed into the fire as I gathered my thoughts. In some ways, I wanted a life similar to Kodan’s, full of adventure and excitement and leadership. But as Kodan had made clear, such a life involved sacrifice.

“Did you... Did you ever think about having kids? When you were deciding to become a soldier?”

Kodan laughed, quietly. "I wondered if you might ask about this."

My eyes widened. "Why?"

"Because you're interested in the things I am," she said. "Travel. Fighting. Seeing the world. And I know that's not exactly what the Court of Nightfall is interested in their Queen doing."

I wrapped my arms around my knees and pulled them into my chest. "Have they been talking to you?"

She shook her head. "No. But it's not a hard jump to make."

"I never thought it'd be something I had to worry about," I admitted. "When I was in Daybreak, I always thought I'd run away with my childhood sweetheart."

"Yeah, I remember that little traitor," Kodan said with a sneer.

I nodded, cringing at the memory, and at how deeply he and my father had betrayed not just me, but all of Nightfall. "So I never thought about it growing up," I said. "I was so focused on just... keeping my head down. Getting away. All of that changed after the Choice. After Elias."

"I don't know if I'm going to be much help," Kodan admitted.

"Why?"

She grinned. "I never met anyone that made me consider it. Not a man, at least."

"But you never thought about it?" I asked. "Ever?"

Kodan sighed and gazed into the fire. Some of the humor dropped off her face as she considered the question. "I guess never seriously," she admitted. "I knew I wanted to be a soldier. And I knew I couldn't do both. Even if I wanted kids, there was no question in what I was going to choose. So I just didn't think about it. But you get a choice, don't you?" She looked thoughtfully at me.

"The Court didn't make it sound that way," I admitted. "What would they even do if I said no?"

"Not a damn thing," Kodan said. "You're the Queen. They can't force you to do anything, as much as they would like to think they can."

A small amount of the anxiety I'd been carrying lifted. "Really?"

"Of course not," Kodan said. "You think they'd try a coup? For that reason? No way. As long as you and Elias set up an heir, they'd have no leg to stand on. They're just old-fashioned."

"Huh," I said, slightly surprised.

"Has it been that bad?" Kodan asked.

“Not until recently,” I said. “The Court said something about it before we left. I guess it still hadn’t really been something I’d thought about much. There’s still so much I want to do, you know? The same things I thought about when I was in Daybreak. And now there’s the added weight of having to lead. I want to be Elias’ equal in leadership, not just the winner of the Choice. Seems like the Court isn’t really interested in that part.”

“Probably not,” Kodan admitted, “but Elias is.”

“I know he is,” I said, “but I know he wants kids, too.”

“He can wait,” Kodan said with a grin and a wave of her hand. “He only wants them because he wants them with you.”

I blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean he was never the type to talk about that as a dream,” Kodan said. “He’s never mentioned kids before. He wants kids with *you*. He won’t rush you. And if you change your mind, I think he could accept that, too.”

“I hope so,” I murmured. “I just don’t want to disappoint him.”

“You won’t,” Kodan said. “He trusts you. He wouldn’t have sent you on this mission otherwise.”

I nodded. I knew these things were true, but hearing them from Kodan, who knew him so well and would never lie about such things, made me feel better. Calmer. “Thank you. Really.”

There was a knock on the door, and then the innkeeper said, “Stew’s ready downstairs, at your leisure.”

Kodan stood and stretched her arms overhead. “Let’s get some food in our bellies, shall we?” she said. She grinned at us, back to her usual teasing self — but it was clear she was grateful for the interruption. “We’ll eat, catch a few hours of sleep, and then cross the mountain range in the evening. It’ll be another long night of travel, so get some good rest now while you can.”

Once I had a good meal in my belly and the hammock was swaying under me, I fell asleep quickly. But, as promised, we only got a few hours. I woke up to Fina prodding my shoulder, her dark eyes gleaming in the golden sunlight. The sun was beginning to dip down over the horizon. The other four were up and packing, and I sat up so hurriedly I nearly tipped out of the hammock.

“Careful,” Fina said, laughing. “We’ll be in trouble if you fall out and break a limb.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I muttered. I climbed out of the hammock and grabbed my rucksack.

“Sleep all right?” Kodan asked. She guided us out of the room and toward the inn stairs. The carriages were already waiting for us out front.

“I did,” I said.

Aerika, Adora, and Fina hurried down the stairs. Kodan motioned for me to follow them, but I paused, then hiked my bag a little higher on my shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here with us,” I said. “And thank you for everything you’ve done. Not just for me — but for Nightfall.”

Kodan’s expression softened. “It’s been my honor to do so.” She swallowed hard, then gestured dramatically toward the stairs. “Now, let’s go before I get emotional. We still have a lot of traveling to do before we make it to Cruora.”

The mountain range outside Efra separated it from Nightfall. It wasn’t a large range, but it was old and rocky, with a narrow pass that cut through the jagged stone. Once we crossed the mountains, it would be smoother travel through the balds and the forests, but I wasn’t looking forward to this part.

“Ugh,” Fina said. Her complexion was pallid, and she braced her arms against the side of the carriage as it rocked and rumbled through the pass.

“Nauseous?” Aerika said. “Here.” She pulled a small bottle from her pack and handed it to Fina, who took a sip, then grimaced. “It’ll help,” Aerika promised.

The three of us were in one carriage, while Adora and Kodan were in the other ahead of us. Of the six soldiers we’d brought, two drove each vehicle, and two others drove the coach with the luggage. It hadn’t seemed like a large travel party when we were preparing to leave Efra, but now as we snaked through the pass, it felt irresponsibly large. I peered out the small carriage window and up at the looming mountain, jutting up like an enormous fang.

“I’m just ready for this part to be over,” Fina grumbled. “I’m about to shift and follow behind on foot.”

The carriages rumbled to a stop.

Fina groaned. “What now?”

“Stay inside!” Kodan called. “Soldiers, with me!”

“What?” Aerika clutched her bag closer to her body. “What’s happening?”

Internally, my wolf roused to attention, hackles up. Something was going on outside — something bad.

“Stay here,” I said. I pulled my sword from my rucksack. The moonstone

caught the late evening sunlight and glinted.

Aerika's gaze flickered down to it, then back to me. "You're sure...?"

"Just stay here." I stepped gingerly out of the carriage, careful not to make any noise.

I crept past the carriages, feet light on the rocky pass. There was barely enough space between the carriages and the mountain for me to squeeze past — no wonder the travel had been so slow. Evening had melted to dusk, and the sky was deep purple as night encroached. From the front of the carriages, I heard a snarl.

I stopped, suddenly stock-still. Wolf magic crackled through the air, dense like the air before an oncoming storm. My wolf's hackles were still up, and her instincts drew my attention up.

On a ledge jutting from the mountainside, a man dressed in ragged black clothes gripped a small knife in hand. He was staring ahead, not at me, but towards the scuffle I heard but couldn't see from where I was. I pressed close to the front carriage.

The man slid down the sloping rock and landed with a thump on the soft dirt. He took a step forward, knife drawn. He was moving slowly, methodically — and as I followed him, I saw over his shoulder that he was moving toward Kodan. Her back was to him, and she was flanked by two wolves, both baring their teeth and snarling.

Coward, I thought to myself. *Attacking from behind. But two can play at that game.*

I withdrew my sword from its sheath. The sound of steel moving through leather caught his attention, and he turned, eyes narrowed. But before he could move, I lunged forward and slashed my blade down in a wide arc. The steel bit into the flesh of his chest, and he cried out in pain as blood blossomed from the gash. He dropped his knife and staggered forward. I caught him, then shoved him to the ground. He lay there, gripping his wound and gasping.

Kodan blinked at me over her shoulder. "Get back to the carriage."

"You're welcome." I stepped forward and stood next to her, my sword still drawn.

A half-dozen bandits blocked the narrow pass, all dressed in the same shabby dark fabric of the man I'd cut down. The leader pulled off the dark fabric over the lower half of his windburned, wrinkled face and sneered at Kodan. "That's what you have for reinforcements?" He laughed, and it was a

bright, mean sound. “Turn over the goods you’re transporting, and we’ll be on our way.”

“That’s not happening,” Kodan said. “Now, do you want to get out of our way, or are we doing this the hard way?”

The leader whistled, low and impressed. He took a leisurely step forward, and the two wolves flanking Kodan bared their teeth and growled. “We don’t usually keep an eye on this pass here,” he said. “The good trade is usually north or eastward. But a little bird told us to spread out, focus on the paths leading out of Efra, and it looks like it’s paying off.”

“Little bird?” I asked. “Who told you? Why?”

“It’s no matter,” the leader said. “Just give us the goods. Now.”

“Last chance,” Kodan said. “Get going, or this is going to get ugly.”

The leader raised his hand. Behind him, the other bandits shifted — and then the pass was full of scraggly, skinny wolves. These were wolves without a pack. Wolves who had been kicked out of their cities or otherwise turned away, and had formed a ragtag pack of their own. They were hungry, desperate, and looking for a quick way to make some money.

Kodan exhaled in irritation. Then, with a crackle of magic, she shifted.

Her paws hit the dirt in front of her with a whump. Her hackles raised and she bared her immense fangs. She looked to be nearly double the size of the starved wolves in the pass. She growled, took a step forward, and the other wolves cowered, retreating an inch.

The leader didn’t shift. He remained in his human form, but he did take a step back.

“Tell me who told you to watch this pass,” I said. I held my sword up, and it was still stained with the bandit’s blood.

His gaze flickered to the hilt of my sword. “You’re not a merchant.”

I said nothing.

“What’s in those carriages?” he asked, eyes narrowing. “Where are you going?”

Kodan snarled again, then lunged forward. She knocked the leader onto his back and then closed her jaws around his throat.

The other wolves yelped and turned tail. Kodan surged again, caught another wolf’s back leg in her jaws, and tossed his body over the side of the mountain. The two soldiers at her side leapt and caught two of the other wolves in their jaws, pinning them to the ground and silencing them with fangs around their throats.

There was a groan behind me. I turned - the man I'd struck down with my sword staggered to his feet. With a groan of pain he shifted. It was a slow, weak shift, so I could see every bone cracking and growing as his body took its other form. Then, in his dark, weak wolf shape, he bared his teeth and loped toward me. Blood oozed from the wound on his chest.

"Your Highness!" Kodan called from behind me. "Are you all right?"

The wolf's eyes widened in recognition. His ears went back.

Now the wolf knew who I was.

Instead of lunging at me, the wolf darted between the carriages. I made chase, but the wolf surged off the edge of the pass and onto a ledge below. He looked up, then disappeared into the brush, half-running and half-tumbling down the mountain.

"Reyna!" Kodan said. She grasped my shoulder and pulled me away from the edge of the pass.

"One got away," I said, breathlessly.

"There was one still alive?" Kodan's gaze followed mine.

"I thought I killed one, but - and he heard — he knows who I am."

Kodan swore under her breath. "I shouldn't have been so careless."

"Are the others taken care of?" I asked. There was nothing else we could do about it now.

"Baltser!" Kodan called.

One of the soldiers loped up and peered at her, ears forward.

"Stay shifted. Track this wolf." Kodan took my sword and held it out. The wolf sniffed the blade, then nodded once, and bounded down onto the same ledge the bandit had landed on.

"We'll find him," Kodan promised. "We'll figure out who they're working for."

"I have a feeling I might know," I said with a grimace.

"Fae?" Kodan asked. She wiped the blood from her face as we went back to the carriages.

"I don't know who else it could be," I said. "If the portals include some scouting parties, then it makes sense to have spies watch the routes to and from Efra. Especially if she's trying to get ahead of what Nightfall is planning."

"Is everyone okay?" Adora squeaked, carefully leaning out of the carriage. "I felt shifts. Kodan, are you all right?!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine." She scrubbed harder at her face. "Sorry, milady."

“Just bandits,” I said. “It’s handled.”

Aerika leaned out of our carriage, her brow pinched in worry. “Bandits?”

“Let’s keep moving,” I said. “We need to get out of this pass before it gets too dark.”

The rest of the night’s travel was uneventful. Our carriages made it out of the mountain pass and onto the balds, rumbling through the darkness undisturbed. The ride was quieter, smoother, and we rode in silence. As dawn approached, we pulled the carriages into the tree line and set up camp.

Finna made stew over the fire. In the cool air, filled only by the rustling and chirping of bugs, we sat and ate. We were all exhausted it seemed, from the bandits, and the exhausting nocturnal travel.

“How much further to go?” Adora asked. She curled her hands around the bowl and inhaled the fragrant steam. “This travel is a lot harsher than I thought it would be.”

“Just one more evening,” Kodan said. “If we move quickly — which we will, what with the bandits — we should reach Cruora by tomorrow.”

“Good,” I said. “I’ll feel better once we’re behind their borders.” I cleaned the blade of my sword, grimacing as the blood stained one of my fine handkerchiefs.

Aerika sat down on a log next to me as I cleaned. She scooted closer to the fire, warming her hands by the flickering flame. “Milady,” Aerika said, “can I ask you something?”

“Please, call me Reyna,” I said with a smile. “Out here, we need to be friends more than anything else.”

Aerika nodded. “Then, Reyna, can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” I said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Where did you get that sword?” she asked. “Is it something from Nightfall?”

“From Starcrest. Lord Ealric gifted it to me.” I turned it over in my hand, so the moonstone embedded in the hilt caught the light of the fire. “Why do you ask?”

Her gaze lingered on the hilt. “Just curious.”

“Moonstone is found mostly in Starcrest’s territory,” I said. “But Ealric suggested that there was something different about this sword.”

Aerika said nothing, but her gaze still lingered on the hilt.

“Is it something you’re familiar with?” I asked. She knew something — that much was obvious — but from her expression it was clear she wasn’t

ready to open up.

“I was just curious,” she said. “It’s beautiful.” She returned her attention to the stew.

I sheathed the sword. “If it reminds you of anything, I’d love to know.”

Aerika remained silent. I didn’t press further. If she knew anything about it, she’d reveal it when she was ready.

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We rested through the day undisturbed, in tents tucked within the tree line. I slept fitfully. Even the cloth I'd tied around my eyes to block out the sun wasn't enough to trick my body into thinking it was safe to sleep. The birds cried all day, and the animals of the forest rustled curiously through the brush around our tent. Still, I was able to get enough, and by the time the sun had dipped low on the horizon, I was helping to pack up the campsite.

We traveled through the dark again, quietly. This time, no bandits disturbed us — they wouldn't dare, not as close as we were to Old Nightfall and Siena. The familiar territory was enough for me to relax in the carriage and catch a few more hours of sleep.

At dawn, Fina woke me with a hand on my shoulder. "Reyna," she whispered. "Something's going on."

I sat up, my wolf suddenly on alert. The carriages had come to a stop. I peered out the window. The sun was rising over the horizon to the east, and to our west stood the mountains that protected Old Nightfall.

"What is it?" I whispered. "What's happening?"

"Do you feel it?" Aerika whispered. She wrapped her arms tightly around her body, her dark eyes wide. She looked like she wanted to withdraw into the seat of the carriage itself. "The magic?"

As soon as she said it, my wolf roused, and I *did* feel it. Goosebumps ran down my arms and over my nape. There was magic in the air, thick and slow-moving — it felt wrong. Wrong, but at the same time, familiar. It felt like when Corinne had trapped me in my wolf form.

“Where’s it coming from?” I asked. “Where’s Kodan?”

“I don’t know,” Fina said. She squinted out the window. “I can’t see anything. There’s only fog.”

“We’re so close to Cruora,” I muttered. “This can’t be a coincidence.”

Slowly, tentatively, I opened the door to the carriage and peeked outside.

The balds were coated in dense, thick fog that sat heavily on the grass. Despite the early hour there was no birdsong, no sound of animals rustling in the treeline. There was only silence. It was a strange, heavy kind of stillness, as if the magic in the air had sent all other life in the area fleeing.

“Kodan,” I whispered. “Are you out there?”

No response.

“Kodan?” I stepped out of the carriage, despite Fina and Aerika’s protests. The grass was soft under my feet, and the dense fog made it so I could see not much more than ten inches in front of my face.

I withdrew my sword. The steel dragged across the leather, and the sound echoed in the silence.

Then magic crackled over my skin like electricity. Through the fog, Kodan’s voice carried loud like a thundercrack — a wordless shout, a war cry. A wolf’s body flew through the fog and slammed into the side of the front carriage. He slumped lifelessly into the grass, and the carriage was painted in his blood where his bulk had struck it.

Kodan roared again, and this time, it was matched by an inhuman screech.

Adrenaline raced through me, overwhelming the icy fear in my veins. I charged through the fog toward the sound. Kodan needed me — my pack needed me.

I burst out of the fog. This wasn’t normal haze either. It ended like a wall I stepped through. Clearly an enchantment, meant to keep us trapped and hidden. Now that I was out of it, the racket was louder, my vision was clear, and my eyes widened in terror as I took in the scene.

Kodan stood with her sword drawn and her teeth bared. She was still in her human form, and her leather armor was stained dark. It didn’t look like blood — it was darker than blood, like she’d struck down an enemy and then left the carnage on the armor to rot for a week. Her soldiers were at her side, in their wolf forms, hackles up and teeth bared as the enemies approached.

From a misshapen portal in the grass climbed an armed Fae, joining four others that stood in front of Kodan. None of them were armored, but they

were dressed in dark clothes, and all had their heads shaved, and all of them stared forward with an unnerving blankness to their gazes. As the fifth Fae climbed from the portal, he dropped open his mouth, revealing sharp teeth as he cried out that terrible screeching sound again. I grimaced as the noise cut through me like a blade, sending a shiver from the crown of my head all the way down to the base of my spine.

“Reyna!” Aerika burst forth from the fog behind me.

Adora was close behind her, and she gripped Aerika’s upper arm. “Stop!” she cried. “We have to get back!”

Aerika clapped her hands over her mouth. “No,” she whispered. “It’s not possible.”

The Fae turned their empty gazes to Aerika in unison.

Then, the balds exploded into chaos.

The Fae moved like they were different heads of the same Hydra. They lunged at all of us simultaneously: at the wolves, at Kodan, and two of them were at Aerika. I leaped in front of Aerika, knocking her backward into the fog, and drove my sword through the throat of the first Fae. The screech he emitted turned into a gurgle as I withdrew the bloody blade. His body collapsed like a puppet with the strings cut. Behind him, another Fae lurched forward to take his place, and I struck him down with another well-placed strike.

“Reyna!” Kodan called.

Panting, I looked up, just in time to see Kodan slide her own sword through the belly of an oncoming Fae. But this Fae didn’t collapse. As Kodan withdrew her weapon, he screeched with a stomach-turning, wet kind of sound. But then he just lurched forward again, teeth bared, his hands like claws. Kodan struck him again, and again, and still he clambered to his feet.

One of the Fae reached Aerika, and she withdrew a small knife, then drove it into the side of his neck. With a cry, she collapsed backward into the wall of fog.

“Kannis!” Adora called. “Take her back!”

The wolf lunged into the fog. Adora took his place, with her own sword drawn, and nodded at me.

Together, the two of us rushed forward to Kodan’s side. Adora cut down the Fae in front of Kodan with a single pierce of his back. He groaned as he collapsed.

A screech sounded from behind me. I whirled around. The Fae with blood

gushing from his neck reached for me, his empty eyes glowing deep, dark red. He bared his teeth, and with a shout, I drove my blade into his chest.

There was just one Fae remaining amid the bodies scattered in the dewy grass. He crept backward, teeth bared.

“Don’t let him get away!” I cried and raced forward.

But I was too slow, and too far away. The Fae stepped backward into the portal, and it swallowed him as if he’d stepped into a lake. The portal flickered and closed.

I stared at the place the portal had been. My knees quivered, then gave out, and I hit the soft earth as exhaustion rolled over me. The fight hadn’t been long, but it’d been so unexpected, and intense, and now, who knew where the remaining Fae had gone? What he would say?

The fog around the carriages dissipated, like a breath exhaled in winter. The dense magic melted away, and the silence did too. Suddenly the air was full of birdsong and the rustling of animals. The breeze rustled my hair where there had only been stillness, and morning sunlight fell in golden beams across the grass.

It was like a dream. But it wasn’t — there was the inky dark blood on my sword, and bodies littering the grass. I sat back on my heels.

Kodan stood, covered in Fae gore and her own injuries, surveying the bodies. Adora was already stumbling back to the carriages, one hand over her mouth. Kodan’s gaze followed her, then lingered on the motionless body of the dead soldier, still in his wolf shape.

It was only us two on the balds now.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” Kodan said. “He shouldn’t have been killed.”

“What was it?” I asked quietly. “What happened?”

“I felt the portals before I saw them,” Kodan said. “The fog descended so suddenly, I knew something was wrong. The soldiers and I came out here first. The portals opened. Just a few Fae, you know, I didn’t think it would be much trouble.” She sighed and turned her gaze up toward the sky. “Except when I struck them, they wouldn’t die.”

“They were all like that?” I asked.

She nodded. “So we were quickly overwhelmed, just because we could hardly slow them down. They got to Ivor first. Tore out his throat. Threw him like he weighed nothing.”

“Gods above,” I whispered. With one soldier, Baltser, tracking the bandit,

and Ivor killed, Kodan only had two soldiers left with her. By the pinch in her brow it was clear she hadn't expected to lose any on this particular mission.

"But you could kill them," she said. Her gaze fell to my weapon.

"I have an idea of why." I stood up slowly and kept my grip tight on the hilt of my sword. "Come on, let's make sure everyone else is okay."

The soldier Kannis had shifted back to his human form, and he and the other soldier bowed minutely as we approached.

"Go find a good location near the tree line," Kodan murmured.

The two nodded and stepped away. Aerika, Fina, and Adora tentatively stepped out of the carriage. Aerika cast her eyes around the bald, and her gaze lingered in horror on the bodies lying limp in the grass.

"You don't have to look," I said. "I just need you to tell me what you know."

"I didn't think it was real," Aerika whispered. "I'd heard stories, and rumors, but I thought they were just that. Rumors." She pushed her hands through her hair. I'd never seen her look so frightened, never seen her lose composure like this. It was unnerving to witness, but I gently set my hand on Aerika's shoulder and guided her to the other side of the carriages. That way, they stood between our eyesight of the carnage. Kodan followed us.

A few paces away, the soldiers had found a suitable patch of earth and started to dig. Kodan watched them with her arms crossed over her chest.

"What are they?" I asked. "Those didn't seem like normal Fae."

"They used to be," Aerika said. "They've been... changed."

"What do you mean?" Kodan asked.

"They're not soldiers," Aerika said. "I mean — they are, but not of their own free will. Corinne is using them, controlling their minds. It's the only thing that makes sense. If — if she can't find enough Fae who are willing to do these kinds of missions for her, she's just forcing people to do them." She swallowed. "I'd heard stories about the Queen and her court stealing away Fae who spoke against her rule and turning them into puppets. But I thought...I didn't think it was something she would ever be capable of actually doing." Aerika wrapped her arms around herself. "It's awful. It's so awful."

"Those Fae could've been on our side," I murmured. "If she hadn't gotten to them first."

Aerika nodded, a tiny motion. She closed her eyes like thinking about it was too much to bear.

Kodan caught my eye. Her gaze flickered down to my sword, still in my hand, and then back up to my eyes. I nodded.

“We’ll be quick,” Kodan said, “and then we’ll be on our way. We’re close enough to Cruora that we should just keep pushing. But I want Ivor buried in Frasian soil.”

“Thank you, Kodan,” I said.

Kodan nodded, then strode over to where the other two soldiers were digging. One handed her a shovel, expecting this, and Kodan joined them in digging the shallow grave that would soon hold Ivor’s body.

“Why was my sword able to strike down the Fae?” I asked quietly. “When Kodan’s couldn’t?”

“The moonstone,” Aerika said.

I was shocked she spoke so easily. She was shaken enough by the appearance of the Fae that all hesitation had been wiped from her mind. Her fear made my own nerves spike as well.

“It’s not just moonstone,” she continued. “It’s been enchanted. I don’t know how. But it’s Fae magic. I can feel it.” She reached out, and her fingertips hovered near the hilt of my sword. “Simple weaponry won’t work on them.”

“How do we enchant it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m only a half, your Highness. I live in Efra. I’m just a tailor.” She swallowed hard and blinked up toward the sky as she fought back tears. “I don’t know how to use Fae magic. I don’t know how she made those creatures. I don’t know what she wants.”

“Aerika.” I dropped my sword and took her hand in mine. “It’s all right.”

She squeezed my hand hard, then closed her eyes as a few tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, milady, this is all just so—”

“I understand,” I said. “Your help has been invaluable.”

Kodan and the soldiers set their shovels aside.

The last thing I wanted was to have Aerika watch them drag Ivor’s body to the treeline to bury it. I picked up my sword, then guided Aerika back to the carriages and helped her climb inside. Fina took Aerika’s hand and helped her into a seat, then scooted closer to speak to her in a low voice. Adora stepped out of the carriage to give them some privacy.

Nearby, the soldiers heaved Ivor’s body up in silence. “Kodan,” I asked, “should I...”

Kodan shook her head. Wordlessly, the three of them carried the wolf to

the pit they'd dug.

It made sense, but still something pinched in my chest. Kodan and her soldiers had their own private rituals of grief. They didn't need me to speak over the body or help with the burial. I was their Queen, and I was a warrior, but I was not a soldier in the way they were. Adora folded her hand over my forearm and squeezed. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "The moonstone weapons are the only way we'll be able to defeat the Fae. If the soldiers Corinne brings are anything like the ones we just fought, at least." I looked down at her sword, with similar moonstone to mine in its hilt, cleaned and sheathed at her side. "What do you know about them? Where did Ealric get them?"

The unasked questions hung in the air. *From whom? How did he know? How can we get more?*

"They're family heirlooms," she said. "Dad kept them in his study. His father gave them to him. I don't know how far back they go."

I sighed. "But he knows they're enchanted?"

"He had his suspicions, it seems," she said. "He never told me about them. I don't know how they were enchanted." She drew her thumb over the hilt of her own sword, brows pulled together.

"I'm guessing there aren't any more, then," I said. So much for an easy solution.

Adora offered me a small smile. "Not enough for an army, that much I know."

"But there's more moonstone," I said. "Enough moonstone for an army." The plan began to form in my mind. If the moonstone had to be enchanted, perhaps the eagles could show us how. Once we had enough gems empowered against the Fae, we could make our own weapons. Maybe we could just graft it onto the blades we already had, giving all of the soldiers in our barracks the power to strike down a Fae with a single blow.

A bird's call cut through the quiet morning. Not just birdsong though — it was louder. Powerful. The sound roused my wolf internally, and now on high alert, I went closer to the carriages.

Overhead, a great winged shape cut across the sun like a storm cloud. A shadow fell over the balds as it circled. Then, two more cries echoed, and with a thrumming sound and a rustle of branches, two more great winged shapes burst from the tree line and moved up to the sky.

"Whoa," Adora whispered. "Are those...?"

“Eagles,” I said.

The three great figures swooped down and landed, with three heavy thumps, onto the grass. Adora’s eyes widened.

Eagle shifters did not shift into birds like the ones that perched in the branches of Frasia. I knew the shifters were different, and I’d read extensively about those differences and their unique culture, but seeing them was still intimidating. They were tall, nearly two heads taller than me, with a body like a dragon: broad chest, thick legs, clawed feet, muscular arms. Their wings were huge even when folded against their backs, and they gazed down at me over terrifyingly sharp, immense beaks. And these were just eagles — not even the Griffin war-shape some of their mythical fighters had.

The eagle in the center stepped forward. He tipped his head to the side and blinked his eyes, large and shiny like two twin coins. Then, with a crackle of magic, he shifted into a human form.

“Your Highness.” He swept into a bow. “I am Parlan of Cruora, a soldier of King Lonzo’s court.” Parlan was not nearly as intimidating when in his human form. He was a short man, with broad shoulders and dark hair cut in a short, standard military haircut. His eyes were just as dark and beady as they were in his eagle form.

“Parlan,” I asked, “I am Queen Reyna of Nightfall. This is Lady Adora of Starcrest.”

“Hello,” Adora said, weakly. She kept her gaze low, avoiding the curious gazes of the immense eagles.

“Have you encountered Fae this close to the border before?” I asked. “Have you seen portals?”

He looked over his shoulder and grimaced at the spread of bodies. “We’ve felt their magic,” he said, “but never seen them attack. We’ve been sent to escort you across the border.” Then his gaze snapped up. “This must be General Kodan.”

“Charmed,” Kodan said, but her voice was flat. “Interesting timing you three have.”

Parlan narrowed his eyes. “Care to elaborate?”

“Just buried one of our own. Heard you come from the trees. We could’ve used some assistance.”

“Kodan,” I said, “these are our escorts.” There was a cool edge to my voice. Kodan met my gaze, but then nodded curtly. She shifted into her wolf shape, then loped to the front of the carriages. The other two soldiers, in their

human forms, climbed up to drive each coach.

Fina opened the door to the carriage and peered at us curiously.

“Stay there,” I said. “I’ll ride up ahead. We’ll be in Cruora soon.”

“Yes, milady,” Fina said. She nodded at the eagles, and then slipped back into the carriage.

“Will your general be...difficult? When we’re behind our borders?” Parlan asked.

I shook my head. “Of course not. Surely you understand her agitation.” I gestured to the carnage behind her. “We’d like to reach Cruora as quickly as we can.”

That seemed to appease Parlan. “Have your drivers follow me.” He shifted back into his immense eagle shape, and then with a rush of wings, took to the sky.

I climbed into the empty carriage and slumped onto the seat with a heavy sigh. My sword was still coated in dry Fae blood, as were my clothes, and sweat was drying uncomfortably down my collar and lower back. I ached. I was exhausted. I’d lost a soldier.

But we’d made it. And if I was right about the eagles, and the moonstone, we’d make it back. *I’d* make it back — to Frasia, to Efra, and to Elias.

The palace of King Lonzo of Cruora was not a castle at all.

I stepped out of the carriage into the bright midday sun. We'd made it into Cruora without any trouble, and traveled over its rocky landscape, to the immense mountain pass that bisected the nation. The palace was more like a fortress, carved directly into the mountainside itself. It loomed overhead, huge and overwhelming, and bustling with activity. Eagles in both their eagle and human forms moved about the space, busy with activity. From where I stood at the base of the mountain, it looked more like an anthill than a castle.

Parlan shifted into his human form. "We'll take your carriages and lead your party to their chambers. We received word from Nightfall of your visit, so everything is in fine order. The quarters are nearby."

I nodded. There was some relief, at least — the King was expecting us. "I'd like to speak to the King, if possible," I said.

"As expected. He is eager to make your acquaintance," Parlan said. Then he sucked his teeth. "Unfortunately, Cruora does not often take diplomatic visits. This way."

I summoned Kodan to my side. Parlan gave her a cold look, but put up no objections to her presence. I wanted to trust the eagles, but I wasn't foolish enough to go into the throne room alone. Not after what had happened with King Draunar in Shianga. As we'd neared the palace, safely behind the borders of Cruora, Kodan had climbed into the carriage in her human form. She'd changed some of her clothes and cleaned up the worst of the blood and the gashes, but she still looked like she'd recently been on the battlefield. But

it only served to make her look more intimidating, which served my purposes fine.

At the far edge of the rock palace, a narrow staircase was carved into the stone.

“You’re joking,” Kodan said.

“My apologies,” Parlan said, but he didn’t sound sorry at all. “Most of those who visit the Fortress are eagles. Follow me.”

Parlan started up the steps. They were steep, and small, and seemed to go endlessly upward.

“Great,” I murmured.

“Ladies first,” Kodan said with a sweep of her arm. “I’ll catch you if you fall backward.”

So we climbed.

And climbed.

And climbed.

It felt like hours. We climbed stairs until my legs screamed with exertion, sweat poured down my back. Even Kodan was huffing and puffing behind me. Parlan, somehow, seemed nonplussed. He was unaffected by the stairs to the point of mild amusement, as he invited us onto the wide, flat platform that made up the throne room of the Cruoran Fortress.

It was as if someone had carved out a flat section of the mountain, to build out a throne room completely exposed to the elements. There were doors leading to hallways and rooms carved into the mountain, but most of the activity was out in the open. Servants dressed in plush robes carried platters of vegetables and fruit, and some carried a crisp, bubbling wine. Soldiers stood along the edges of the space in their shifted forms, armed with long spears. Overhead, eagles soared through the skies, effortlessly weaving around each other and disappearing over the mountain pass.

For all the activity, I couldn’t look away from the view. I hadn’t realized how high we’d climbed, focused as I was on surviving the climb itself.

From here, I could see all of Cruora: its vast rocky balds and sparse trees. At the horizon, the balds became more densely forested, and beyond that, the mountain ridge of old Nightfall. It made my heart clench to see Frasia from this distance. It was gorgeous.

I wasn’t going to let Corinne harm a single blade of grass.

“Incoming,” Kodan murmured.

I turned away from the view. A servant offered me a glass of water,

which I accepted gratefully, drained, then I traded it for a glass of the light Cruoran wine. At the far end of the room, the soldiers turned, then struck the steel-capped ends of their spears against the rock. The clacking sound rang through the air like a bell. The servants stilled for a moment, then slipped to the edges of the room.

From the large arched doorway carved into the mountain, a figure stepped out.

The eagles all bowed their heads. Kodan glanced around, then did the same. I bowed briefly, then straightened up.

The King shuffled forward. He was a small man, dressed in a plush, deep red robe that was so long it trailed on the ground behind him. His face was deeply lined, and his silver hair was mussed and chaotic - his dark eyes over a large nose made him look birdlike even in his human form. He shuffled to the dais in the center of the room, climbed up onto it with some awkwardness, and then took a seat on a finely carved wooden chair with a cushion made of the same plush dark fabric. The chair was at the head of a small rectangular table.

“Welcome!” he called, then gestured broadly in front of him. “Please! Join me, my guests!”

Kodan and I glanced at each other, then walked to the table. It was oddly silent as we did so, for the eagles fell into stillness. It wasn’t until we took our seats at the table that the activity resumed.

“I am King Lonzo,” he said with a broad smile. One of his teeth was golden. “I am grateful to have the Queen of Frasia join me at my table, and her fine general. It’s been many years since Cruora has welcomed a diplomatic visit.”

He snapped his fingers, and a flurry of servants appeared. The table was then spread with food: vegetables and fruits, all raw, and all looking as if they’d been harvested that very morning. It wasn’t the kind of cuisine I usually craved, but it all looked so fresh. I was exhausted from the day, and when Lonzo gestured for us to eat, I bit into a peach with pleasure.

Wine was poured, and we each ate a bit of the food. Then, over the rim of his elegant wineglass, Lonzo asked, “I have my own thoughts on what might bring the wolves to my door. But I’d like to hear your tale, first.” He looked over at Parlan. “Odd things at the border, I hear.”

“I come in hopes of gaining Cruora’s assistance,” I said.

Lonzo watched me carefully, with his head tilted slightly to one side. If

he hadn't hosted diplomatic guests in a long time, I saw no reason to fall onto the careful chess moves of diplomacy like Elias did with the Nightfall court. I would start with honesty and see how he reacted to that.

"Few come to the eagles for help," he said. "Surely you know this."

"I do," I said. "I respect a kingdom which prioritizes its own well-being."

That made Lonzo smile slightly. "So the eagles and the wolves have that in common."

"What have you seen at your borders?" I asked.

"Our scouts have seen many odd things," Lonzo said. "Though, I must say, not as odd as receiving the Queen and her general. I don't think I've ever seen a woman general." Lonzo's tone was curious, not judgmental, and he peered at Kodan with his head still tilted to the side.

"I've heard such sentiments before," Kodan said coolly. "You'll find I'm just as capable."

"I don't doubt it," Lonzo said.

Kodan blinked, surprised.

"You know," Lonzo continued, "the last I heard of the Nightfall wolves, they had a mad king and a decaying kingdom. It appears things have changed. A woman on the throne, no less?"

"My husband is the son of the mad king," I said. My appetite disappeared.

"And is he mad, too?" Lonzo poked at an apple, found it bruised, and tossed it over his shoulder.

"No," I said simply. "He leads well. I travel on our behalf. We lead as one."

"Impressive," Lonzo said. "Much has changed in the nation of the wolf. I trust you'll be less difficult than our neighbors to the west."

Shianga. My mood soured further. "Frasia has no friendship with the dragons."

Lonzo barked a laugh. "Another commonality between us, then! Did they encroach upon your borders as well?"

Kodan raised her eyebrows at me. I took a sip of my wine. But...if Lonzo held contempt for the dragons, perhaps I could leverage that to gain his trust. Carefully, in a low voice, I explained what had happened in Shianga. I left out the details of my own foolishness, and how that had led to my capture by Draunar. Instead, I told him how Draunar had captured the Fae Queen, and now she intended to take her revenge.

“I see no problem with that,” Lonzo said. “Let her destroy the dragons. One less worry for me.” He waved a hand dismissively.

“She won’t stop there,” Kodan said. “She hungers for power. She won’t be satisfied with Shianga alone.”

“And then she’ll come for Frasia?” Lonzo asked. He raised his eyebrows. “How do you expect the eagles to help you then? Do you come to me to ask for reinforcements?”

“No,” I said immediately. Already I knew Lonzo was not the type of king to offer soldiers unless it was absolutely necessary. “She may come for Frasia next, or she may come for Cruora. I intend to stop her before she does either of those things.”

“And how will you do that?”

“Are you familiar with the jaguars of Askon?” I asked.

Lonzo nodded. “I have no qualms with the jaguars.”

“Queen Enet and King Khainan recently visited my Court. I raised my concerns about the Fae Queen gathering power. Us wolf shifters only have our shifting magic — nothing like the magic the Fae wield. Queen Enet suggested that the eagles may still have access to the kinds of magic that could hold strong against Fae magic.”

Lonzo’s hands stilled. “Did she, now?”

“On our travels here, we encountered Fae scouts at your border,” I said. “They were not normal Fae. They had been changed. Magicked, somehow. They could not be killed by sword alone.”

“Then what could kill them?” Lonzo asked.

“That’s what I hope you and your court can help me understand,” I said.

Lonzo hummed. He took another sip of his wine. The silence spread out between us, but I said nothing more. Finally, after a long few minutes, Lonzo sighed and set his glass down. “I’ll have my staff show you to your quarters. You must need the rest. We can discuss more in the morning.”

“I really think it’d be best if we could open discussions today,” I said. “Considering what just happened at the border—”

“The eagles of Cruora have faced threats for as long as we’ve been in this Fortress,” Lonzo said. “A border skirmish is no need for panic.”

“Your highness, this was no border skirmish,” I said. “This was—”

“Queen Reyna,” Lonzo said with sudden fierceness. “I have been King of this nation for longer than you have been alive. We will open discussions tomorrow.”

I bit back the sharp retort already on my tongue. I should've expected this kind of patronizing from a King who was surprised to see a Queen at his table. "Thank you for your time," I said. "I look forward to discussing more."

"I trust you'll find the accommodations welcoming," Lonzo said. "I am grateful to have Frasia in my home. But please be aware." He narrowed his eyes slightly. "We are a kind nation, but none of us will hesitate to defend ourselves should need be."

I smiled politely. I knew a threat when I heard one. But honestly, I would've been more unnerved if he had been nothing but nice. A bit of distrust was good at the beginning of a relationship. And it gave me a chance to show my teeth, as well. "Of course, your Highness," I said. "Nor will the wolves."

That made Lonzo's suspicious look melt into a grin. With a laugh, he dismissed us.

Parlan led us away from the table. "Please tell me there's an easier way down," Kodan said.

"Can you fly?" Parlan asked.

Kodan sighed. We made our way down the stairs. Much to my relief, Parlan only led us down a few flights before we stepped off the narrow staircase onto a landing carved into the mountain. We stepped through a narrow, dark doorway, which led to a narrow hallway, with a curved ceiling high enough for the eagles to walk through in their bird shape. Anxiety clawed its way into my throat. Even with Kodan behind me, I wasn't keen on walking deep into a cavernous lodging again. It reminded me too much of what had happened in Shianga.

"This is where you'll be staying," Parlan said. He pushed aside a thick curtain and welcomed us into our quarters.

My jaw nearly dropped. I'd been expecting another cavern, dark and cold and unwelcoming, not a space like this.

"This is your common space," Parlan said, gesturing to the large room. The room was carved into the mountain, but it had a soaring ceiling, and four immense windows that looked out over the view just as the throne room did. The windows were nearly as tall as the ceiling itself, and decorated with stained glass images of soaring birds, so it appeared as if they were gliding through the sky outside. The windows were latched, and opened up outside and inside the room like doors, so eagles could take off and land comfortably from there. There was a large hearth carved into the wall, with a fire already

burning. A smattering of heavy furs were used as rugs, and plush chairs and couches sat around the low coffee table. Curtains blocked off three other doorways as well, and from behind the middle curtain, Fina stepped out with a smile.

“How lovely is this place?” Fina asked. “The rooms are just as wonderful.”

Parlan nodded. “Your luggage will be up shortly. General Kodan, the soldiers typically stay closer to the barracks—”

“I’ll stay here,” Kodan said immediately. “There’s plenty of space.” She gestured toward the furs stacked by the hearth.

“If you insist. I’ll leave you to get settled.” With a bow, Parlan left the room.

“This is amazing,” I said, still gazing with awe around the room. “It’s beautiful.”

“Comfortable, too.” Aerika stepped out of the center bedroom as well. “There’s plenty of space.”

Adora emerged from the other room, smiling. She’d cleaned up and traded her riding clothes for a simple blue silk gown. With her blonde hair loose, she looked comfortable but elegant. It suited her. She smiled at Kodan. “There’s space in my room, General.”

“That’s not necessary,” Kodan said. “I can sleep out here.”

“Please,” Adora said. “I insist.”

Kodan pressed her lips together, but didn’t say anything else.

I caught Adora’s eye and raised my eyebrows. She flushed slightly, then turned and hurried back into her bedroom. I stepped through the curtain that separated my room from the main room. The space itself was smaller than the main one, with a lower ceiling and a hearth of its own. The walls were decorated with carved murals of eagles gliding, done with so much detail I could see every feather on their wings. The bed was low to the ground, but big and soft, and I crawled onto the plush mattress with a sigh of pleasure. After the rough travel and fitful sleep, sinking into the bed was a sweet relief.

I pulled my necklace from beneath my shirt and smoothed my thumb over the smooth ivory of the wolf’s fang. I closed my eyes. I wondered if, across the balds and the mountain pass, Elias was thinking of me, too.

Even in the depths of seemingly endless exhaustion, I dreamed.

I was running through the woods. The earth was soft under my paws, and the cold air ran through my pelt like fingers. The sensation thrilled me,

invigorated me, and I ran faster. I was in joyous pursuit. I could smell Elias up ahead, his scent calling to me like a promise. I leapt over tree roots and small streams, easily dodging the knobby young trees that grew alongside our well-worn, narrow path. I barked, announcing my presence, and up ahead three bright barks answered my own.

I burst out of the tree line and into a small, familiar clearing — familiar in the way dream-spaces were, an amalgamation of the most beloved places in my life. Elias was there, in his great wolf shape, his dark pelt gleaming in the afternoon sunlight and his golden eyes sparkling with humor.

At his side, two children rolled around in the lush grass, playing like pups even though they were in their human forms. They couldn't have been more than ten — a boy with white-blond hair like mine, and a girl with thick dark hair like Elias'. Their laughs rang out like bells, and my heart swelled at the sound.

Then, in the clearing, Elias shifted back into his human form.

He smiled at me, and my heart skipped a beat.

His face was more lined than I remembered, with deep crow's feet and laugh lines. And his dark hair was shot through with silver at the temples, as was the dark shadow of his beard. Yet I rushed forward, then shifted into my human form and leaped into his arms. He caught me with just as much, if not more, strength, and swung me around in delight. My king pulled me into a kiss, and the teasingly disgusted shouts of the children rang through the clearing.

A clatter in the common room jolted me awake, and the beautiful dream dissipated like fog. I was suddenly alert from the noise. In the common room sounded careful, harried whispers. My wolf leaped to attention, and I sat up in bed, listening carefully. Then more whispers.

Someone was here.

My wolf would know if it was another pack member. These voices were unfamiliar.

Slowly, I climbed off the mattress and to my feet. My instincts prickled, and my wolf's hackles raised —she was right at the surface. If I needed to, I'd shift, and handle the intruders in my wolf shape. When I had told Lonzo I wasn't afraid to defend myself, I'd meant it.

I pulled the curtain aside just enough to peek through. Two young women were struggling with a heavy platter of breakfast, and one had spilled some of the tea on the rugs and was frantically wiping it up while the other set the table.

I exhaled. Maybe I was growing more paranoid than I realized. I straightened up, then stepped through the curtain. "Good morning, ladies," I said.

The girls jumped, and then started to stammer through greetings and apologies, but I just smiled and waved them off. "Thank you. You're dismissed."

They scurried out of the room, like pups with their tails between their legs. I poured myself a mug of strong black tea from the pot. The sun was just beginning to appear beyond the horizon, turning the sky shades of pink

and gold.

Kodan stepped out of the room, her bare feet quiet on the floor. Her red hair was loose to her shoulders, which I realized I'd never seen before. She greeted me with a nod. "Servants woke you?" she asked.

"I didn't sleep well." I poured Kodan a mug of tea and offered it. "What about you?"

To my shock, Kodan actually blushed. "Just fine." She took a sip of tea and stared resolutely out of the windows at the sunrise. "What's the plan for today? I spoke to Parlan earlier. He can show us to the training facility."

"I need to speak to the King again, first," I said. I grimaced down at my dirty clothes. "After I clean up."

"What are you trying to gain from him?" Kodan asked. "What other information do you need?"

I glanced sidelong at her. "What can you get me?"

She grinned. "I'm not sure. But Kannis is quite good at uncovering information when need be."

"I knew there was a reason you chose the escorts," I said. "It'd be good to have our ears alert, I suppose."

Kodan nodded in agreement. Then she sat down on the furs by the table and uncovered the breakfast spread. "Oh, thank the gods," she muttered at the sight of braised meat alongside the vegetables and bread. "I was worried I was going to be expected to survive on celery stalks."

I cleaned up and changed into a simple but elegant jacket and trouser set, then wound my hair into a fine plait. Elegant, but functional. When I returned to the room, the other girls were up, sharing breakfast with Kodan. I found I wasn't hungry and waved off their requests to join them. Instead, I took my sheathed sword, and stepped out of the entrance of our chambers where Parlan was waiting.

"Good morning, your Highness," he said. "What can we do for you this morning?"

"I'd like to speak with King Lonzo," I said. "If he'd be so kind to see me."

"Surely you'd like to see more of our Fortress first? There's the training facility, as well as--"

"Please," I interrupted. "It's a timely matter."

Parlan nodded curtly. If he was irritated with me, he didn't let it show on his face. Instead, he led me up the stairs back to the throne room. It was quiet

this morning, with just a few servants and soldiers in the vast space. The morning sunlight fell in vast golden stripes across the open space, and I squinted against the brightness, as I followed Parlan across the space and into the doorway through which I'd seen the King enter yesterday. The doorway led into a dark hallway, and at the end was a plush curtain, which Parlan pulled aside. He peered into the room, then nodded, and motioned me through.

"Starting your day off early, I see," Lonzo said. "Please, join me."

Lonzo was seated at a large circular wooden table in the center of what appeared to be a well-used study. He was dressed in a large, plush robe again, and was already halfway through his own breakfast, which was an extravagant spread of food and tea. There was a desk against one side, and the other was lined with stuffed bookshelves. Across from the desk, the walls were papered with maps, which immediately caught my attention.

He noticed my interest, then grinned. He poured me a mug of tea then gestured at the papers. "Take a look. I drew them myself."

"You did? You're a cartographer?"

"Just an amateur," he said. "You'll see there's nothing too dramatic on those maps."

The maps were incredibly detailed maps of the Cruoran coastline. It included every jagged cliff and every mountain, every bay and river, and even notes of depths and riptides in the sea. "They're quite impressive. What led you to cartography?"

Lonzo hummed, but didn't answer. "Please. Have a seat, eat. I trust you slept well in your accommodations?"

"Quite well." I took a piece of dark buttered bread and nibbled at the edge.

"Is there anything else you need in your rooms?" Lonzo asked. "As I mentioned, we don't often take guests. You'll forgive me if anything has been missed, I hope."

"It's truly lovely," I said. "It's a beautiful space. The Fortress itself is beautiful."

"Thank you," Lonzo said. He took another sip of his tea, then pressed his lips together. "I assume you wish to continue the conversation we began yesterday?"

"If you'd be so kind," I said. I didn't want to make him irritated again — but I couldn't just sit on my hands and wait for information. Not when those

strange Fae soldiers had appeared so close to the border.

He sighed. "Make your case, then."

I blinked.

Lonzo peered at me expectantly over his mug of tea.

I cleared my throat. I'd expected more conversation, more back-and-forth...not Lonzo just waiting for me to say my piece.

"Well," I started, "As I mentioned, there's Fae at the border, and we've seen more portals open up in Frasia, as well. Corinne is testing her abilities. It won't be long before she strikes again, at Frasia or Shianga. And then from there, she won't stop."

"How do you know?" Lonzo asked. "I say let her take Shianga. The dragons have caused us nothing but trouble, and I say good riddance to them."

My stomach soured at his easy dismissal. What kind of leadership was that, to wish to see an entire nation of shifters eliminated? "The Fae at the border were under her control," I said, "and I've been under it as well."

He raised his eyebrows. "What exactly do you mean?"

"I was captured by the Fae Queen," I admitted. I still didn't want to tell him exactly how — but I hoped my story would show him how dangerous she truly was. "And taken to Shianga. But it wasn't just by force she was able to capture me. She was able to force me into my wolf shape and keep me there."

His eyes widened slightly.

Now I was getting somewhere. "Fae magic can easily overpower wolf shifter magic. I was in my wolf for many months."

"And yet you did not experience the wolf madness?" Lonzo asked.

I shook my head.

"You must be a strong shifter, then. Go on."

I took another sip of my tea. "You must see how I am extrapolating her next move. If she was able to keep me in my shifted shape, and also able to control the Fae we saw at the borders, who knows what she might be able to do to the dragons?"

"You mean to imply..."

"That she could control the dragons," I said. "If she's able to control the dragons the way she can control the Fae, and control me...she could have an army of dragons at her disposal."

"This is all just extrapolation, though," Lonzo said with a huff. "You have

no proof of this magic.”

“I have no proof yet,” I said. “But I will.”

He huffed again.

“The dragons will show up on your doorstep, I fear,” I said. “By then, it will be too late.”

“Queen Reyna,” he said, “you must understand how ridiculous this sounds. You’re suggesting that the Fae Queen is planning an attack to mind control the dragons of Shianga, who will then come to Cruora with the goal of slaughtering us and taking over. Is that correct?”

I pressed my lips together. Well, when one put it like that, it did sound a bit absurd.

“The eagles have enjoyed our peace for centuries,” Lonzo said. “I am in no hurry to send my soldiers to defend the wolves, if it will bring the Fae to my borders. Why should I help you at all? Why not allow the scuffle to play out as it will? The eagles are not involved. This is not my fight, Wolf Queen.”

“I’m not asking you to send soldiers,” I said. I bit back the eagerness that threatened to climb into my voice. This was my in — here is how I could convince him. “I am not asking you to put any eagles on the battlefield, should it come to that.”

Lonzo leaned back in his chair. “Then what are you asking for, Reyna?”

I unlatched my sheathed sword from my hip and placed it on the table. I slid it, hilt-first, across the wood surface to Lonzo. He peered at it curiously.

“Our weaponry did nothing against the Fae at the border,” I said. “Except for this sword, and one like it. There’s something about the moonstone in the hilt. Something different.”

Lonzo picked the sword up and looked closely at the hilt. Then he stood, walked to his desk, and shoved some of his papers aside to make space for it. He pulled a magnifying glass from a drawer of the desk and looked even closer at the carving and the inlaid stones. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s an artifact from the Starcrest Court,” I said. “It was given to me by a member. According to Starcrest, there aren’t many others like it. The art of making weapons like this is lost to the wolves.”

Lonzo looked up. “Lost, you say?”

“I did not come to Cruora for soldiers,” I said. “I came here for knowledge. We need more weapons like this. We have the moonstone, but this moonstone is different. Can you tell?”

“It’s been enchanted,” he said. “This is an old spell.”

“I suspect from when the Fae still lived in Frasia,” I said. “When there was more crossover between our people. The wolves have lost this art, but...” There was no reason to talk around it. Lonzo had asked me to make my case, so I would. “I’ve come to Cruora in hopes that the eagles still practice alchemy.”

Lonzo stilled briefly. If I hadn’t been looking for it, I would’ve missed it. Then he went back to examining the moonstone through his magnifying glass. “You want to know if the eagles can enchant weaponry in this same way?”

“If we don’t have more of this, we don’t stand a chance against the Fae. I already lost one wolf to her Fae soldiers. I won’t lose more.” I crossed my arms over my chest. That was the heart of the matter, and the reason I was here. Seeing the expression on Kodan’s face as she’d hauled Ivor’s body to its shallow grave had only made it clearer what I needed to do.

“It’s only a rumor that eagles practice alchemy,” Lonzo said. “Most don’t believe it.”

“I know,” I said. “I was willing to travel here to find out if it was true. I’ve learned that most rumors have a grain of truth at the center.”

“It’s a long way to travel for something that could end in nothing.”

“Would it be wiser to not try at all?” I asked him. “To wait for the Fae Queen to attack my nation and let my wolves run into her waiting maw? I’ll travel to every corner of these nations if I think there’s a way to help my soldiers stand against the Fae.” There was a hard edge to my voice, and my wolf rustled in my chest. If Lonzo wasn’t going to help me, I wanted him to go ahead and say it so I could be on my way. I meant it — I was here for diplomacy, but more than that, I was here for solutions. If there was no magic to be found here, I’d take my leave.

Lonzo straightened up. He handed the sword back to me, hilt first.

“That’s my case,” I said. “If the eagles of Cruora see no way to aid me, then we’ll thank you for your hospitality and be on our way.”

“You are a surprising Queen,” Lonzo said. He sat back down at the table and took another sip of tea. “If knowledge is what you seek, Cruora will do our best to provide.”

My eyes widened. “So it’s true? You practice alchemy?”

“Not myself,” Lonzo said. “There’s very few that do. It’s an old art. A secret art. But there is someone I can introduce you to.”

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After some hurried direction from Parlan, I made my way from the throne room deeper into the Fortress. The hallways were surprisingly well-lit, even as they wound deeper into the mountain. I passed various members of Lonzo's court: tall eagles, with sharp gazes and elegant, loose clothing. Servants wove through the hallways carrying baskets of laundry and platters of food. The hallways seemed to go for miles, splitting off in various directions like tunnels in an anthill. I was just about to turn back, find a nearby servant and ask to be dragged back to the throne room, when suddenly the hallway turned and opened up.

I stopped dead in my tracks. An eagle servant nearly walked into me from behind, sidestepped around me neatly, and then shifted and took off into the sky. Easy as breathing.

I was on the other side of the mountain, on a wide ledge similar to the throne room. It opened to a lush, green valley, bisected by a river below. Large trees grew in the valley, and on their immense branches, immense tree houses bustled with activity. The valley was surrounded by mountains on all sides, making it feel secretive, tucked away from the rest of the world. Gazing down at the trees below, I understood why Lonzo was so reluctant to invite the outside world in. This part of Cruora was an oasis.

The sound of steel crashing into steel caught my attention. I hurried along the ledge, to the staircase Parlan had told me would be there. Carefully I made my way down the narrow steps, onto the ledge below.

"Hah!" Adora shouted, as her blade sliced through the air and narrowly missed Kodan's arm.

The training area was a large, round arena carved into the side of the mountain, with seats chiseled in stadium-style all around us. A few eagles lingered in the seats, watching the sparring match with curiosity.

Adora shouted twice more and swung the blade in time with it. Her steps backed Kodan up as she forced Kodan to parry the two blows, but the Nightfall general was grinning as she did so.

In the arena, Adora hardly looked like the woman I'd first met at the beginning of the Choice. She was dressed in tan trousers and a white shirt, with no jewelry, and her blonde hair whipped up into a bun high at the crown of her head. Her and Kodan both had their feet bare on the arena floor. The sight made my heart clench with fondness. It reminded me of the first time I saw Elias in Nightfall, pacing the halls with his feet bare — it was so wolfish, and charming, a sign of his connection with his animal nature. Seeing Adora fall into the same rhythms was remarkable.

She was so strong now. We both were, as friends, and as sisters.

I lingered near the edge of the arena, keeping my distance. As I watched them spar, Kodan caught sight of me. She called a time-out, and Adora huffed in dismay, until she looked over and saw me as well. Her face broke into a grin. She sheathed her sword, then grabbed Kodan by the wrist and hauled her over toward me. “How did it go? What did the King say?”

“He said he can help,” I said quietly. “The rumors are true. Or — I think they are. He was a bit obtuse.”

Adora clapped in delight. “Incredible! So he'll be able to ench—”

“Help us, yes,” Kodan interrupted loudly. “I suggest we keep the details to ourselves?” She glanced around the arena, where the interested eagles were still watching from the stands.

“Right,” Adora said. “Of course. Here, let's get some tea, shall we? I told Fina to meet us when she was finished.”

“Finished?” I asked. “Finished doing what?”

“There's this adorable tea shop downstairs. This way.” Adora sheathed her sword, waved at the eagles in the stands, and then guided us back down the stairs again, closer to the tall trees in the valley above. Below the stadium, there was another narrow platform, which opened to a hallway. Adora tugged us through the narrow hallway to another small room that opened out over the valley below. It was, as she had promised, a small, cute tea shop.

“Reyna!” Fina called. She waved us over to her small, round table, where she was seated with Aerika. The three of us joined Fina and Aerika at the

table overlooking the view. A cool breeze blew through the valley, rustling my hair. I sighed with relief as a young woman with long dark braids brought us three more cups and a teapot. She served us the tea with quiet elegance, then drifted back to her seat behind the bar and its wall of brews and opened her book.

“What have you been doing?” I asked. The tea was floral, light, and sweet on my tongue.

Aerika wrapped her hands around her mug. She looked a bit anxious as she glanced over at Fina.

“We went into town,” Fina said. She nodded toward the treehouses below us.

“What?” I asked. “Into town? By yourselves? You can’t have thought that was a good idea—”

“Kannis was with us,” Fina said. “I knew he was going scouting, so I asked if we could take a look around as well. He’s still scouting, but I knew I was meeting you, so we came back.”

I sighed and took a sip of my tea. I wanted to chastise her, to tell her she should’ve waited until Kodan or I could’ve gone with her. But I’d brought these women with me for a reason, hadn’t I? I trusted Fina to keep herself safe. “Did you find anything?”

“Not a thing,” Fina said, but she was still grinning hugely. “We were listening for any whispers of alchemy, or rumors like that, but no one seemed to know anything. The city’s incredible, though. All the buildings are built into the trees. They’re connected with rope bridges, or just the natural branches of the trees. It’s so elegant. I’ve never seen anything like it, have you, Aerika?”

“I don’t think I like the heights so much,” Aerika said. She took another shaky sip of her tea.

“So what did the King say?” Fina asked.

“The King himself doesn’t do any alchemy,” I said, “but he seems to know about it. He looked closely at the moonstone in my sword and seemed to know it was enchanted.”

“Can the alchemists repeat the process?” Kodan asked. “Can we get more weaponry like it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And I don’t think there are a lot of alchemists. Lonzo made it sound like there was just one. One singular alchemist left.”

Kodan sat back in her chair and rubbed her hand over her forehead.

“Well, I hope he knows what he’s doing. If we don’t get more weaponry like those swords, the Fae are going to steamroll us.”

“Don’t say that,” Adora said with a sharp exhale. “We’ll figure something out even if that is the case.”

Kodan didn’t look convinced, but she said nothing.

Aerika set her mug down. “This might help.” She reached into her hair and withdrew the clip keeping it off her face. Her hair fell like a white curtain around her striking face, and she placed the clip in the center of the table.

It was a small silver comb, no longer than the width of my palm, and the spine was inlaid with moonstone.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My mother gave this to me,” she said. “She said to always keep it close. She said if the Fae ever...if they ever came for me, then this would protect me from them.”

“What does it do?” Fina asked.

“I don’t know,” Aerika admitted with a small, sad smile. “But it comes directly from the Fae. If the alchemist needs to figure out what exactly the enchantment on the weapons does, maybe this will help.”

I nodded. “It might. Especially if the enchantment on our swords is old wolf magic.” I took the comb. It felt cool and solid in my palm. I closed my fingers over it and held Aerika’s gaze. “Thank you. I’m grateful you’re here.”

Aerika flushed and nodded.

“Who’s the alchemist?” Adora asked. “When will they be here?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I suppose he’s been sent for. We have the welcome ball tonight. I can only hope Lonzo will provide more information then.”

The welcome ball was an extravagant affair. It was held in yet another part of the Fortress — a ballroom on the inner side of the mountain, overlooking the town. Eagles flew from the village and arrived from homes in the rock face, dressed in fine silk clothes and dripping in jewelry made of colorful stones and brightly-colored twine.

I was seated at a table on the dais with the other wolves, with Lonzo in the center of the table overlooking the festivities. The table was covered with an extravagant spread of Cruoran delicacies: cold fruits, fresh vegetables, thin breads and, to my surprise, a fairly expansive spread of fish and crustaceans.

Lonzo noticed my surprise as the servants dropped more plates of fine fish on the table. “Strange to see it up so high, is it not?”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” I said with a small chuckle.

“It’s part of the reason I’m so interested in mapping the coastlines,” he said. “We don’t have much space to grow crops here in Cruora, and what we do have is rocky and difficult to grow in.” He gestured to higher points in the mountain, dotted with green. “We grow in unusual spaces, too, experimenting with new methods to increase the diversity of our crops.”

“Those are farms?” I asked, wide-eyed.

“Most aren’t as successful as you’d hope,” Lonzo said. “So we’ve expanded more into fishing. It’s gone quite well, to my surprise as much as yours. The fisher-eagles travel out to the coastlines, spend a few days fishing, and then are able to fly back with the catch quick enough that it’s fresh as if we caught it that morning. Quite remarkable.” He gestured to a plate of prawn. “Please, enjoy.”

The prawns were delicious, perfectly cooked and with a hint of spice as the flesh melted in my mouth. I hummed, pleased, and Lonzo grinned with self-assured delight.

“I told you,” he said, “our fishers know what they’re doing.”

“Clearly,” I said.

More wine was poured, and more food brought out. The ballroom filled with activity, as eagles flew in and shifted, more and more in elegant, colorful outfits. Then, music began to play. I started — I hadn’t seen a band anywhere.

“Look,” Adora said at my side. She pointed high above us.

In a small cut-out high above the ballroom, a large band played drums and horns, creating a rich, fast-paced tapestry of sound. It was similar to the Nightfall jigs, I was surprised to find, but with heavier drums and fewer strings. The music reverberated off the stone around us, increasing the volume and echoing, as the musicians above shouted with delight and danced around each other as they played.

“Now,” Lonzo called to the crowd, “please clear space for the Court’s Dancers!”

The dance floor cleared quickly as the eagles hooted and applauded at the announcement. I glanced over Adora, Fina, and Kodan, but all of them were just as confused as I was.

Then, from two narrow doors behind the dais, two dozen dancers streamed out. They were all dressed in pale silks, with colorful twine jewelry and hairpieces. They stepped into the center of the ballroom and created an

angular formation in stillness like so many statues. The ballroom fell silent.

A strange tension fluttered over the crowd. I found myself holding my breath, sinking into the anticipatory silence.

Overhead, the band exploded into music. The dancers did too, leaping outward with their limbs cutting through the air like knives. Their dance was fast-paced, riotous, and extremely detailed — I could hardly follow it, so much was happening on the ballroom floor. Lonzo clapped with delight, then leaned back in his chair with his narrow fingers wrapped around a very full glass of wine.

The dancers went through a hypnotizing routine. As the song reached a crescendo, their voices rang out as they shouted along to the music. Then they rushed toward the edge of the ballroom, arms windmilling through the air. The dancers leaped off the edge and plummeted out of sight.

I gasped and stood up from my seat. Lonzo hooted a pleased laugh at my reaction.

Then the ballroom burst into cheers. The dancers had shifted, mid-fall, and now two dozen eagles soared through the air, performing impressively choreographed aerial maneuvers as the music continued to ring through the mountains.

It was impressive. It was stunning. It was the kind of thing I'd only dreamed of as a girl in Daybreak. I'd always imagined myself traveling, visiting places like this, soaking in the culture and the music, savoring the incredible sights.

And I did enjoy it—but this wasn't just travel. Every moment in Cruora was another moment Corinne had to gather her strength, and her troops.

"Your Highness," I asked quietly, leaning closer to Lonzo. We were seated at the two largest wooden seats on the dais. After the dancers finished, he watched, with pleased detachment, as the ballroom filled again. "When can I expect to meet this alchemist you have called?"

Lonzo sighed. He poured us both a bit more of the crisp white wine which I'd learned was a specialty of the nation. "You're quite eager, aren't you?"

"You might say so," I said. "As much as I cherish the hospitality, you must understand--"

"Queen Reyna, I do understand," he said with a huff. "Lynx is an old man, and he lives deep in the mountains. I've sent my swiftest scouts to retrieve him, but he moves slow. He should be ready to make your acquaintance before dinner tomorrow."

“Lynx,” I murmured, repeating the name. “And he is your only alchemist? Why is the craft not passed down?”

“It’s not something that can be taught,” Lonzo said. “Alchemy is an old art. It requires one be able to read the elements of nature. Some can do it, some cannot. We haven’t had an alchemist born to the eagles in many, many years.” He sighed. “Lynx has been dedicated to writing down what he knows, but once he passes, there will be no more alchemists in Cruora.”

I hummed and took another sip of my wine. “But there used to be more?”

“Many more.”

When Faerie was severed from our realm, did it sever other connections too? If we were somehow able to repair our relationship with the Fae, would some of their magic seep back into our world?

Would alchemy return to Cruora? And old earth magic to Askon?

The ripple effects of Corinne’s rule seemed to extend everywhere I looked. As I watched the eagles dance and perform and soar through the air, I tightened my grip on my wine glass.

I was going to stop her. Whatever it took, her reign of terror was going to end.

The next day, I woke early again despite the late evening. The servants delivered breakfast and stammered through a message that I was to meet the alchemist prior to dinner. After that, it was a waiting game. I sparred some, read some, had lunch at the tea shop — killing time anxiously until the morning melted into afternoon.

Then, as promised, as the servants had instructed, I met Parlan outside my quarters. Aerika gathered her things and pulled a cloak over her shoulders.

“My apologies,” Parlan said, “but Lynx has requested you meet him alone.”

Kodan stood up. “A request?”

Parlan met her gaze steadily. “Will that be a problem?”

“No,” I said, “that’s fine.” I nodded at Kodan, who narrowed her eyes in response. “It’s important that Lynx feel comfortable. I’m more than happy to meet him alone.”

“Your Highness...” Kodan said.

“But,” I continued, “you’ll allow me to bring my general as an escort, yes?”

Parlan bit his lower lip. Kodan crossed her arms over her chest and looked down her nose at him. Then, with a sigh, Parlan nodded. “That’s acceptable. But she won’t be allowed in Lynx’s accommodations.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Lead the way.”

Kodan was visibly irritated, but didn’t argue. I could hear the arguments without her having to say them. *It’s dangerous, it’s foolish, you don’t know what kind of magic he wields, you don’t know what his intentions are.* I knew

all that, but so far, this was the only lead I had.

I'd have to defend myself, if need be. Kodan would be close by. It wasn't ideal, but it'd have to be enough. I nodded at Aerika, who returned the nod and then slipped back into her chambers. As much as I'd wanted her at my side to ask questions or provide insight into Fae magic, having her comb with me was the next best thing.

I tugged my own cloak on and slid my sword into my rucksack. I didn't want the alchemist to think me a threat if I walked in with my sword on my hip.

"Where are we meeting?" I asked.

Parlan led us out of our chambers and into the halls of the Fortress. "Lynx has chosen the location," he said. "This way."

I expected to be led up, deeper into the Fortress, perhaps to the very top of the mountain. I was mentally preparing to climb endless flights of stairs, but to my surprise, when we reached the staircases on the inner side of the mountain, Parlan led us down.

Down, and down, and down. Down to the very base of Fortress, and into the valley.

"Wow," Kodan said. "Fina wasn't kidding."

The valley was filled with tall, immense trees, so tall that their vast interlocking canopies blocked most of the afternoon sun. It fell in slanting golden beams onto the path in front of us, which was tangled with roots and overgrown in places. There wasn't much happening on the ground at all. All the activity of the town was occurring over our heads.

The branches were filled with elegant, interlocking wooden structures. There were homes, tea shops, taverns, tailors, merchants, artisans of all kinds — everything was built into the strong branches of the trees. The eagles moved about in human and bird form, crossing over thick rope bridges, or climbing elegantly up carved ladders to buildings even higher in the canopy. Some swooped through the air, beating their wings as they traveled empty pathways left open for flight. The town buzzed and bustled, and the three of us garnered more than a few odd looks as we moved through the forest on foot.

We reached the gurgling river bisecting the valley. It was wide but calm, the crystal-clear mountain water sliding over the few boulders emerging from the riverbed. Next to the water, a large tree hung its branches over the water. Built into the branches was a large, plain platform, with no walls, but a roof

was built in the branches above it. Vines hung throughout the tree, wrapped in sparkling lights, twinkling even in the midday sun.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Healer’s shop,” Parlan said. He gestured at the tree trunk. Planks were nailed into the trunk, creating a ladder that led up to the shop.

Kodan nodded. She stood by the trunk, arms crossed over her chest like a sentinel. At least with how open the platform was, she’d hear if there was any ruckus.

“Thank you, Parlan.” I gripped a plank on the trunk and began to climb.

I pulled myself up onto the platform and was met with silence.

“Hello?” I stepped gingerly onto the creaking wood, half-expecting it to collapse beneath me.

It didn’t look like any healer’s shop I’d seen before. The platform was high enough that I kept my distance from the edges. In the center of the platform were a few small tables scattered about, dotted with jars and bottles and open books, each with its own stool. Near the tree trunk were a few cots, for patients I assumed, and a pile of blankets.

I stepped toward the tables. Was this a healer’s materials, or was it Lynx’s? I approached one of the small tables, then leaned down and poked at one of the jars. There was a thick liquid inside, but the glass was unlabeled. Strange. I looked around. Where was Lynx?

Then, the pile of blankets near the cots rustled. I stumbled backward. The heap groaned, and then stood up. It wasn’t just a mass of blankets — there was a scrawny, short eagle shifter standing and blinking blearily at me. His hair was pure white and stood straight up like he’d been recently struck by lightning. His face was deeply lined, but his eyes were sharp. He pulled his dark, heavy cloak tighter around his shoulders like he was about to face a winter storm. It wasn’t that cold in the valley, but still he shivered.

“My apologies,” he said. “I was just having a quick catnap before you arrived. You must be the Queen of Nightfall.”

He shuffled forward and offered his bony hand to shake. His hands were decorated in bright twine jewelry, reds and purples and blues winding around his fingers like rings and bracelets. I accepted the handshake.

“Yes,” I said, “Please, call me Reyna.”

“I am Lynx,” he said. “Thank you for making the journey here to see me. I don’t often leave my roost in the mountains. You see, I’d prefer to meet you in the Fortress, of course, but I haven’t been able to fly in many moons.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” I said.

He waved a hand. “It’s no issue. I just don’t like those stairs in the Fortress.” He grinned. “I’m sure you understand.”

“They’re a bit exhausting, it’s true.”

“Please, have a seat.” He gestured to a small circular table in the center of the platform, its surface nearly covered with glass and metal tools I couldn’t identify. He sat across from me, pulled a flask from inside his cloak, and took a sip. He offered it to me, and I considered it, but then shook my head. If drinking random liquids from a mysterious alchemists’ flask didn’t kill me, Kodan definitely would if she found out. “I must admit,” Lynx said, “I was surprised to hear I’d been summoned back to the Fortress. There hasn’t been much need for my services these days. I spend my time writing.”

“Writing?” I asked.

“For the next alchemist,” he said. “Should there ever be one. I always dreamed of having an apprentice, but I keep getting older, and no eagles show any aptitude for the old arts.” He sighed. “So, it’s nice to be summoned. But what in the soaring gods’ names does a wolf need with an old alchemist?”

At least this part I’d gotten good at. I settled into my seat and caught Lynx up on what we were delaing with: the portals, the strange, controlled Fae, the Queen and what I thought was her mission. By the end of it, Lynx looked more curious than anything else.

“So the wolves must stand against Fae magic,” he said. “Interesting, interesting. If you’ve come looking for spells, I regret to inform you there’s not much I can do to help.”

“I don’t need spells,” I said. “I need weapons.”

That piqued his interest. He leaned closer. “What do you mean?”

“Like this.” I withdrew the sheathed sword from my rucksack, then nodded at the crowded table. “Can we make space?”

Lynx placed his bony hands on the edge of the table. The air crackled with energy around his hands, and then --

I had expected him to move some of the instruments. Instead, he pulled the table, stretching it like one would stretch a bit of fabric. He created *more* of the desk.

I stared, slack-jawed, at the new wood gleaming in the center. The instruments were now on either side of us, with two hands’ width of space in between them. “I thought you said you didn’t have any spells.”

“The tables are thick,” he explained. “There’s plenty of wood. Alchemy is not about creating — it’s about rearranging. I rearranged the wood to give us more space. Now, show me this sword.”

I set the sword on the table and slid it across to Lynx, hilt-first. “This and another blade like it were the only swords that could kill the Fae we met at the borders. To defeat them, we need more weapons like this. King Lonzo suggested you might be able to recreate this enchantment.”

Lynx’s eyes widened. He leaned closer to the sword, just as Lonzo had. “Interesting.”

“What is it?”

Lynx shushed me. I bit back a grin. He was so entranced in the sword that he forgot to treat me like royalty — and honestly, it was refreshing. He reached into the pile of strange instruments without looking and withdrew one. It was a magnifier, similar to the one I’d seen King Lonzo use, but this one was smaller, and more telescopic. Lynx held it to his eye and peered at the moonstone, muttering to himself.

I said nothing as he examined it. Not even as he stood up, still muttering, and took the sword to another table, and then another, peering and tapping at the moonstone with various instruments as he did so.

Finally, he returned to the table. “It’s not simply an enchantment,” he said. “This is not regular moonstone.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s a blend. Look, I’ll show you.” He picked up the jar of odd, oozy liquid and placed it on the table next to the sword. With a deft hand he unscrewed it, retrieved a small dropper, and then withdrew a small amount of the liquid from the jar. “Watch closely.”

Deftly he placed a singular drop of the liquid onto the moonstone in the center of the hilt. It seeped into the stone, as if the sword were suddenly porous. For a moment, nothing happened, but then a bright, reddish glow emanated from the stone. From where it was inlaid, reddish streaks ran like rivulets of water down the steel of the blade. Like veins. It was oddly beautiful, and unnerving. I leaned closer. “What is it?”

“Copper,” Lynx said. “The moonstone has been advanced with copper properties, and it behaves as if the copper is smelted into the blade itself. Copper is already powerful against Fae, and the moonstone only makes it more effective. It’s an elegant solution. Who created this?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It was a gift from the Starcrest pack in

Frasia.”

“Ah, those Starcrest wolves,” Lynx said, “they’re often developing strange treats like this. Or they were, many, many moons ago.”

“Can you make more?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “I’ll have to run some tests.”

“We don’t have much time,” I said. I knew I was being overeager, but I couldn’t help it. I scooted my chair closer. “I have others, too. Perhaps it’s made differently? Would this help?” I pulled Aerika’s comb from my pocket and placed it on the table.

Lynx narrowed his eyes curiously at the comb, then pulled it close. Then, the process repeated: the close looking, the moving around of tables, the muttering. He sat back down and brandished the comb at me. “Where’s this one from?”

“A Fae,” I said.

“This has no copper in it that I can tell,” he said, “but a unique enchantment to it. I might be able to peel it apart. Yes, yes, this could help.” He ran his forefinger down the spine of the comb. “I can run some experiments and try to develop a way to recreate what’s been done to these swords. It seems within reach. We have the copper here in Cruora, deep in the mines — but we lack moonstone.”

“Starcrest has no lack,” I said immediately. “I can get moonstone. I’ll leave tomorrow. If I travel in my wolf shape, I should be at their gates within a day.”

“That’s not necessary,” Lynx said. He whistled low and long. The leaves in the top of the tree rustled, and then a medium-sized dark bird appeared at the top of the branches. It tilted its head, peering down at Lynx.

“Come here, you,” Lynx said. He gestured down at the table. “We’ve got a job for you.”

The crow cried out once, a sharp ‘caw’ sound, and then bounced to the lower branches. When it was just above the table, it peered at me, tipping its head from side to side.

“This is the Queen of Nightfall.”

“Caw?” the crow said.

“No, she’s a wolf,” Lynx said.

The bird flapped its wings.

“Don’t be such a rude host,” Lynx said. “Get down here.”

“Caw,” the crow said, then with trepidation, hopped down onto Lynx’s

shoulder. It curled its small, dark talons into the plush fabric of Lynx's robes.

I nodded politely to the bird. I wasn't sure what else I was supposed to do.

"Your Highness, this is Falcon, one of the messengers of Cruora."

"He's a falcon?" I asked.

"No, he's a crow, his name is Falcon. Here." Lynx stood up abruptly and scurried to another table. On his shoulder Falcon wobbled, then caught his balance with a flap of his wings. Lynx didn't seem to notice. He returned with a parchment and ink quill. "Write to Starcrest. Falcon will ensure it's delivered."

"Really?" I asked. "You can be sure?"

"Without a doubt," Lynx said. "The eagles have long had a strong relationship with the crows who first inhabited this territory. Falcon has worked with me for many years."

Falcon puffed out his chest and fluffed his feathers.

Well, it was a safer option than running to Starcrest myself. I quickly wrote a note to Lord Ealric's court, requesting as much moonstone for weaponry as they could spare. Lynx rolled it into a tight scroll. Falcon extended one leg for Lynx to fasten the scroll onto it.

"Directly to the Starcrest court, and nowhere else, you hear?" Lynx asked. "Make sure it gets straight to the royals."

If a bird could look long-suffering, Falcon did. The crow nodded at me once, his dark eyes gleaming with intelligence, and then took off into the sky. With a few beats of his strong wings, he disappeared.

"You don't look convinced," Lynx said with a grin. "I take it that the wolves are not familiar with bird messengers."

"I'm not, at least," I said with a small smile. "But I trust you and King Lonzo."

"Do you?" Lynx asked. He tilted his head to his side, in a manner quite similar to Falcon.

"I must," I admitted. "If I want to bring down the Fae Queen, I have to."

Lynx nodded. "Leave the sword and the comb with me. As soon as the moonstone arrives, I'll see what I can do."

I had nothing to do but wait.

Lynx had promised Falcon would be fast, but still the waiting was like an itch I couldn't dispel. I attended Lonzo's extravagant dinners and listened as he walked me through the details of his coastal mapmaking and the fisher-eagles' routines. I sharpened the remaining swords we had at the Fortress blacksmith. I had the servants do our laundry and repair the nicks in our tents. I did everything I could think of to pass the time, and still, time seemed to crawl.

On the second day with no word, Fina invited me to go into town again with her.

"What for?" I asked as I laced up my boots. I'd agreed without question, simply grateful for something to do besides twiddle my thumbs.

"Honestly?" Fina asked with a small smile, "I'm just killing time. Usually, Adora would be begging me to go shopping with her, but she's been dragging Kodan along instead."

I laughed. "Yeah, that makes sense. I can't believe Kodan puts up with it."

"I can," Fina teased. "Have you seen the way she looks at her?"

"I try not to," I said. "Gotta let them go at their own pace."

"They think they're being so sneaky." Fina picked up her cloak and wound it around her shoulders. She was dressed casually, in dark slacks and a pale shirt, with the fur-lined cloak she'd brought from Frasia. She'd picked up some of the Cruroan jewelry at some point during the trip. The brightly colored twine was wound around her fingers and wrist, nearly up to her

elbows, in the style the eagles of the Court wore them. She looked elegant, but fierce — the style suited her. She raised her eyebrows at me. “What are you staring at? Something on my shirt?”

“No, no, just thinking,” I said. “A lot has changed since we first met, hasn’t it?”

Fina’s tipped her head to the side. “That’s an understatement. But I think we’ve done pretty well for ourselves, don’t you?”

“I’m just glad you agreed to stay,” I said. “This would be a lot harder if I was here alone.”

“And I’m glad I’m not stuck in Duskmorn,” Fina said with a grin. It was a warm expression, and I knew from the sparkle in her eyes that she was just as glad as I was that we were here together. “Come on, let’s go check out the town.”

We made our way down the seemingly endless stairs, huffing and puffing by the halfway point. As we passed levels of the fortress, eagles took off and landed on the platforms. Their ease of movement definitely made me jealous.

By the time we reached the town, it was mid-morning. The sun was high and bright, and the breeze chilly enough that I pulled my own cloak a little tighter around my shoulders. The town was bustling with activity. The treehouses and platforms built into the interlocking branches of the trees felt alive as well. Fina and I linked arms as we wandered through the town on the narrow path. There were a few eagles on the ground level, but most of the townsfolk moved about the trees, hopping from branch to branch, or shifting to soar above the tangled canopy.

“Let’s get breakfast first,” Fina said with a smile. “I found a place last time I was in town.”

She led me through the trees with surprising familiarity. As we moved, the enticing smell of coffee caught my nose. I almost gasped.

“I know,” Fina said, throwing me a grin over her shoulder. “I had to do some serious investigating to find this.”

We climbed up the rope ladder into the platform built high in the branches. The space was small and crowded, but there was no ceiling, just branches and canopy above. Near the trunk of the tree, an older woman managed three different kettles, and a table nearly covered with mugs and narrow glass beakers. I watched as she scooped a heaping spoonful of coarse-ground coffee into one of the beakers, then added water from one of the kettles, and gave it a quick, expert swirl in hand. She waved Fina over like an

old friend.

“This is the only place that has coffee,” Fina said. “And it’s really good.”

The woman smiled, but said nothing. She poured the coffee over a strainer into two mugs, and then slid them across the table to us. Fina thanked her, and I paid with a few coins before Fina could fish out her own stash. Coffee in hand, we made our way to the edge of the platform, and then carefully onto the branches of the tree. Fina led me to a cradle of branches that served as a comfortable seat. We sat side-by-side.

I took a slow sip of my coffee. It was strong, and richly flavored, just bitter enough. I sighed with pleasure and leaned back against the tree trunk.

“Right?” Fina said. “I was really missing coffee. The tea they serve here is good, but...”

“I agree,” I said. “Tastes like home.”

Fina hummed her agreement. We sat in comfortable silence as we drank our coffee. I turned my gaze to the sky, looking up through the canopy of leaves, hoping to catch a glimpse of a crow streaking purposefully across the sky.

“I like this place,” Fina said. “I’d like to come back in...better circumstances.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “Really?”

She raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Cruora has been notoriously private,” I said, “but if this leads to more diplomacy between the wolves and the eagles, we’ll certainly need people to make regular visits.”

Fina hummed. “You know, that could be fun.”

Suddenly, a clash of steel-on-steel and a cacophony of shouts rang through the air. I startled at the sound, and Fina grasped my shoulder like she was afraid I might tumble off the branches.

“What is that?” I asked. “What’s happening?”

Had a portal opened in Cruora? Had the Fae arrived, swords raised, ready to slaughter the townspeople? Or were there dragons, turned mindless like the Fae soldiers had been, ready to burn the forest to the ground with their fiery breath?

“Relax,” Fina said. “It’s a training facility.”

I exhaled and slumped back. The adrenaline drained out of me just as rapidly as it had arrived. I hadn’t realized how on edge I had been — the waiting around was killing me. I tightened my grip on my mug of coffee,

savoring the warmth, though I found I wasn't interested in drinking it anymore. My heart was beating fast enough already.

"Come on," Fina said. "Let's go check it out. It'll make you feel better."

"How do you know about all of this?" I asked. We deposited our mugs and climbed back down the ladder.

"Because I had the same reaction when I heard it," Fina said. She hopped off the ladder and her feet hit the earth softly. "Had to go find out what was happening to make myself feel better. They really don't mess around with the training here. But I think this will surprise you."

She led me further away from the center of everything through tall, close-knit trees. The noise of town quieted as the shouts grew louder, and there was more clanging of steel on steel. Then, suddenly, the forest opened into a square clearing. It was cut into the area by hand, but carefully maintained and separated from everything with a low wooden fence.

In the center, eagles were training in battle. I'd seen some sparring in the castle, but this was different. A woman stood in the center of the clearing with her sword drawn. She was tall and muscular, with her dark hair cropped short, and she cast her severe gaze over the handful of soldiers in front of her.

These were no regular fighters, though. The eagles in front of her, brandishing their own swords, ranged in age from four to likely no more than thirteen. As we approached, the youngest one dropped her small sword and waved her hands over her head.

"Who's that?" she asked the woman.

The woman looked up. Her eyes widened in surprise, then she swept into a bow. "Queen Reyna," she said. "I — we weren't expecting guests."

"Sorry, Maribel," Fina said. "I heard the training start and thought Reyna might be interested in observing."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said with a nod. The little girl was still waving her hands over her head. I waved back, and she squeaked and ran to hide behind Maribel's legs. "Do you mind if we watch?"

"I'm not very good," the little girl said.

Maribel laughed. She nudged to the girl's shoulder, encouraging her to hurry back to her place in the lineup, but the girl didn't budge. "You're doing just fine. Pretend they aren't there."

"But Mom!" the little girl cried.

"Go on." Maribel nudged her again.

With a dramatic sigh, the girl stomped back into the clearing and picked

up her small sword. “All right,” Maribel said. “Pair up, and let’s go through formations again.”

With a few groans, the kids paired up, automatically choosing a partner close to their height. They faced each other and raised their swords. Maribel stood near the fence. “One!” she called out.

“One!” The kids — the soldiers — repeated as their swords clashed together. All moved into the same position: one weapon raised, another in a perpendicular parry. Even the youngest girl moved into the pose with ferocity, her eyes focused on the six-year-old boy across from her. Her shyness disappeared under the shouted commands.

Maribel called out eight different formations, and the kids worked in tandem, moving through each pose with ease and focus. Their feet dug into the dirt of the clearing, holding their stances as the swords pressed against their opponents’ blade.

“Torok, lead another run-through,” Maribel said upon completion.

The tallest boy nodded. “Reset!” he called to the group.

With a few groans, the kids switched partners, then held their swords up toward each other. The boy glanced around at the other kids, then called out, “One!” The kids repeated it, and the whole process began again.

Maribel stepped away from the group and approached Fina and me where we were still leaning against the fence, watching carefully.

“This is just a standard practice,” Maribel explained as she watched the kids.

“Your daughter?” I asked, nodding toward the youngest, who was sweating and baring her teeth as she held her sword.

“She is,” Maribel said. “And Torok’s my son. There’s a couple of my nephews in the mix, and the rest are friends.” She smiled at the group, a mix of pride and adoration. “They’re doing quite well. A little extra focused with spectators here.”

“What are you training for?” I asked.

She smiled. “I don’t know if any of them will end up as soldiers, but we like for all young eagles to have a solid foundation of training. So we start them young.”

“Wow,” I murmured. “It’s impressive.” I knew Nightfall also started soldiers young — but not this young, and not *all* of them.

“I’m not a soldier myself,” Maribel said, “so don’t judge their form too much.”

“You’re not?” I asked. “You fooled me, then. I see nothing to critique.”

“You’re too kind,” Maribel said with a laugh. “No, no, I’m a builder. But we all share duties among each other. I’m on shift to train the kids this week.”

“Mom!” the girl whined. “We’re done! Can we go now?”

“Not quite yet,” Maribel said. “We have two more drills.”

The girl groaned.

“That’s my signal,” Maribel said. “You’re welcome to stay and watch as long as you’d like.”

After watching a few more sparring sessions between the kids, I nodded to Fina. Midday was ambling toward afternoon, and I wanted to get back to the castle to check and see if there had been any word from Starcrest. We called our thanks to Maribel and the kids, and then began to make our way back through town toward the fortress.

“Pretty impressive, don’t you think?” Fina asked.

I nodded. I struggled to put what I was feeling into words.

Was that something I could do? Be a mother, a Queen, a fighter, a teacher? All at once? Maribel wasn’t a Queen, of course, but she had a job of her own, and yet still had her daughter, and all the other children she taught to fight, despite the fact that she wasn’t a soldier. She shared the duties.

Fina glanced over at me, her expression thoughtful. Though I said nothing, something in her eyes told me she knew what I was thinking about. “Seems like a nice balance,” she said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. We fell into companionable silence as we made our way to the fortress.

Maybe it wasn’t as black and white as I thought. Maybe there was a way I could be a Queen, and a mother, an equal leader, and still myself. The thought still intimidated me, but the image of that little girl hiding behind Maribel, only to rush with joy towards a weapon, filled me with something like anticipation.

“Hurry up,” Fina said. “We’ve got a lot of stairs to climb before dinner.”

Right. The stairs. That was the part of Cruora I wasn’t going to miss. I’d always wanted to travel — I’d spent nearly my entire life in Daybreak dreaming of it — but now that I was Queen, I longed to return home just as much.

On the third day of waiting, Kodan went with me to the stadium for a few rounds of sparring.

I rushed forward, sword drawn. It was heavier than the lighter rapier I'd gotten used to, but it still felt good in my hand, the weight creating a pleasant burn in my muscles. I brought it down in a wide arc, which Kodan parried easily. She shifted her weight and turned sharply on the ball of her foot, then whacked me right in the small of my back with the flat of her blade.

"Stop taking your frustrations out on me," Kodan said. "Focus."

I groaned, then pinched the bridge of my nose. When I turned to face Kodan again, she was holding her own sword loosely in her hand, the sharper end pointed down. "You okay?" she asked, concern pinching her expression.

"The waiting game is killing me," I said. "What if the Fae are already in Nightfall?"

"We would've heard word if that were the case," Kodan said.

"Would we? This Fortress is so isolated. How would word even get here?"

"I'm one of a few spies," Kodan said. "Someone would get here. Elias would find a way."

"I know," I admitted. "I know. I know you're right. But there's still part of me that worries..."

"The worrying will drive you mad, Your Highness," Kodan said.

"I wish Lonzo would send a few eagles to Efra. Just to see how things are. Or at least a crow."

Kodan stepped closer and lowered her voice. "We're lucky he's offered to help us at all. I get the sense our presence is tolerated more than welcomed. I know he told you there was no chance he'd send soldiers to our aid."

"I know. I can only hope the weaponry will be enough." I tightened my grip on my sword. "Shall we go again?"

"Your Highness!" a voice called. "General Kodan!"

Parlan rushed through the doors to the stadium, sweaty and wild-eyed. And behind him was --

"Baltser!" Kodan said. She sheathed her sword and rushed forward to meet them.

"He's just arrived," Parlan said, "with information, he says. He insisted on seeing you immediately. He's a member of your party?"

The young soldier looked exhausted. His travel clothes were stained with dirt and blood, and his dark hair clung to his temples with sweat. His knees quivered as Kodan approached, and she gripped his shoulder firmly. "What happened?"

I hurried to her side. “Are you all right? Please, we can show you to your quarters --”

“Did you track them?” Kodan asked. “The bandits?”

“There’s Fae,” Baltser said.

“More?” I asked.

“I followed the bandit to their camp. There were more people present, waiting to hear back from the one I’d followed. I snuck close, trying to hear their conversation, when there was this strange sensation in this air. Like an oncoming storm. I saw a portal open, and a Fae stepped through it. A tall man, in silver armor.”

“Just one?” I asked.

Baltser nodded. “He was alone. The wolves in the camp seemed to be expecting him. He questioned the bandit who had been in the pass, and when the bandit described the party, the Fae became enraged.”

“He knew it was us,” Kodan said.

Baltser nodded. “Then, more Fae came through the portal, but these were...different.”

“Did they seem dazed? Mindless?” I asked.

“Exactly,” Baltser said. His eyes were wide and terrified. “You saw them, too?”

“And they wouldn’t die?” Kodan asked.

He shivered. “No matter how the bandits struck them, the Fae just kept getting back up. All the wolves were killed like that. I ran here, in my shifted shape, without stopping.”

I took Baltser’s hand in mine and squeezed. “You’re safe now,” I said. “You’ve done well.”

Then Baltser shook like he might really collapse where he stood, whether with relief or exhaustion, I didn’t know.

“Thank you, Parlan,” I said. “We’ll take him to the soldier’s quarters.”

Parlan bowed slightly. He looked nearly as shaken as Baltser did. Perhaps the reality of the Fae threat was beginning to descend on Cruora, too.

Kodan and I escorted Baltser through the halls of the Fortress, to the soldier’s quarters where Kannis gasped in shock and relief. He thanked us profusely before ushering Baltser inside their small, homey quarters.

“I need to discuss this with Lonzo,” I said as we strode back toward the stadium. “The Fae know we’re in Cruora, and they’re angry about it. The border attack was carefully planned — not random. I doubt we would’ve

survived if not for our moonstone swords.”

“They’ll be looking for us when we leave,” Kodan agreed. “We need to be prepared.”

“How is that even possible?” I asked. Anxiety climbed into my throat. “Who knows how many Fae will be waiting for us when we leave. Or if they’ve already made their way to Duskmorn, or Efra. What if we’re too late?”

“Reyna.” Kodan stopped. We stood in the hallway leading to the stadium. It was dim and quiet. Kodan placed both hands on my shoulders. “Thinking that way does us no good. Baltser told us what we already knew — that the Fae are looking for us. That the Fae seek to take over. All we can do now is continue our preparations, and return to Nightfall with the weapons that will help us defeat them.”

I exhaled slowly. “But what if it’s not enough?”

“Then we die a glorious death on the battlefield,” Kodan said with a sharp, wolfish grin. “We fight alongside our King, and we take as many Fae with us as we can.”

Strangely, Kodan’s ferocious words did settle my nerves some. The thought of being back in Nightfall, to draw my sword with my husband at my side, filled me with anticipation. I needed to be with my court, my people, my King. Being his equal in leadership was more than having him trust me as a diplomat. I realized now that was just one role I had to play. Just as important was the role I played at home, at his side. I wanted to be a part of my Court. I wanted the wolves of Nightfall to see me, and know me, and know that I was a leader they could rely on.

“I’ll go speak with Lonzo,” I said. “I’ll see if there’s been word from Starcrest.”

I made my way through the maze of the Fortress, back up the stairs to the throne room, where there was no Lonzo to be found neither in the room nor in his study. Another stammering servant suggested he might be in the owl roost, which made me blink in confusion, then sigh in resignation when she directed me to a spiral staircase at the end of the hall.

After what felt like a century of climbing, my legs burning and my knees aching, I made it to the top of the spiral stairs. It opened to a vast, open space — was this the top of the Fortress itself? I couldn’t tell, as the walls of the space were the mountain itself, and above there was only blue sky.

“Ah, Queen Reyna,” Lonzo said. “You’ve found my favorite place in the

Fortress, I see.”

The roost was full of wooden structures, built to look like trees, complete with branches, small treehouses, and netting stitched between them. Perched among the structures were dozens of snowy white owls. Lonzo had one on his forearm. It was an immense bird, nearly a third of the size of Lonzo himself, with thick white feathers and enormous yellow eyes. The bird blinked at me. Lonzo placed two fingers at the top of its head and stroked it like a cat, and the owl’s eyes went half-lidded.

I had no energy for pleasantries. “One of my scouts has just returned from the balds,” I said. “He tracked a group of bandits that attacked us, only to find them slaughtered by the Fae.”

“Mm,” Lonzo said. “I’ve heard word of this as well.”

“What?” I asked, shocked. “What do you mean?”

“Since we received word of your visit, I’ve ordered more of our own patrols,” Lonzo said. “I’ve been mapping the appearance of portals, but my scouts have only seen them on the Frasian side of the border.”

“That doesn’t make you nervous?” I asked. “It’s only a matter of time before Corinne encroaches on Cruora.”

“There is no need to cause alarm within my nation,” Lonzo said. His voice was suddenly cool and sharp. He lifted his arm, and the snow owl took off from its perch. With a few heavy beats of its wings, it soared upward and into the branches of the roost. “I would not be helping you if I did not see a threat myself. But yes, my scouts mentioned that the Fae had been making contact with bandits. I hadn’t heard of their deaths. But it makes sense. If the Fae were unhappy with the lack of progress made, perhaps they would make an example of the wolves.”

“Every moment we wait makes the journey back more treacherous,” I said. “Corinne will be seeking us out. Have you heard word from Starcrest about the moonstone? Has Lynx said anything about his alchemical experiments?”

Lonzo whistled, and another snowy owl swooped down and landed clumsily on his arm. “These are beautiful birds, aren’t they?”

Frustration built like an itch under my skin. But I remembered what Elias had said — diplomacy. The pieces were set in motion. I took a slow, deep breath. “They are,” I agreed. “I had expected more crows.”

Lonzo chuckled. “Lynx is the only one that can manage those crows,” he said. “He lives with them up in his roost. They’re unruly, sometimes, and it

takes a deft hand to train them. Simply because a crow cannot be ordered to do anything. The crow must choose the task of its own volition.”

“But not owls?”

Lonzo scratched the owl’s head, and just as the other had, its eyes fell half-closed. “I’ve kept owls since I was a boy. Don’t tell them I said this, but,” – he lowered his voice - “they’re quite dull. Terrible messengers. But the feathers are luxurious. The bedding in your chambers is filled with owl feathers.”

“Is that not laborious?” I asked, gazing up at the owls. “It must take years to gather enough feathers.”

“Certainly it is,” Lonzo said, “but it’s how we do things here in Cruora. We live slowly, your Highness. We take our time. We’ve kept each other safe and happy for centuries, even as the world has changed around us. Our rituals may seem odd to you, but they are the foundation of what it means to be an eagle.”

“I understand your priority is keeping your people safe,” I said, “just the same as mine.”

“It’s a weighty responsibility, is it not?” Lonzo asked with a tilt of his head. “Striking out with just a handful of soldiers and a rumor. Hoping to find the thing that will turn the tide in your favor. You are brave to do so.”

“Only because our King stays in Efra to protect and lead while I am gone,” I said.

“I doubt that’s the only reason.” He grinned. “You have an eagerness about you, Reyna. A youthful energy, a quickness. I haven’t been privy to such energy in many years. I find it invigorating.”

“I hope we can continue our diplomatic relationship,” I said. But again the irritation was building inside me. Yes, I wanted to work with the eagles, but more than that, I wanted him to stop rambling and give me the information I needed. “Thank you for your time. I should go into town and give Lynx a visit--”

“He is no longer in the healers’ shop,” Lonzo said.

“Then where is he?” I asked. Had he left? Given up? Gone back to his roost and his crows?

“In the smithery,” he said. “Crafting weapons.”

“With moonstone? The moonstone arrived?”

“Yes, late yesterday evening,” Lonzo said. “The delivery was made and the wolves left just as briskly.”

“Why wasn’t I informed? Why didn’t they stay?” I was irritated to be kept in the dark, but the irritation was easily overwhelmed by my excitement. The moonstone had arrived. The weapons were being made.

“The Starcrest wolves also know the dangers of traversing the balds,” Lonzo said. “They chose to travel in the dark and return swiftly to their city, and send their best to the Queen. Lynx has been working since the arrival of the moonstone. He requested a day to work prior to alerting you. He wanted to ensure the process was effective.”

“But it is?” I asked. “Is it working?”

“It is,” Lonzo said. “He’s enhanced a few weapons. He intends to enhance many more.”

Relief crashed over me like an ocean wave. I pressed my fingers to my browbone, then my temples. The feeling rolling through me was so immense, it made tears prickle hot behind my eyes.

The alchemy was working. We’d have more weapons.

We were one step further from doom.

“I know you are quite eager to return to Frasia,” Lonzo continued, “and I suggest you prepare to do so. The eagles would be honored to host you for as long as you would stay, but from our conversations--”

“Yes, yes,” I nodded. “Thank you. Yes. I’ll prepare my party for travel. You’re correct, we need to return to Efra. As for the weapons--”

“Lynx will travel with you,” Lonzo said.

“Truly?” I asked, stunned.

“He requested as much.” Lonzo sent the owl flying back up into the roost, then strode closer to me. “You have impressed our alchemist. Rarely does he leave his roost at all. It is with Lynx’s advice in mind that I have decided to send some of our finest soldiers with you as well.”

“Your Highness.” I bowed my head. “We would be honored to travel to Frasia with the eagles.”

“My finest general, General Bozhin, will be leading his chosen soldiers,” Lonzo said. “I’ve had Lynx prepare weaponry for them. I would like for this threat to be eliminated before it reaches Cruora.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t thank me,” Lonzo said. “It was Lynx and Bozhin who argued to join you. Were I the only one making decisions, I would give you the weapons and have you be on your way. But Bozhin believes the eagles should stand with the wolves.” He sighed. “I know I am growing long in the

beak. I am no longer the spry young leader I once was. Bozhin has trained his soldiers well, and he requested to join your party. Personally, I think he might just hunger for a bit of adventure.”

“You could say the same about me,” I said.

“And I have,” Lonzo said, but there was no judgment in his voice. Just mild amusement. “You remind me of me when I was younger. Regardless, Lynx supports the decision, and if my last alchemist is with you, I want him defended well. And so my soldiers will join you.”

“Myself and my wolves are endlessly grateful for your support,” I said.

“Prepare your party for departure,” he said, “and we will do the same.”

I hurried back down the spiral staircase, leaving the owls and King Lonzo behind me.

Early the next morning, Parlan led me down the winding stairs of the fortress, on the inner side of the mountain, deep into its depths.

“You and Aerika are the first two outsiders to see this part of the palace,” Parlan said as the halls grew narrower and the lighting dimmer. “The King has granted you a great privilege.”

“And I’m honored,” I said. “As well as grateful.”

He led me through the winding, narrow hallways, deeper into the mountain. Soon the warmth of the air pulled beads of sweat from my skin, and it grew still and stuffy. Great clanking noises grew louder and louder as we approached the blacksmiths’ shop. The entrance was a wide, open doorway, lined in carved runes in a language unknown to me. I touched the carving, knowing without asking that it was ancient. This must have been one of the oldest parts of the fortress.

“Queen Reyna!” Lynx called from inside. “I’ve been expecting you.”

With a bow, Parlan motioned for me to enter the cave.

The smithy was much larger than I expected: vast and wide, with soaring ceilings, and chimneys cut through the rock to free the smoke from the work. Despite the ventilation it was still raging hot from the large fires - eagles worked the bellows and pulled swords from the heat to better mold them. Lynx waved me over to the table where he and Aerika had a spread of weaponry before them. Aerika looked exhausted, but she was smiling. Her hair was pulled up and off her face, and she was dressed in a loose, sweat-stained shirt, with soot marking her arms and caught under her fingernails. Lynx was a bit wild-eyed, and his hair was crusty with dried sweat, but he

looked pleased to see me.

“We’re wrapping up getting the rest of the materials we need,” Lynx said. He nodded toward the eagles still working on swords, daggers, spears, and other weapons. “But here’s an idea of what we have to arm the soldiers.”

“This is incredible,” I said, awed. The long table was covered in weapons. They were simple: short and long swords, daggers, curved blades, narrow blades, even fiercely tipped arrows. None were made with the ornate details that my sword had, but were functional and plain.

Each had moonstone embedded in it somewhere, be it the hilt or the base of the blade. Standing close to the weapons I could feel the power thrumming through the air. Aerika grinned at me. “How’d we do?”

“You worked on these, too?” I asked.

Aerika nodded. “Lynx did most of it--”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Lynx interjected.

“—but I’m learning a lot about the process.” Aerika picked up one of the smaller daggers and twirled it in her hand. “Each should have a similar power as the ones Lord Ealric gave you, though. They should be able to hurt the Fae.”

Lynx and Aerika walked me through all the weapons they had prepared: the sizes, numbers, and even the strength of the alchemical reactions. As they did, I developed the plan in my mind: how many arrows we had for the archers, how many daggers we had for the frontline swordsmen, how many spears for the eagles, how many swords for everyone. As we discussed, the eagles in the smithy began to pack up the bulk of the weapons to be brought out of the smithy and to the waiting carriages for packing and distribution.

Aerika spoke with a new confidence, enough that Lynx stepped back and let her take the lead on the discussions. It was like seeing her at home in the tailor shop, but with a new determined edge in her gaze, and a more serious tone to her voice.

It suited her. Perhaps when we made it back to Frasia, she’d do just as well in the smithy there, rather than just the tailor shop.

By midday, I was prepared to leave Cruora. It had been a flurry of activity to get us ready, with all the wolves working as well as the eagle staff. We prepared our carriages, and the eagles had wagons as well, with heavy canvas tents, weaponry, and provisions. Lynx had his own wagon, pulled by a crotchety old mule, which he insisted would easily outrun the horses that pulled us. By this point, I’d learned not to doubt him. Lynx would be crafting

weaponry in his wagon as we traveled.

I stood at the base of the mountain, at the carriages, with Kodan at my side. Aerika, Fina, and Adora were finishing up packing the luggage, while Kannis and Baltser, our soldiers, were receiving swords from Lynx.

“You think there will be enough?” I asked Kodan.

She watched carefully as Kannis, Baltser, Lynx, and some of the eagle servants loaded the swords into one of our wagons. She pressed her lips together. “It has to be. There’s no point in wishing we had more — what we have is what we have. I’ve worked with less.” She squeezed my shoulder. “We’re in much better shape than we were before coming to Cruora, that much is for sure.”

“I just hope this works,” I said. “If the alchemy doesn’t work the way we think it does, and then our weapons don’t—”

“Then we’ll figure out something else,” Kodan said. Her stern voice cut off my nervous spiral before it could even begin. “A wolf of Nightfall can always think on her feet.” Then she smiled at me. “You’ve proven that much.”

Activity swarmed around us. I had my own sword back, and I gripped its hilt tightly. Its presence reassured me. We may not be able to avoid notice with this many people traveling, but we could at least hold our own against the Fae.

An eagle’s cry broke through the activity. Overhead, an immense eagle shifter spread his wings, then swooped from the upper levels of the Fortress and glided elegantly through the air. Then he folded his wings close to his body and dive-bombed down, fast enough that I took a step back in sudden concern that he might plummet directly into the ground.

At the last possible moment, the eagle opened his wings and caught himself, then landed gracefully on his talons in front of me. He was easily the tallest eagle shifter I’d seen, towering over me with dark, gleaming eyes and his beak as sharp as a sword. He was dressed in thick, dark leather armor, which blended in with his dark brown feathers. With a crackle of magic, he shifted back into his human form. He was still imposing as a human, tall, broad-shouldered, and armored with sword at his hip. His brown hair was cropped close to his skull, and sweat dotted his olive skin from the exertion of the flight. “Your Highness.” He bowed. “I’m General Bozhin. Myself and a few of my finest soldiers will be joining you.”

I returned his bow. “We’re lucky to have you, General.”

Behind Bozhin approached two other shifters. Parlan we knew, and his brother, Zellan. A handful of others packed their wagons behind them.

“We intend to get you to Efra safely,” Bozhin said, “and we hope this will be the beginning of a fruitful relationship between the wolves and the eagles.”

“I hope so as well,” I said. I’d come here simply for solutions — for aid — but if it led to a strong diplomatic bond, as well, then the Nightfall Court would never doubt me again. “This is General Kodan of Nightfall.”

Kodan stepped forward and shook Bozhin’s hands. They met each others’ gazes steadily. “Quite a display there,” Kodan said. “Ever misjudge the landing?”

“Dozens of times,” Bozhin said. “The theatrics are an important part of military training.”

Kodan broke into a surprised laugh. “Us wolves are similar. I’ll show you to our soldiers as well. This way.”

Adora peaked her head out of the carriage. “That seemed to go all right.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “As long as they defer to Kodan, things should be peaceable.”

“You think they will?”

I pressed my lips together. It was hard to say. Lonzo himself had been surprised to see Kodan was a general, but Bozhin had seemed unfazed. Maybe things were changing in Cruora, as well. Perhaps the eagles needed to get out of Cruora as much as we needed them to join us. “Only time will tell.”

We left Cruora in late afternoon with nothing more than a bow from Lonzo. The pounding of the eagles’ drums sounded our departure. The hours passed as we rumbled uneventfully over the balds. I rode in a carriage with Kodan and Aerika, and no conversation passed between us. We rode in anxious silence, peeking out the windows at the balds. It was only a matter of time.

As the evening melted to night, the carriages rumbled to a stop.

“We’re stopping?” I asked Kodan. “What for?”

I opened the door and stepped out. Bozhin was already out of his carriage and setting up a tent near the edge of the forest.

“General!” I said. “We’re not riding through the night?”

Bozhin hammered the final stake of the canvas tent into the ground. “No,” he said. “The wagons are too large to navigate the balds at night. I

don't want to lose a wheel running into a boulder, that will add days to our travel schedule."

"I don't think that's wise. We should move as quickly as possible." I glanced up toward the darkening sky. "Traveling under cover of night will do better to prevent us from running into bandits, or worse, the Fae themselves."

Bozhin narrowed his eyes. "We've only heard one account of the Fae at the borders. Yours." With the stakes on the tent planted into the ground, he stood up and surveyed his work with a pleased nod. "I'm not worried about managing a handful of wolf-bandits. Travel will barely take two days. Please, get some rest, and we'll be back on the road at dawn tomorrow."

Kodan, Fina, and I pitched our tent. These weren't the small canvas tents we'd arrived with. These were real war party tents, provided by the eagles, with space for bedrolls, cots, and a small fire pit. There was space for all the wolves, sans the soldiers, to share one tent. It was cozy, and comfortable, and all I could think about was how easy we would be to spot.

"This is foolish," I muttered to Kodan over our dinner of stew and bread.

"I agree," Kodan said, "but the general won't listen."

"I hope he's right."

Kodan said nothing. At her side, Aerika took tiny sips of her stew. By the flickering light of the small fire, she looked terrified. We went to sleep with murmured good nights, and it was only the exhaustion of the day that allowed my eyes to fall closed.

A crack of thunder awoke me.
Thunder.

Thick, dense magic rolling over my skin like a sucking quicksand.
Fog inching in through the seams of the tent.
Then, a blood-curdling scream.

I leaped from my bedroll before I realized I was moving. I grabbed my sword and flung open the flaps of the tent, and raced outside, barefoot and dressed in just trousers and a plain shirt, my hair in a loose plait.

Fae had descended on the camp. I stood briefly frozen in horror at the sight. At least a dozen Fae swarmed like locusts, weapons drawn and eyes burning red. They moved like the Fae we'd seen at the border, fearless and unstoppable, like sentinels. Their sharp teeth gnashed - they brandished their swords. Behind the dazed, drooling Fae stood three clear-eyed soldiers. Fae magic crackled through the air, and a jagged portal remained behind them, as if the atmosphere had been slashed open.

The Fae looked hungry. As one they lurched forward.
"Generals!" I cried. "With me!"

Bozhin broke through the fog with a war cry ferocious enough to chill my blood. He lunged toward the Fae with his sword drawn, and in the midst of the motion, he shifted. But not into his eagle form.

Magic vibrated through the air as Bozhin shifted into an enormous gryphon. The force of the energy was enough to catch the Fae's attention, allowing me to strike one down with my blade as he turned his gaze toward the beast. The gryphon was immense, nearly double the size of a horse, with

the head, front talons, and enormous wings of an eagle, but the back legs and body of a muscular lion. I'd seen drawings of gryphons in my books when I was a girl, but I'd thought they only existed in myth. Bozhin screeched an ear-splitting cry as he barreled into the Fae.

The Fae roared, and magic danced like sparks down his arms. He attempted to take control of Bozhin, but it was futile. The spell did nothing, and Bozhin rolled with the attack like water off a duck's back. Bozhin pinned the Fae to the ground. He shrieked and struggled under the immense talon, but it was futile. Bozhin gripped the Fae's head in his beak and ripped it off. Then, with a roar, he whirled around to face the remaining Fae. He lifted up onto his clawed back legs and flapped his enormous wings. The fog dispelled under the force of the wind.

The battlefield exploded into action. Bozhin grappled a Fae in his talons and chucked him aside - the man's body crashed into a tree trunk, and he fell, motionless. I stalked forward, sword drawn, until I was at Bozhin's side. Kodan was at his other side. We stared down the Fae. Then, Kodan shouted and lunged forward, burying her blade in a Fae's gut.

Chaos descended. I lost track of where anyone else was. The sound of battle surrounded me as eagles and wolves charged the Fae. All I could think about was the motion of my blade cutting through the air, the grass under my feet, the exhalations of my breath as I parried the blows. I struck down one Fae, then another. Distantly I heard the sounds of Fina and Adora shouting, the clatter of steel on steel, groans of pain and the thump of blades hitting flesh.

An eagle soldier — Parlan's brother, Zellan — shifted into eagle form, then drew his moonstone-inlaid sword. He charged at a clear-eyed Fae leader. The leader grinned and extended his hand. Magic crackled through the air, and then Zellan stumbled forward and dropped his sword. When he straightened up, his gaze was clouded over. The Fae gestured with his hand, and Zellan turned and faced the rest of us, but his gaze was unseeing. Sword abandoned, he lunged forward, razor-sharp beak open as he charged toward me.

I barely dodged, his great wing nearly striking me as he passed and knocked me backward. I scrambled backward just in time to avoid the sharp end of his beak before he slammed it into the dirt where my legs had been moments before. I swore, then scrambled to my feet, sword still drawn.

Zellan reeled up and screeched out a war cry. The sound chilled me to the

bone. I gripped my weapon. “Fight it!” I shouted. “Soldier, fight it!”

His gaze fixed on me, briefly, and his eyes cleared — but only for a moment.

Bozhin slammed into Zellan and pinned him to the ground.

“Reyna!” Kodan shouted. “Which one!”

“There!” I pointed at the Fae who had controlled Zellan.

Kodan raced toward him, sword drawn, and brought the blade down in a powerful arc. The Fae whirled to face her, parrying the attack — and it took up his attention. Zellan sucked in a huge gasp of air as he shifted back into his human form. “I’m sorry,” he gasped, “I don’t know--”

Bozhin helped him to his feet, then turned back to the battle. There was no time for apologizes or explanations.

“Tie him up!” Bozhin called to Kodan. “Kill the rest!”

I scrambled to my feet. A dazed Fae lurched toward me, and I didn’t hesitate to strike. My blade sank into his neck like a fang. I withdrew it, and the Fae gurgled and slumped to the ground, blood rushing from the wound and staining the grass below his prone body.

The battle went on for what felt like a century, but I knew it was only a few minutes. Soon, the fog was nearly cleared. Adrenaline still galloped through my bloodstream, and my grip was tight on the hilt of my sword.

I was unharmed. The Fae had retreated, or been killed. I wasn’t sure which, but I hadn’t been able to see how many there were. Bodies littered the grass around me, and the stench of blood and death was thick in the air. We’d lost a few eagles, and a wolf.

Baltser. His body had collapsed in the grass, eyes open in fear, with an immense gash across his chest, nearly deep enough to reveal his still heart. I knelt at his side. He looked young — young, and scared, and still exhausted from the work he’d already done. For me. For Frasia. I gently closed his eyes. Despair tightened my chest as nausea roiled my gut.

Corinne would pay for this.

“What was that?” Bozhin asked. Blood stained his armor, but he was unharmed. “What did that Fae do to Zellan? How did you know what that was?”

I gestured for Bozhin to step into my tent, which was miraculously still standing, while Kodan guided the others in tending wounds and cleaning up the battlefield. I shoved down whatever anger and despair I felt — it wasn’t easy to lose another wolf. But protecting the ones who survived was more

important. We sat down at the small table in the center of the tent.

“You know something about this,” Bozhin said, eyes narrowing. “What is it? Why didn’t you warn us?”

“I didn’t know it was something all Fae could do,” I said. “But yes. I’ve seen it before.”

“Where?”

“The Fae Queen was able to force me into my wolf shape,” I said, “and keep me there. She wasn’t able to control my behavior like that...yet I believe it’s similar.”

Bozhin sat back in the small chair and rubbed his chin. “I felt the Fae try some kind of spell when I was in my war form, but it didn’t seem to work.”

“Your gryphon,” I said. “Is it different than the other eagle shifters’ forms?”

Bozhin met my gaze, but said nothing. If there was different, more powerful magic involved in his war form — which I expected there was — he wasn’t going to tell me. No matter, though. Right now, the details weren’t important to me.

“It appears to only work when we’re shifted,” I continued. “We’ll need to fight in our human forms.”

Bozhin nodded. “I’ll discuss it with my soldiers. We’ll need more swords. Or...”

I leaned closer. “Or what?”

“I’ll discuss with Lynx,” he said. He stood up. “Thank you.”

I nodded. There was more I wanted to ask him — about his war form, about what he wanted from Lynx, about our plans — but I tamped down my curiosity. Bozhin already didn’t trust me, that much was clear. Especially since he thought I had hidden my knowledge of what the Fae could do and put eagle lives at risk.

I followed him out of the tent. Lynx had emerged from his wagon, and was surveying the damage with a deep furrow in his brow. At his side, Aerika stood wringing her hands.

Kodan approached, sweaty and bloodied, with dirt on her hands. “We need to keep moving before the Fae come back with reinforcements.”

A roar sounded overhead.

High above, a group of dragons beat their wings aggressively, picking up speed as they soared across the sky. They didn’t spare us a glance down as they flew straight and fast, their dark bodies barely visible against the night

sky. It was unlike the flights I'd seen in Shianga, which were always dramatic and beautiful, with easy loops and turns. The dragons always flew like they savored the act itself. This was different. It was just travel.

“They're headed east,” Kodan murmured. “They're headed to Efra.”

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Dawn crept closer as the soldiers packed up the camp and dealt with the bodies littering the grass. I dragged another Fae body to the pyre, then paused and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

Suddenly, a shriek ripped through the quiet air.

The wolves looked up in shock. The eagles, though, barely reacted to the noise, continuing their work of breaking down the camp.

“What was that?” I asked.

Parlan nodded toward the forest. “Information gathering.”

Then I realized both Bozhin and Kodan were missing. Another groan of pain sounded from the trees.

I left the camp behind and rushed into the forest. I followed the sounds to a small clearing, where Bozhin and Kodan stood side by side. In front of them, a Fae was tied to a large tree. His sharp teeth were bared, and he thrashed against the ropes holding him in place.

“Tell me what you know,” Bozhin snarled. He pushed the tip of a small knife into the Fae’s side. Dark blood spilled from the wound. “What are the Fae planning?”

The Fae laughed sharply, then bared his teeth at Bozhin. “It’s too late, shifter.”

Bozhin withdrew the knife, only to crack the back of his hand across the Fae’s face. “I’ll only ask once more,” he hissed. “What are the Fae planning?”

Blood spilled from the Fae’s lips, which were still curved into a smile. He rolled his head back, laughing. “You think I’ll give you anything?” he asked.

“You think a simple shifter can break a soldier? You think your little weapons hurt? Your little show of teeth?” He cackled again. “You amuse me. Each moment you waste here is one less moment you’ll have in this Realm. Soon it will be soaked in shifter blood.”

Crack. Bozhin struck him again. Blood sprayed from the Fae’s mouth.

“General!” I called. Disgust burned in my throat. “What are you doing?”

“Your Highness,” Bozhin said coolly. “This is work for your generals. Please, return to the camp.”

“Little wolf Reyna,” The Fae cooed. “What a treat. My Queen will be so pleased to know we’ve met.” His stare burned red, and he grinned in a sharp-toothed, bloody smile.

“You won’t be seeing your Queen again,” Bozhin said. He kicked the Fae in the ribs, right where the point of his blade had been. The Fae groaned in pain and his grin twisted into a grimace.

“General Bozhin, this is a waste of time,” I said. “You won’t get any information out of him.”

“See?” The Fae said. “The Queen is right yet again. Why don’t you listen, little bird?”

“We shouldn’t stoop to their level,” I continued, ignoring the Fae and the way his dark gaze made my wolf’s hackles lift up. “End this with mercy, and let’s get to Efra.”

“Ooh, yes, have mercy,” the Fae cooed.

“To their level?” Bozhin asked. He turned to face me. Rage creased his brow and sharpened his gaze. “Why are you so concerned with this Fae, your Highness? Do you not want to know what he knows? Do you not want the Queen’s plans revealed?”

“General Bozhin,” Kodan said sharply. “Watch your tongue.”

“Forgive me for my concerns,” Bozhin snapped, “but the eagles are not the ones who travel with a half-Fae. Nor keep secrets about Fae magic. And now the Queen says we don’t need information from this soldier?””

My blood suddenly ran hot, and internally my wolf bared her teeth. How dare this Eagle suggest that I was anything but loyal to my kingdom. After all I’d been through at Corinne’s hand, he had the audacity to suggest that I was, somehow, working with the Fae. My skin prickled with the desire to shift and solve this miscommunication in the easy way, with tooth and claw.

“That’s enough,” Kodan snapped. She grasped me by the upper arm and hauled me backward. “Bozhin, please get whatever you need. We’ll be

waiting at camp. We need to move, and soon.” She half-dragged me away through the forest and back to the camp.

“How can you let him do that?” I demanded. “He’s torturing prisoners. That’s not — that’s not how this fight is supposed to go!”

“War never goes the way you expect.” As we reached camp, Kodan dropped my arm and sighed. “Sorry for pulling you away like that. You looked like you were about to shift.”

“I was,” I admitted. “First he tortures a prisoner, and then suggests I’m on their side for being against it? We can’t just stand for this!”

“Yes, we can,” Kodan said. “General Bozhin is working with us, not for us. That Fae nearly took control of one of his soldiers. If he wishes to try to wring information out of him, I’m not going to stop him.”

“But we should,” I said, even though I knew this was a losing argument. I knew that Kodan was right. “We shouldn’t allow torture in our ranks.”

“And we won’t,” Kodan said. “But he’s not in our ranks.”

I rubbed my temples and exhaled hard.

Kodan said, “This is wartime, your Highness. This is how things are.”

“I won’t stand for it again,” I said quietly. “This won’t be something the wolves allow.”

She nodded. “I agree.”

As we finished packing up the campsite, my wolf still knocked against my ribs, hungry to be set free. It was the fighting, the anger, the disrespect — she wanted to come forth and prove her strength. Bozhin didn’t think I could lead, or fight. He thought I was a weakling, or a traitor. The general wouldn’t think that if I got my fangs close to his throat. I needed to get out of here. I needed to be in Efra, with my pack, with Elias. I heaved a box of provisions into the trunk of the wagon with slightly too much force.

“Reyna!” Adora was just as bloodied as the rest of us, but she’d taken the time to carefully wash her face. It was almost comical, her pristine skin like a moon above her dirty sleepwear and the stain of dark blood, not her own, on her neck. “Hey, what’s going on? I can feel your wolf from across the campsite.”

“What?” I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Your wolf,” she said. “You’re worked up.”

“I didn’t...you can tell?”

“You’re part of my pack,” she said with a small smile. “We’re family. So yeah, I can tell. Is everything okay? Besides, well.” She gestured around.

“Everything.”

I laughed, exhausted, and then pulled Adora into a hug. “No,” I admitted quietly. “I’m worried. I’m worried about Efra.”

“Me too.” She squeezed me hard. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared.”

“All right!” Kodan shouted. “Let’s move!”

The campsite was packed up, the bodies buried, and Bozhin had emerged from the forest with his hands covered in fresh blood. He shot me a dark look, then joined Parlan and Zellan with the other eagles.

A new rush of white-hot irritation raced through me. I stalked to the front of the caravans and then let my wolf surge forward. My paws hit the dirt, and I shook out my white pelt.

“You Highness,” Kodan said, “with the Fae, I don’t know if—”

I bared my teeth at her. I knew the risks. I knew what the Fae could do. But right now, my wolf needed to have her claws in the Frasian soil, and to move briskly toward my pack. Kodan sighed, waved her hand, and we started on our way.

We traveled without stopping. As the day melted into night again, I shifted back into my human form, unwilling to risk being caught by the Fae under cover of darkness in my wolf form.

By dawn, we would reach Efra.

“You work tirelessly.” I turned the sword over in my hand, examining the inlaid moonstone as the wagon rumbled over the bards.

Lynx didn’t seem to notice the rattling at all. He leaned over his workspace, a table that took up the bulk of the wagon, peering at another plain sword laid out in front of him. He wore glasses that magnified his vision, and his hands were gloved like a blacksmith’s. Moonstone spilled from a canvas bag on the table, and copper ore was piled on the floor.

“The thrill of the work is more than enough to keep this old bird awake,” Lynx said with a grin. “It’s been too long since a war has brought me from my roost. Your wolves are impressive warriors.”

I hummed in agreement. “I pray your weapons will help keep them alive.”

“Ah, speaking of that,” he said. “I’ve been working on something else as well. Look at this.” He slid a long strip of leather across the table, dotted with moonstone and copper.

It could’ve been beautiful, if it hadn’t been made in such haste. “What is it?”

“Obviously untested,” he said, “but I believe it will prevent the Fae from doing that little mind-control number I saw earlier.”

My eyes widened. Only then did I realize it was a collar, big enough to

wrap around a wolf's neck. "It will?"

"General Bozhin was unaffected by their magic, yet Zellan was able to be controlled," Lynx said. He placed a moonstone on the hilt of the sword in front of him, and then ore on the blade. Then he put a hand at the tip of the blade and the end of the hilt. He bit the tip of his tongue in concentration. The air hummed with energy as the copper melted into the steel like a drop of blood into water. "Do you know about the war gryphon?"

"Only the myths."

"Like alchemists, they are a dying breed," Lynx said. "An eagle who has been chosen by the gryphon comes into this world raging. Old magic runs in his veins, same as it does mine. I can enhance a weapon easily. I believe I can also enhance shifter magic." He grinned. "Unfortunately, no way to test it."

"Better than nothing," I said. "Thank you."

"How is Aerika doing?" Lynx asked as he worked. "She was shaken up by the battle. Nearly threw up all over my workspace at one point."

"She's riding with Fina and Adora," I said. "She's strong. She'll be all right."

"Well, she was quite helpful in making all these swords," Lynx said. "She's got a good eye for alchemy. Might even be able to perform it herself. Send her back to Cruora when all this mess is over, will you?"

I smiled. "Of course. I'd be glad to." At least Lynx saw an end to all this mess — even if it was hard for me to see an end at all.

"Good, good. Here, I have another one for you." He reached down into the box of sheathed, enhanced swords — a whole box! — and retrieved a small knife wrapped in plain cotton. A single, tiny moonstone was inlaid in the hilt. "A Queen should always have a good boot-knife, don't you agree?"

I did agree. Except for the fact that I still wasn't wearing any boots. Lynx noticed that as well and raised his eyebrows at my bare feet.

"I'll put them on before we reach the city."

"You wolves," Lynx said with a pleased grin. "You're all so very odd."

"Queen Reyna!" Kodan called.

I stood and leaned out of the back of Lynx's wagon, pushing the canvas aside to peer toward the horizon. We'd traveled all night, and now, as we rumbled through the narrow mountain pass, Efra was visible on the horizon. The sky was pale with the oncoming dawn.

With one hand on the wagon, I leaned out to better see things. The cold wind whipped through my hair, and it wasn't the cold of the wind that sent a

chill down my spine.

“No,” I whispered, but the word was lost to the wind.

Smoke rose in great plumes from the city. Even from a distance, the damage was visible: the walls of the city were broken in places, and the tall buildings half-crumbled. The manor still stood, with no damage that I could see, but we were far away yet.

Kodan stood at the edge of the pass, letting the carriages and wagons pass. Lynx’s was near the end, and she jogged alongside. “We’ll stop once we’re through the pass,” she said. “Reconvene and decide what to do.”

“How bad do you think it is?” I asked.

“Hard to say from here. We need a better read on the situation.”

We made it out of the pass and made camp under the sparse cover of trees near the mountains. It wasn’t as close to Efra as I wanted to be, but Kodan insisted. We couldn’t risk getting closer. Not until we knew what was happening.

The thought of what we could be up against made terror roll like ice through my veins, but it was no match for my anger. I longed to shift and race into the city, teeth bared, and tear apart any Fae I saw. How dare Corinne do this — how dare she harm my city, my home, my pack. I wanted to know who was hurt, who was fighting — I wanted to know everything. I wanted to be in the thick of it, defending my pack like a true leader. My heart beat wildly in my chest, but I didn’t let any emotions show on my face.

“I’m going,” Kodan said. We stood by the edge of the treeline as the rest of the party made camp as best they could in a small clearing in the forest. “I’ll be back before sundown.”

“I’m going with you,” Fina said. She stepped away from the camp, her dark eyes determined. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

“I agree,” Kodan said. She raised her eyebrows. “Which is why I should go with one of my soldiers, not a lady of the court.”

“I am a soldier,” Fina said simply. “I fought alongside you against the Fae, did I not?”

“Yes, but—”

“I’m going,” Fina said. “It’s my pack as much as yours.”

My heart clenched. Fina was of Duskmoon — but she *was* a part of my pack. She was as much a sister to me as Adora was. “Then I’m going, too.”

“No,” Kodan and Fina said in unison.

“What?” I glanced between them. “I’m just as strong as—”

“I know,” Kodan said, “but that’s a risk I won’t take. Let us get the information we need first.”

“Us?” Fina raised her eyebrows at Kodan.

Kodan pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes. Fine. You can come. Reyna stays. Deal?”

My wolf raged against that decision, knocking against my ribs, demanding my attention. Had I not released her as we’d traveled, she would’ve forced me to shift.

Because Efra was right there. My pack was right there.

Elias was right there.

I longed to shift, race across the balds, and barrel into Efra to find him. But Kodan was right. If Fae had taken over Efra entirely, we’d be no help if we walked right into their waiting embrace.

“Deal,” I said with reluctance. “Be careful. Both of you.” I pulled Fina into a tight hug.

When I pulled back, she was grinning. “Don’t worry. This is going to be fun.”

Lynx fixed them both with strips of leather around their front paws, enhanced with moonstone and copper. He explained the purpose, and Kodan only nodded. There was a spark of amusement in her dark eyes.

“Looks like I might get my test,” Lynx said.

They bounded off into the balds.

Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Time dragged. I sat by the small fire in our campsite. The rest of the soldiers were silent. Some ate, some sharpened weapons, or examined their new enhanced ones - some talked in low voices. Lynx took a much-deserved break from his alchemist work, and he sat with Aerika across the campsite, talking together as she tended the horses.

I tapped my foot anxiously as I sat gazing into the fire. My ears were attuned to the sounds of campsite, the crackle of the logs, the rustle of the wind, the low voices around me — but I was listening, under it all, for the distant sound of paws hitting the earth. How long would this reconnaissance take? Maybe if I shifted, I’d be able to hear better. But if I was in my wolf shape, would I be able to resist the closeness of my mate? There was a chance I’d lose sight of what I’d agreed to. I’d know he was near, and I’d just run. Consequences be damned.

Adora dropped down onto the log I was seated on and knocked her

shoulder against mine. "I can feel your wolf again," she said.

I leaned against her. "Doesn't surprise me."

"I know it's hard," she said. "You want to go straight to him, don't you?"

"Of course," I said with a small smile. "Do you feel the same?"

"What?" Adora asked. "About Elias? Of course not. You don't think I hold any feelings from the Choice, do you? Because that's mad. I know when I first arrived--"

I interjected with a laugh and patted her knee. "No, not about Elias. About Kodan."

Adora's face turned red faster than I'd ever seen someone flush. The color even turned her ears pink. "What? I mean--Well--I--"

I laughed again. "Come on."

Adora huffed and turned her attention to the fire. "Well, yes, it's hard to watch her run off on these spy missions. Even though I know she's good at it."

"She is," I said, "and I expect she'll be more careful, now."

"Why's that?"

"Because she has something to return to." I squeeze Adora's knee. "I'm happy for you both."

Adora's flush turned impossibly darker. "Really?"

"Of course," I said. "She's perfect for you."

Smiling, Adora poked at the fire with a long stick. "I think so, too."

"Your Highness?" Bozhin's deep voice cut through the quiet. Standing next to us where we sat, he loomed like a sentinel.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Coffee?" He held out two tin mugs.

"Oh," I said, surprised. I took the mugs, handing one to Adora. "Thank you, general."

He nodded, then returned to the carriage where the eagles were assessing their new weaponry.

The coffee was strong and warmed me down to my bones. I knew a peace offering when I saw one. I didn't like what Bozhin had done in the woods to that Fae — but if we could get through this battle alive, maybe we could repair our relationship some. Maybe this really would be a new chapter between the eagles and the wolves.

The hours passed in tense silence. We had more coffee, a few more conversations, but mostly the war party kept to themselves while we waited.

The sun was low in the sky by the time Fina and Kodan returned. Relief crashed over me when I saw both of them running through the woods unharmed.

Fina careened through the woods in her wolf form and nearly crashed into me. I met her with open arms, wrapped my arms tight around her strong, furry neck and squeezed. Relief washed over me. I hadn't realized how anxious I was until they were both back at the campsite.

Magic crackled through the air as Fina shifted back, mid-embrace, and laughed as she hugged me back. "Were you that worried?"

"Yes," I said. "I trust you both, though."

Kodan returned to her human form as well. Her cheeks were ruddy with exertion, but she looked pleased, her eyes bright and eager. She looked to Adora, and Adora bit her lower lip and flushed yet again.

"What news?" Bozhin asked.

"Efra is not lost," Kodan said. "King Elias keeps control of the manor."

Another rush of relief, so strong it caught my heart like a wind and sent it soaring. My knees nearly went weak with it. Kodan met my gaze and nodded once, like she felt it as well.

"But the Fae have taken much of the outskirts of the city," Kodan continued. "Most of the damage is to the outer buildings, the houses and the markets. But it appears that there is no active fighting right now. Some weak Fae linger in the taken territory, but they are not pushing forward. They seem injured, or dazed."

"Why aren't they attacking?" I asked. "What's happening?"

"The city is quiet," Kodan said. "I'm not sure. But if we want to make our way to the manor, we couldn't have a better opening. It appears Corinne is not there."

"Leave the camp," I decided. "Let's move quickly. We need to get to the manor."

"There's passages we can use," Kodan said, "secret entrances from the forests into the cellars--"

"No," I said. "As you said, Corinne isn't there. But if there are still wolves, soldiers, those who have fought against the Fae to defend Efra — they need to see us. They need to know the Queen and her finest soldiers have returned."

"I like it." Bozhin smacked his fist against his chest. "Let's show the Fae we are here to fight."

Shouts of agreement rang out from the war party.

Kodan grinned, then nodded. “If that’s what the Queen wants, then that’s what we’ll do.”

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I led my war party across the balds of Frasia and to the front gates of the city.

I was still anxious, glancing around the horizon for a flicker of a portal, expecting to sense the energy of Fae magic. Though the nerves climbed into my throat and tightened my chest, I didn't let it show. I rode across the balds astride one of our mare's backs, with Kodan in her wolf shape on one side, and Bozhin in his war gryphon on the other. Behind us, the rest of the soldiers walked on foot, armed to the teeth with Lynx's moonstone-enhanced weapons.

There were no Fae guarding the front gates. Nothing but quiet welcomed us.

Up close, the wreckage was worse. I pressed my lips together as I gazed around at what used to be the bustling town square. The big fountain in the center of the square was destroyed, with the water puddled on the cobblestone, darkened with old blood. The alleyways were silent, and glass had been broken in the windows of the taverns. Smoke still spilled out weakly from buildings within the quiet streets. The only sound was the clack of my mare's hooves against the cobblestone as we made our way through the damaged city.

"Gods above," Adora whispered from behind me. "Do you think..."

She looked over to the narrow alley that led to the tailor shop.

"I don't know," I murmured. "We can't worry about that. Not now."

I didn't know how much had been lost. But the manor still stood, and it was still under control of the wolves. The eerie silence of the damaged city

only made my anxiety worse. There had to be Fae lurking, somewhere, creeping in the wreckage, or watching us from the darkened windows. Where *was* everyone? I spurred the mare forward, and we made our way to the gates of the manor.

The fine silver gates still stood, even though the narrow brick wall had taken damage in the fighting. As we approached, shouts of acknowledgment rang out.

My heart swooped. There were wolves here, and they were waiting for us.

“The Queen!” A soldier turned on his heel and ran to the manor, then threw the front doors open. “The Queen has returned!”

The gates opened, and I led my party inside.

My wolf grabbed my attention. I could feel him before I saw him, his presence like a whisper of cool breeze through my hair. My king. My mate.

Elias stood in the open doors of the manor. His dark hair was loose, blown by the wind, and his eyes were wide with disbelief. His leather armor was clean, but damaged, a gash ran from his cheek to his jawline, and his forearm was tightly bandaged. He looked like he’d lost weight, and shadows were dark under his eyes.

He was the most handsome man I’d ever seen still. My heart leaped into my throat. I jumped from my horse and ran toward the manor doors before I even realized I was moving.

“Reyna,” he said, his voice an awed whisper.

I leaped into his arms. I flung my arms around his neck and hauled him close. “Elias,” I whispered into the warm familiar column of his neck. “Elias.”

He wrapped his strong arms tightly around my waist and pulled me flush to his body. “My queen,” he murmured. “You’ve returned.”

“Of course, I did.” I leaned back, but only enough to pull him down for a kiss. “I’ll always come back to you.”

He smoothed the hair off my forehead and gazed at me. His eyes burned gold. “I never doubted it.”

All my anxieties, my fears, my doubts melted away under his gaze. I’d made it back to Efra. I’d made it back to my kingdom. Elias still held the manor. Corinne had retreated, however briefly, to lick her wounds.

The wolves still held Frasia. And as long as Elias and I were together, we still would. Determination wrapped like steel around my heart.

“I have a lot of news from Cruora,” I said.

Elias finally looked up, and blinked, shocked, at the enormous war gryphon standing in the center of the courtyard. Bozhin rustled his wings, peering down at the soldiers as they approached cautiously.

“I see that,” Elias said. “Come inside.” He led us inside with a wave of his hand.

The banquet hall had been transformed. The long table at which I’d sat and had many meals was now covered in maps, marked up in ink, scattered weapons, and half-finished plates of cured meats and hard breads. The windows had been covered, and a fire burned low in the rarely-used hearth, with armor spread out and drying in front of it. The floor was dirtied with footprints, both human and wolf.

It was a war room. At the head of the table, Ealric stood, a relieved smile on his face as he saw both me and Adora.

“Sit, please,” Elias said to all of us who had traveled. “I’ll have the staff bring in a meal, and prepare the guest quarters for your stay.”

I briskly ran through the introductions. Elias was particularly impressed with Bozhin and his war gryphon form, and he made that known as he clasped his hand hard in greeting. He thanked all the eagles for joining us in Efra, and we all took seats at the long table. Servants came in, with platters of dried meats and cheeses, flagons of wine, and hot coffee. Lynx in particular looked delighted, and he sank into his chair with a block of cheese and a relieved look on his face.

“What’s the status here?” I asked. I was eager to be caught up. “The city is quiet. Where are the wolves?”

“Many have fled,” Ealric said. “Into the forests, and to the cities further north. As far away from the portals as they can get. Those who didn’t are staying here, in the manor, where it’s safest.”

I nodded. At least the wolves were safe — or most of them. I exhaled a slow breath. “And the Fae?”

“Withdrawn,” Ealric said. “For now. We expect them any day.”

“We have soldiers patrolling the borders,” Elias said. “Looking for any new portals or signs of Fae activity.”

“I’ll have mine take to the air,” Bozhin said. “Portals are easier to spot from above.”

“Be aware that the Fae are using dragons,” Elias said.

“Using?” I asked. “We saw some traveling east as we were. They came to join the Fae?”

“She’s controlling them,” Elias said. “It’s some form of Fae power. It’s like it takes over the dragons’ will.”

“We’ve seen it,” Bozhin said.

Elias raised his eyebrows. “You have?”

“We were attacked by the Fae on our way here,” Bozhin. “They pulled that little trick on us.”

“You mean...?” Elias asked, glancing around the table.

At the far end, Zellan took a long sip of from his wine glass. “I shifted, and the Fae soldier I attacked used some kind of spell on me.”

Elias’ attention snapped to Zellan, and mine did as well. Zellan hadn’t spoken of what it was like to be under her control. He’d been quiet since the attack, and I hadn’t pressed. I’d had my own dose of that magic — albeit in a less intense form — and I wasn’t keen on experiencing it again.

“It’s like being locked in your own body,” he said. “I saw what I was doing, but I couldn’t change my behavior. It was like I was behind glass in my own mind, shouting, but no one could hear me.” He shivered and took another sip of wine. “That must be what she’s doing to the dragons.”

“Whatever it is, it’s not easy for them to maintain,” Elias said. “The dragons have been able to break it for moments, especially if the Fae have been trying to keep control for too long. I think that’s part of why their soldiers have retreated. They’ve drained their resources overpowering them, and now they need to regain their strength.”

“So they’re preparing for another wave of attacks, then,” Bozhin said.

Elias nodded. “Right now, it’s a war of attrition. We’re trying to hold Efra while the Fae break on our walls like waves. We’re able to hold them back, but we’re not doing any lasting damage.”

“So how do we change the tide?” Kodan asked.

Elias laughed, but there was little humor in it. “I was going to ask you that, General.”

“Word from my court was that the eagles of Cruora had requested moonstone,” Ealric said. “It was sent to the border. I trust you received it?”

“Yes,” I said. “Thank you for the swift response.”

“Strange message delivery, I admit,” Ealric said.

At the end of the table, Lynx grinned. “Falcon’s a smart delivery boy.”

“Caused quite a ruckus in the court,” Ealric said. “I had some sent here to Efra, as well, just in case.”

“Oh, excellent!” Lynx said. “Aerika, dear, shall we get back to work?”

Your Highness, I trust you have a blacksmith shop here in the manor we can use?”

Elias blinked. “For what purpose?”

“We figured it out,” I said. I folded my hand over Elias’ forearm and squeezed. “Lynx is an alchemist. He was able to craft weapons that kill Fae.”

Elias grinned. “So it was true all along,” he said. “The eagles have their own magic.”

“Just this eagle,” Lynx said. “Alchemy is a dying art in Cruora. You wolves dragged me down from my roost at just the right time.”

“I’ll have the staff show you to the blacksmith,” Elias said. “We’ll need as many of those weapons as we can get.”

“Keep the coffee coming, then.” Lynx stood up, then bowed gracefully. Aerika did as well, and they followed a servant out of the main hall.

“The weapons,” Elias said. “Will they be strong enough to kill the Fae Queen herself?”

“I’ll make sure of it,” I said. I looked around the table, meeting the eyes of every member of my war party. “When she returns, I’ll kill her myself.”

The steely tone in my voice was a surprise, even to me. But I meant every word. For all Corinne had done, everything she had taken from me, the damage she’d done to my kingdom and all its people — I would make her pay.

Between the moonstone, the copper, and the weaponry in Efra, we had the resources to create enough enhanced weapons to arm all the wolves that remained in the city. The only question was —would Lynx and Aerika have enough time before Corinne returned?

With the alchemy underway, Elias and I began to prepare the rest of the war party for the next battle.

“Fina,” I said, “you’ll be joining Kodan as a spy.”

Across the table, her eyes widened. “Really?”

“If you are okay with it,” I said. “Will it be a problem?”

“Not at all.” Fina squared her shoulders. “Just a surprise. I’m honored.”

I grinned at her. “Well, you proved yourself running the earlier mission with Kodan.”

Kodan nodded her agreement. “Glad to have you join us.”

“And Adora,” I continued, “I’d like for you to join the royal guard.”

“The guard?!” Adora balked. “Your Highness--”

“In a logistical role,” I said with a small smile. “You have a good eye for organization. I’d like for you to help Lynx ensure all the soldiers have adequate weaponry as quickly as possible.”

Adora sat back slightly in her seat, visibly relieved. “Of course. I’d be happy to.”

Elias looked to Kodan. “General, meet with Ealric separately to prepare for any on-ground fighting. We’ll need all the soldiers we can muster if we want a chance of defeating the Fae. Tomorrow, Reyna and I will go to the quarters where the citizens are staying to recruit any strong wolves who will

join our ranks.”

“Yes, sir,” Ealric said.

“General Bozhin, Kodan will show you to the barracks. I hope the eagles can help with any dragons Corinne still has under her control.”

“Happy to,” Bozhin said with a hungry grin.

“We’ll reconvene in the morning,” Elias said. “Good work.”

I stood up from the table, and the war-talk faded into private conversations as the people in the room caught up after travel. I was exhausted, both mentally and physically, but more than that, my heart and my wolf both longed for privacy.

As if he could read my mind, Elias stepped to my side. He wound his arm around my waist and pulled me close to his side. “You know,” he said quietly into my ear, “I think this diplomatic mission was a success.”

I leaned into his arms, letting him hold me up. The rest of the war party began to filter out of the meeting room, with bows and murmured goodbyes, to the barracks and their quarters, to prepare for the next day. Then, finally, Elias took my hand, and together we walked up the staircase to our quarters.

I sighed with relief as I stepped over the threshold. Elias closed the door behind us, then slotted his chest up against my back, holding me close. He pushed his nose against my temple and inhaled.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been more in love with you than when I saw you ride up to the manor with a war gryphon at your side,” he murmured.

I laughed and smoothed my hand over his forearm. “It was the gryphon that did it?”

“The eagles are known for being isolationist,” he said. “I was surprised enough when they hosted you. I’d trusted your ability to gain the knowledge we needed — but never did I expect for you to bring eagles back to Efra.”

“I didn’t either, honestly,” I admitted. “Bozhin didn’t seem to trust me.”

“He seems to, now.”

“I don’t know,” I said with a small shrug, “I think he understands the threat in a way he didn’t before.”

“And that’s your doing.” He kissed my cheek. “A gryphon. I didn’t think they were real.”

“Neither did I.” I laughed, then turned and wound my arms around his neck. “But the Fae magic didn’t work on him when he was in a gryphon shape.”

“Strange. But it works on the eagles and the dragons.”

“I think it has something to do with the Fae influence on our realm,” I said. “Lynx said alchemy is dying out in Cruora, and gryphons haven’t been born, either. Both are influenced by magic...I wonder if when the realms are connected again, if both will return.”

Elias’ eyes flashed gold again. “You think so?”

“It’s just a hunch,” I said. “Something to keep an eye on.”

He laughed quietly to himself, then shook his head as if in disbelief.

“What?” I squeezed his waist. “What’s so funny?”

“I wanted revenge on Corinne,” Elias said. “That’s what I’ve been seeking. I wanted her to pay for what she did to us. To you. But now...” He furrowed his brow slightly, then brushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His touch was gentle, but still left sparks in its wake. “Now, this is more than just a chance for revenge. You’re suggesting these battles could be key to healing the realm itself.”

My heart did a somersault. “I don’t know if it will do anything at all. But I can hope it will.”

“Like a true Queen,” he said, “you look forward, not backward.”

“You make that easy,” I said. I pulled him down for a searing kiss.

It wasn’t the gentle smooch we’d shared in the entrance of the manor, with the war party watching us. It was a deep, hungry kiss - a low growl rumbled in his chest as he pulled me impossibly closer. He kept one hand at my nape, guiding the kiss, and I slid my hands under the hem of his shirt, seeking out the warmth of his skin.

“I missed you,” he murmured against my lips.

“I missed you, too,” I sighed. “Every moment. I longed for you.”

“You’ve made Nightfall proud,” he said. “I’m honored to call you my Queen.”

I tugged him back toward our bed, then hooked my fingers in the waistband of his trousers and urged him onto it.

My exhaustion melted away under the heat of my desire. Molten heat surged through me as our lips met again. I shimmied back onto the mattress, just enough to lean back against the headboard. With a sigh of relief, I briskly released the plait in my hair, then, peeling my shirt up and over my head, I shook out my blonde hair, letting it fall loosely over my shoulders.

“You’re so gorgeous,” Elias growled. He wrenched his shirt up and off, revealing his tan, muscular torso. I stared unabashedly at his body as I reached for him. He noticed and grinned, slightly lopsided. I almost thought I

saw a flush in his cheeks.

Elias hooked his fingers in the waistband of my trousers and pulled them down and off, and then wrestled out of his own. Then he grasped my waist and pulled me down on the bed, so my back was flat on the mattress. He swallowed my needy breaths in another kiss. Our legs tangled together as we kissed and touched. I ran my hands over every inch of skin I could reach. I just needed closeness. It was like I was making up for lost time, I couldn't seem to get close enough. I tipped my head back with a sigh of pleasure as he kissed my neck and collarbone, then drew his mouth over the curve of my shoulder. I could lose hours like this, I thought. I could spend the rest of my life here, in this bed, sinking into his kiss and his touch.

But the hard length pressing against my lower belly was a hot promise of more.

I set my hands at his shoulders and pushed, rolling us so he was flat on his back and I was straddling his hips. His eyes widened, but then he smirked as if surprised but pleased. He gripped my thighs and squeezed. I leaned down and kissed him.

In the past, I may have been too shy to take what I wanted like this. But now, Elias made me feel safe. Desired. He trusted me, and he saw me not just as a prize of the Choice — how long ago that felt! -but as an equal in leadership.

He wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

“Reyna,” he said, in a voice so low it was almost a purr. He slid his hands up my thighs to my waist. “Go ahead. Take what you want.”

My cheeks burned with both pleasure and some embarrassment. But it was easy, so easy, to shift my weight, trace my fingers down the hot length of his erection, then guide him inside me.

I gasped with pleasure. Elias' fingers dug hard into my waist. His eyes burned gold, and his lips were slightly parted as he watched me.

The weight of his attention only made the pleasure more intense. I held his gaze as I moved, rocking my hips. I set my hands on his broad chest and let him hold my weight, and I could feel each shift of his muscle and see every flicker of pleasure across his face. It was nearly overwhelming — it was so different than the sex we'd had before, dizzying in its intimacy, in the rush of pleasure and power.

I lost myself in the sensation of it. Elias set his feet flat on the mattress, grasped my thighs, and then thrust up into me, matching my pace. I fell

forward and gasped into our open-mouthed kiss as pleasure danced over me like shifter magic. When I tumbled into my release, it was with Elias' name on my lips.

In the afterglow, Elias wrapped his arms around me and held me close. He pressed a kiss to the crown of my head, and his thumb traced circles on my upper arm. In the cool darkness of our quarters, in the quiet manor with Efra silent outside, I tried to focus on the steady beat of his heart.

Yet, even exhausted as I was, my worries began to resurface. When would Corinne return? Would we have the weapons we needed? Would we be ready? How big would her army be? Had she maintained the control of the dragons?

Would this be happening if I hadn't gotten involved?

Elias hummed and raked his fingers through my hair. "I can hear you thinking, little wolf."

I laughed and nuzzled my face into his chest. "Sorry."

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

I sighed. "Do you think..." I trailed off as I gathered my thoughts. Elias didn't push me, just continued raking his fingers through my hair. "If I hadn't made a fool of myself in Shianga, this wouldn't be happening now, would it?" I was the one who had insisted on taking King Draunar's stupid offer, and then got myself kidnapped and added to his hoard. That's where I met Corinne, that's where I let her trick me, and that's where she used my shifter magic to open a portal back to Faerie and escape. "She'd still be trapped. Harmless."

"Hmm," Elias said. "Perhaps."

That wasn't really the answer I wanted. My heart clenched.

"But you said it yourself, earlier," Elias continued. "It's possible that being cut off from Faerie has had lasting results across the Realm. Defeating Corrine is going to change things."

"Or just cause more pain," I murmured. "We lost two wolves already on the journey."

"Kodan informed me," Elias said. "Those soldiers gave their lives defending their pack. The best way to honor them is to carry that forward."

"But it all circles back to me," I said. "This all started because of my mistake."

Elias lifted up onto one elbow so he could peer down at me. He was gorgeous in the moonlight, casting shadows over his angular face and the cut

on his cheek, still healing.

“And if you hadn’t, maybe the eagles would’ve lost their alchemy and their gryphons for good,” he said. “Or maybe Corinne would’ve broken out on her own and caught us completely unaware. Or maybe we never would’ve connected with the jaguars. And so on and so forth.” He traced a finger down the bridge of my nose. “Leading is never as simple as we want it to be. Wishing things were different will not make the decisions you make now any easier.”

I sighed, then caught his wrist, and placed a gentle kiss to the heel of his hand. “You make it sound so easy.”

“Mm, the talking is easy. The doing is harder.”

“I just want to do right by our pack,” I admitted quietly. “I want to be a good Queen.”

“You are,” Elias said. “But if you want to prove it, I know we will.”

“On the battlefield?” I asked.

“Where else?”

We kissed for a long moment. The future and the past seemed to weigh on me simultaneously, pressing down like a weight. The battlefield loomed in our plans like a mountain in the distance, huge and jagged and waiting to be climbed. There was always a chance we wouldn’t make the ascent. I broke the kiss and tipped my forehead against Elias’. “There’s something else I want to tell you.”

He hummed and trailed his hand down the curve of my waist. “What is it?”

“If we make it through this--”

“—*When* we make it through this.”

I nodded. “When we make it through this...I think...I think I’m ready,” I whispered. Even as the thought still made nerves curl in my chest, I was strong enough, and that we were strong enough together. “Ready to have kids. With you.”

A surprised grin as bright as a sunrise rose on Elias’ face. “What changed?”

“Traveling to Cruora,” I said. “I loved doing it, and I want to do more diplomatic work, more travel... but that’s not *all* I want to do. I want to be a strong leader for all of Nightfall, with you at my side. And...”

Elias was still smiling. “And what?”

I thought of Maribel, and her daughter peeking out from behind her legs. I

thought of the dream Elias had, of our pups running alongside us in the woods. I thought of my own dream, and the crow's feet at the corners of Elias' eyes.

“And I want a family,” I said. “A family with you.”

He kissed me again, sweeter and softer this time. “I want that, too,” he murmured against my lips.

The promise only galvanized me. Together we'd get rid of Corinne, and heal Frasia — and start a new era of our own, as well.

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The next morning, preparations began in earnest. In the war room, over coffee and a spare breakfast, Elias and I laid out the plans for Corinne's return. I was to lead the elite swordsmen of Nightfall, with Elias' top swordsman, the young private Haulfrun. Kodan was to lead the largest battalion of soldiers — those who had less experience, and more fear. I trusted Kodan to inspire confidence in them. Fina would work with the spies, keeping tabs on any enemy movement, and Bozhin would lead the eagles in the sky. Aerika and Lynx had worked together to make as many of the moonstone collars as they could to protect the shifters from the Fae magic.

“Reyna!” Adora hurried across the war room. She smiled brightly, despite the dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was tied up into a high bun, and she was dressed in her plain, functional trousers and shirt — though now, the collar and hems were embroidered with delicate silver thread. She was still a Lady of Starcrest, after all. “Come, if you're ready, let's go down to the citizens' quarters.”

I nodded. Elias was busy speaking with General Bozhin, hunched over the maps across the war room table. He caught my eye and nodded.

There was no time for us to go speak to the citizens together. I swallowed around the sudden tightness in my throat.

I was growing more confident navigating diplomacy and the intricacies of the Courts. But I hadn't spent much time speaking to the citizens of Efra. And now, I needed them to trust me now more than ever.

I adjusted my sword on my hip, then nodded to Adora. “Lead the way.”

I followed Adora out of the main hall. We moved through the quiet

hallways of the manor to the heavy doors that led down.

Down toward the dungeons. I swallowed again. The last time I had been into the dungeons below the manor, it was through the secret tunnels — and it was to rescue the man I'd thought loved me.

But this time, we didn't descend all the way to the dungeons. Instead, Adora tugged me toward the storerooms. "They were converted while we were gone," she said. "It's safer down here in case of a siege."

Adora pushed open the heavy doors.

I stopped dead in my tracks. I'd known, logically, that the storerooms beneath the manor were large. There had to be enough space to store provisions for the city to carry us through times of famine and war, so of course they were vast. I hadn't realized how vast, though. The storeroom was nearly as large as the manor itself, sprawling out in one hugeroom with a low ceiling. I expected it was usually dark and silent, filled with barrels and shelves full of emergency provisions, but in the wake of the Fae battles it had been transformed into something closer to a refugee camp.

The floor space was filled with cots and bedrolls, and a fire roared in a large hearth at the furthest end of the storeroom. Clothes were hung out to dry on shelves, and low stools were placed around tables dotting the space. There were families here: older wolves, children, wolves with limps and scars, haggard wolves with barely any muscle, wide-eyed teenage wolves who leapt to their feet as the door opened.

Murmurs ripped through the crowd as games shuddered to a halt and napping wolves roused from their restless sleep. They leaned close to each other, and the murmurs traveled like a breeze through the room: "The Queen. The Queen is here."

Their gazes fell to me expectantly. I stood in front of all these wolves, my packmates, and I knew I should feel nervous...but to my surprise, I didn't at all. In front of my pack, it felt easy to speak from the heart.

"My friends," I said. "I know you've suffered under the Fae siege."

Murmurs of agreement.

"I've returned from Cruora," I continued, "where I've convinced the eagles to aid us. We now have the weaponry we need to stand against the Fae."

A few younger wolves perked up with interest.

"There will be another attack," I said. "I don't know when. I don't know how hard the Fae will strike. I don't know what the Fae Queen is doing as she

bides her time. All I know is that the wolves will stand against her, and do whatever it takes to defend our city, our pack, from her and her army.” I looked around the room, then set my hand at the hilt of my sword. “I expect her to arrive any day now. We’ll need all the able wolves we can to join us on the battlefield.”

My words hung over the room like a storm cloud.

“No one will be forced,” I continued, “but should you wish to stand with your pack and hold Efra against the Fae, we will need you. Adora will take all those who cannot or do not wish to fight into the forests north of the manor. Our warriors will be bottle-necking the Fae toward the castle. We want to keep their presence contained so we can defeat them. It won’t be safe to remain here.”

More wolves murmured low to each other throughout the room. Near the middle of the room, a young wolf, couldn’t be more than sixteen, wrestled away from his mother’s grip and stood up straight.

“I’ll fight, your Highness.” The boy — the young man — squared his shoulders and met my eyes steadily. “I won’t let the Fae take my home without a fight.”

He was young. So young.

And yet, I knew if I were in his position, I’d do the same thing. Like me, he was determined. Strong enough. I’d get him a good sword and give him a chance to defend his pack alongside Nightfall’s most elite warriors.

I nodded and gestured for the boy to join me. “What’s your name?”

“Kota,” he said, wide-eyed.

“You’ve made your pack proud today, Kota,” I said.

The boy beamed, then turned and faced the crowd with his chin slightly raised.

Then, more wolves began to stand up. Young men and women, as well as older wolves, too, separated from their families and joined me at my side. They were a little more ragtag than the soldiers that had already been fighting, but they were all just as determined as Kota and myself.

And that’s what we needed to defeat the Fae. We needed soldiers, and we needed people who believed that we *could* win. I had inspired that fire in them.

I could only hope it was enough.

“I’ll take our soldiers to the barracks,” I said, “and Adora will lead the citizens into the forests for safety.”

The room burst into activity as the wolves packed up their belongings, their makeshift cots and bedrolls. I led the soldiers to the barracks as promised, and passed them over to Kodan, who beamed with delight at the sight of new recruits. The general immediately launched into an invigorating speech about what the soldiers would bring to the batallion. Excitement crackled through the air.

I caught Kodan's eye, then nodded briskly. She returned the gesture.

Now began the logistical challenge of arming everyone. I stepped out of the barracks and back onto the path toward the manor. I paused outside, taking a deep breath of the crisp winter air. The contrast between the stillness of the air and the activity of the barracks was almost jarring. I looked toward the forests north. There was no trace of activity, but internally my wolf pricked her ears forward. There was a feeling of a pack within the forests, with everyone in their wolf shapes, spreading out and finding safe places to ride out a few days of fighting.

I hoped this would all be over soon. I hoped we were as ready as I thought we were.

I needed to make my way to the blacksmith's. I needed to know how many swords we currently had, and how quickly we could get at least some weaponry to the new recruits. I also needed to ensure we had a fair amount of protective collars for the elite shifters, and to ensure the soldiers knew it would be safer to fight in their human forms.

I massaged my forefingers into my temples. A powerful headache was forming behind my eyes — the travel, the stress, and the exhaustion were all getting to me. I took another deep breath. Elias was at the blacksmith's. I had time to take a breath. Gather my thoughts.

Instead of heading directly to the armory, I made my way to the solarium. Perhaps I'd find Amity or Rue on the way and be able to wrangle another cup of coffee or even a bit of chocolate. Something to lift my spirits. Give me a little bit of energy. Gods knew I'd need my strength.

I opened the door to the solarium from the gardens, expecting silence, and was surprised to see Ealric seated at the round table amid the lush plants. There was a carafe of coffee on the table, and Ealric sipped from a small porcelain cup as he reviewed the top page of a thick stack of parchment. The writing on the parchment was minuscule, enough that it gave me a headache to even think about reviewing it.

"Queen Reyna," he said. "Please, join me. Coffee?"

I sat down at the table next to him and nodded gratefully. He poured me a cup of coffee and slid it over. I accepted gratefully, then sighed and took a long sip. He watched me for a moment, then returned to his document.

“What are you reviewing?” I asked.

“Moonstone records,” he said. “Calculating what Starcrest sent here and to Cruora, with the status of the mines and the expected output.” He smiled wanly. “The thrilling parts of leadership, as I’m sure you know.”

I nodded. I hadn’t realized the extensive records Starcrest kept, but it made sense. I wrapped my hand around my coffee cup. Ealric’s gaze flickered down to my hands.

I laughed gently.

“What?” Ealric asked.

“You’re not sly,” I teased. “The ring?”

“Ah,” Ealric said. He grimaced at being caught. “Well, of course I don’t expect you to wear it, but I had hoped—”

“I wear it,” I said. I pulled the necklace out from under the neckline of my shirt, where the moonstone ring Ealric had given me hung next to the wolf’s fang.

His expression softened. “Good,” he said. “Should’ve known you’d find a way to keep it safe.”

“I’m doing a lot with my hands these days,” I said.

He shook his head fondly. “You really are so much like your mother.”

The comparison warmed me. It ached, still, like an old bruise, but it was worth it to see the flicker of affection in his eyes when he was reminded of her.

“How are you doing?” he asked. “You look tired.”

I laughed, then folded my arms on the table and slumped forward. I rested my cheek on my forearms. I’d been holding back how exhausted I really was, and having Ealric ask made it all come surging to the surface.

“I *am* tired,” I admitted.

“I don’t think anyone expected this is how the King’s Choice would end up,” Ealric said. “When I sent Adora here for the contest, I thought she had a strong chance at winning. She’d been taught well on the manners and expectations of a Lady of the Court, and historically the Starcrest Court has always been well-received in such positions.”

He said this not like a brag, but like a fact. And there was nothing but truth to his statement. Adora had been a fine competitor in the Choice, and

most packs did want good relationships with Starcrest, due to their resources and wealth.

“The expectation was that the winner of the Choice would act mostly as a figurehead,” Ealric said. “A representative of the winning pack, and a way for Elias to become more favored, and move away from his reputation as the Bloody King. I don’t think anyone really expected the Queen of Frasia to have much more responsibility than that.”

“I didn’t, either,” I admitted. “I didn’t want to be a part of the Choice at all.”

Ealric laughed quietly. “Doesn’t surprise me. Your mother was not too keen on being told what to do either.”

I sat back up and took another sip of my coffee. Maybe that explained where I got my stubborn streak. “I still don’t feel like I know what I’m doing. Everything is happening so fast.”

“The secret to leadership is that none of us really know what we’re doing,” Ealric said. “I’ve seen how you shine when you’re speaking to the Court. You may feel like you’re out of your depth, but that’s what leading is. Nightfall should be proud to have you.”

I pressed my lips together. As good as it was to hear that, I wasn’t sure if I’d earned it. “Do you think this is the right decision?” I asked. “Facing Corinne like this?”

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Ealric said. “But you and Elias are leading us well. Myself and the wolves of Starcrest will be at your side, no matter what.”

“Thank you,” I said. Internally, I was pulled in two directions: the relief of seeing the pride and loyalty in Ealric’s eyes, and the terror that his belief was be misplaced.

Then, a loud clap of thunder rang out. I jumped, dropping my coffee as the porcelain shattered on the solarium floor. Thick, intense magic poured through the atmosphere, like oil into water. My wolf raised her hackles.

“A portal opened,” I said. “The Fae are here.”

I rushed out of the manor with Kodan, Elias, Bozhin, and a handful of our finest soldiers at our backs. The portal had opened in the center of town, right above the destroyed fountain — insult to injury. It was as if the Fae had sliced a gash in between the realms. The gate was a long, dark, jagged thing which revealed traces of swirling darkness behind it.

More magic crackled through the air, enough to make my hair stand on end. I gripped the hilt of my sword, stance wide on the cobblestone.

Then, from the depths of the portal, a single Fae emerged. He hopped down onto the damaged wall around the fountain, and then stepped down onto the ground. He brushed an invisible bit of dirt from his silver breastplate.

“Well met, wolves of Frasia,” he said. “And eagles of Cruora, I see.”

The Fae was tall, with shining silver hair and sharp, dark eyes. He grinned at me, then swept into a dramatic bow.

“General Eodwin,” I snarled. “How dare you show your face in Efra.”

I hadn’t seen the General since I’d escaped from the Fae Queen’s clutches, and the sight of his face filled me with a ferocious rage. I pulled my sword from its sheath just enough to reveal the biting silver of its blade.

Eodwin rolled his eyes. “Relax, wolf. I come with a message. For you, in particular.”

He seemed unconcerned by the sight of my sword. He had to know it had killed Fae — but maybe he didn’t know we’d been able to enhance the rest of our weapons, too. “Now that the true leader of Frasia has returned, she would like a meeting. Perhaps the two Queens of the realms can end the fighting

together, don't you think?"

At my side, Elias growled low, like he didn't even realize he was doing it. I looked toward him, but his burning gaze was focused on Eodwin alone.

"I will speak with Corinne," I said, "on my own terms."

"Name them," Eodwin said.

"I will meet her south of the city, on the balds," I decided. "I will speak with her alone, but not privately."

I wanted to be far from the forests north of the city, where the citizens of Efra took shelter, and the openness of the balds would allow me to see any oncoming attacks. I'd have my wolves nearby, but there'd be enough space that I could speak with her. It was the best I could improvise.

"Reasonable," Eodwin said. "Dawn, tomorrow."

I nodded.

Eodwin stepped back into the portal. With a crackle of magic, the portal snapped closed, leaving nothing but a quickly dissipating shimmer in its wake.

"Prepare for war," Elias said. "Corinne does not seek peace. That much I know."

"Elias!" I said.

Elias turned on his heel, and then as easily as exhaling a breath, leaped into his wolf form and ran back toward the manor. I called his name again, but he didn't stop — so I pursued him, leaping into my wolf as well. I took off after him and followed him back toward the manor. Instead of heading inside, he ran toward the gardens.

I followed after him. His face turned longingly toward the northern forests, but we couldn't go for a run now and risk leading the Fae directly to our citizens. Instead, Elias shook out his pelt, exhaled hard, and then trotted into the gardens.

It was odd to be in the rose gardens in our wolf shapes. I was used to ambling through these gardens with my handmaidens or members of the Court, discussing whatever political upset needed our attention. In my wolf shape, the scent of the roses was nearly cloyingly sweet, overwhelming in its intensity. I trotted to Elias side and nudged my head against his. *Everything okay?*

Elias pulled his upper lip back and growled, low, but not at me. It was absolute frustration. *What is that general thinking, asking for talks? After all the damage the Fae caused while you were in Cruora?*

Maybe we can come to an agreement, I answered. I doubt it, but perhaps you held her off long enough to deter another attack.

If that were the case, why would she insist you are the true leader?

I shifted back into my human form, and a laugh burst out of my chest as soon as I was back to having my proper vocal cords. I wound my arms around Elias' strong neck, then flopped back onto the grass. I pulled his wolf body atop mine, savoring the familiar weight and softness of his fur. All I could see was him, and the rosebushes arcing over our heads.

"Silly wolf," I teased, nuzzling into his fur. "You're playing right into her hands."

Elias tipped his head to the side curiously.

"She's trying to get under your skin, and it's working," I said. "She wants to pull us apart. There is no one true leader of Frasia. You know that."

He chuffed, and then with a crackle of shifter magic, he was atop of me in his human form. Elias groaned with frustration and pushed his face into the curve of my neck. "It's petty of her. I'd like to meet her on the battlefield myself."

"Perhaps you will," I said. I raked my fingers through his soft, dark hair. "It's just a war tactic. She's a cunning woman. It was only Corrine's wits that allowed her to escape from Draunar in the first place."

Elias climbed to his feet, then offered his hand. I took it and he pulled me up.

"What do you think she wants?" he asked.

"I don't know," I admitted, "but I intend to find out."

We had one night before the battle. The inevitability hung over me like a shadow.

Elias felt it, too. We made our way back to our chambers, and in the cool darkness of the room I kissed him long and slow. I savored every touch, every breath. I tried to memorize the weight of his hands on my waist, the rich murmur of his voice, the soothing scent of his skin when I kissed his neck.

It was sweet and slow. In the aftermath, he held me close. I pillowed my head on his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart. I didn't want to sleep. I didn't want to face the battlefield.

I didn't want to think that this might be our last night together.

But despite the despair that weighed like a stone in my chest, eventually the steady beat of his heart lulled me to sleep.

Too soon, though, I woke up to deep darkness, and my armor laid out at the foot of the bed. In silence we prepared for war.

In the gray darkness before dawn, Elias and I mounted our horses outside of the manor.

Our soldiers were waiting in the city, south of the manor, between the gates and the balds, where I would meet Corinne. My plain leather armor sat snug against my body, the weight comforting, matching the leather bracers on my forearms. The canvas pants were snug as well, but my feet were bare. I wore my hair in a tight plait, pulled back out of my face. At my side, Elias was dressed similarly, in leather armor, and his feet were bare too.

He nodded, gesturing for me to lead the way.

I swallowed down the anxiety threatening to suffocate my mind.

With a few soldiers behind us, Elias and I made our way through the quiet city to the southern gates. Behind the wall, Kodan, Bozhin, and Fina all stood with their soldiers. The men and women of Frasia were armored, and all of them had weapons, some more elegant than others. As we passed, the soldiers stood at attention and thumped their fists against their chests.

The sky turned rosy pink with the coming dawn. Kodan pushed open the southern gates. I squared my shoulders, pressed my heels into my horse's flanks, and guided her out onto the balds.

Then, just as it had happened in the town square, a thunderclap rang out through the quiet morning. A portal burst into existence as the atmosphere clawed itself open, revealing the swirling darkness behind it.

An immense black stallion leaped elegantly out of the portal and landed gracefully on the balds. It tossed its head and pawed at the ground as if it were hungry to gallop forward.

The Fae Queen tightened her hands on the horse's reins, then urged him forward. She was dressed in delicate silver armor, so fine and detailed it looked as if it were spun from spiders' silk. Her hair was shimmery white, falling straight to her elbows. Her dramatic features were narrow, and her dark eyes were penetrating as she guided the horse forward. Behind her, soldiers spilled out of the portal, on horseback and on foot, swiftly forming a semi-circle behind their queen.

Elias and I urged our horses forward.

"The Queen alone!" Corinne called. Her voice rang like a bell across the balds.

"Reyna..." Elias murmured.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I can handle her.” I wasn’t sure if that was true, but if Corinne wanted to speak to me alone, I would do it. “You said I would prove myself to be the Queen on the battlefield, right?”

I’d meant it to lighten his mood, but his gaze remained serious. “This isn’t what I meant.”

“Elias,” I whispered, “do you trust me?”

“More than you know,” he said.

“Let me do this. Please.”

He held my gaze for a long moment. Gold flickered in his dark irises, and the corners of his lips turned down. There was a strange tug in my chest, a feeling like...like he thought he might be looking at me for the last time.

“Go,” he whispered. “For Nightfall.”

He turned and led his horse back toward the gates.

In the center of the balds, far from her army of Fae, Corinne waited on the back of the black stallion. The breeze caught her white hair and blew it to the side elegantly. The stallion pawed the balds again. Despite the anger and determination that I carried, it was impossible to deny the Fae Queen’s beauty. I remembered the seemingly endless nights we’d spent deep in the caverns of Draunar’s cave, reading books side-by-side. That Corinne had been something like a friend to me, before she harnessed my shifter magic to force me into Faerie with her.

I hardly recognized the ferocious woman I approached. But no longer was I the scared wolf she’d kidnapped and overpowered.

“Queen Corinne,” I said as I approached.

“Reyna,” Corinne said with a toothy smile. “I’m pleased to see you in such fine conditions.”

“Fine?” I asked, glancing around. My mare tossed her head. “Surrounded by our soldiers on all sides?”

“On a beautiful day,” Corinne said, “under a lovely sunrise, on land that will soon be ours.”

I blinked. “Ours?”

“I’m quite proud of you, Reyna,” Corinne said. “You’ve done well for yourself in Frasia and built up a strong reputation. You’re an impressive Queen. Certainly, you’ve done better than I expected.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I shot back. “What have you called this meeting for?”

“To speak with you,” she said. “What else? I’ve missed you, Reyna.”

Anger burned in my chest. “If that were true, you would not have damaged Efra like you did — and I wouldn’t have lost so many wolves at the edges of Fae swords.”

Corinne smiled again. “Well, sacrifices must be made in the pursuit of greatness.”

“What is your pursuit?” I asked. “You wish to take over Frasia? It’s a fool’s errand. It will only end in pain.”

“Is that truly what you believe?” Corinne asked.

“Yes,” I said. Was that a flicker of the woman I met in the caverns of Shianga behind her eyes? “This war is useless. It’s doomed. There’s no reason for us to be fighting like this — we can come to a diplomatic agreement for the betterment of both of our Realms. I know you’ve been hurt by the dragons, but now—”

Corinne barked a laugh, cutting me off. “Are you truly that naive? You think the Fae would meet the shifters across the table of diplomacy?”

“For both of our Realms, yes,” I said. “Isn’t that what you want? To heal Faerie? A return to prosperity for the Fae?”

“Of course,” she said. “But to think that can be achieved with diplomacy...you are not the Queen I thought you were. Prosperity will come to the leader with the most power. And I will never be without power again. Never.” Her eyes burned with rage. “All of Faerie suffered while the dragons of Shianga kept me away. I will not risk that that happening ever again.”

“Then we are at an impasse,” I said. “What do you want from me?”

The grin returned. “I’m here to offer you a chance to have power of your own. True power. Power unlike anything you’ve ever imagined.”

I tightened my grip on my horse’s reins. “What do you mean?”

“I see potential in you, Reyna,” Corinne said. “You’re smart. Cunning. Determined. You have strong shifter magic. I want you to work with me, not against me, as a leader of Faerie. I want you to be my eyes and ears in this Realm. I want you to be on the ground for me.”

My stomach soured. “You want me to work for you.”

“When I take over this Realm, it will still be in need of a leader. You will lead this Realm as a Fae Queen yourself.” She raised her eyebrows. “No more will you be surrounded by those who question and doubt you. You *will* be the true leader of Frasia. You will finally be able to be the Queen I know you could be. Together, we could achieve power beyond anything you could imagine.”

I furrowed my brow. Working *with* Corinne — I'd thought some about what she might propose to me, but leading Frasia under her command was not something I'd even imagined. To be a strong, unquestioned, powerful leader...it wasn't something I'd ever dreamed of.

And I realized, as I met her gaze steadily, it wasn't something I wanted at all.

"I already am the leader of Frasia," I said, "but I am nothing without my King by my side."

She scoffed. "The Bloody King is a joke. He can barely keep his own city safe, and you expect him to hold the Realm?"

"I would never turn my back on Nightfall," I hissed. "Not for anything you could offer me. If you thought there was ever a chance of that, then you are the fool of the two of us."

Her expression darkened. "You're making a mistake, Reyna. Consider what I'm offering you. And consider the death and destruction that will rain down on your pack if you refuse."

I'd made this mistake before, and I wasn't going to make it again. "There will be no such thing," I said. "You'll pay for what you've done to my pack. Of that you can be sure."

Corinne laughed again, bright and bell-like. "If you won't surrender and join me, then you and your wolves can prepare for war."

"Tell your soldiers the same," I said. "The wolves of Nightfall will not surrender without a fight."

With a shout, I dug my heels into my mare's flanks and guided her back to the gates of the city. "Wolves!" I cried. "Prepare for war!"

C orinne's horse nickered and reared up. She lifted her sword to the sky and screamed a long, high war cry. It was a shrieking, inhuman sound, like a bird shot down from the sky. The sound sent an icy rush of fear down my spine, but I didn't let it show. Behind her, Fae soldiers drew their weapons in unsettling unison.

I drew my own sword and lifted it to the sky. Behind me, my soldiers pounded their breastplates and shouted. Their voices carried through the air to drown out the screech of the Fae.

Then, behind the wall of Fae, the dark portal sparked with magic. It began to widen, eating away at the sky like a stain. The edges of the portal went up, up, up, until there was an immense wall of swirling darkness behind them.

In the distance, something roared.

A lot of somethings.

The horses nickered and swished their tails nervously. I tightened my grip on my mare's reins. "Hold!" I called. "Hold!"

Orange light glowed deep in the darkness. The roars grew louder, closer, and then with a rush of beating wings, dragons poured out the portal, surrounded by rushing flame. There were at least two dozen of them, maybe more. Flames poured from their mouths onto the balds, setting the scrubby grass alight and scorching it to nothing. They flew with soulless determination, over the balds, and directly to the city.

My horse whinnied and jerked backward, barely avoiding a burst of flame as the dragons soared overhead. The one who had expelled the flame barely noticed my reaction. It simply snapped its jaws shut and kept flying.

“They’re under Fae control!” I called. “Bozhin, to the dragons!”

Bozhin shifted into his immense war gryphon form. He cried out, and the few eagles at his side shifted into their forms as well. They took to the skies, streaking after the dragons. Bozhin led them higher, so they were above the beasts, and then led them in a rapid dive-bomb. Bozhin went talon first. He buried his claws in the muscular back of one of the dragons near the back of the group. It roared in agony, then fell silent as Bozhin dragged his talon down its neck. Its body fell lifeless from the sky, and landed behind us with a heavy thump.

Then the dragons realized they were under attack. The group turned upon the eagles as roars and war cries filled the air. Heat from the dragon’s flames made sweat bead at my temples.

To my left, arrows sang through the air. Fina, Kannis, and their soldiers had turned their bows on the dragons. Elias and Haulfrun shifted into their wolf forms and charged forward across the balds with a dozen others at their backs. Kodan and I remained in our human forms. I leaped off my mare and hit the scorched earth, and then we ran side by side with the swordsmen at our backs.

I gripped the hilt of my sword tightly as I charged toward the oncoming Fae and broke upon them like a wave.

The smell of burnt flesh and smoke prickled in my nostrils. Screams and roars sounded through the air, as did the clash of metal on metal, and the sickening thunk of metal on flesh. I was surrounded by chaos, noise and blood, but I could only focus on my own breath. My own sword.

I parried a Fae blade, then drove my weapon into the gap in his armor, just above his hips. With a grunt of exertion, I dragged it to the side and opened up a visceral gash. The Fae gasped in shock. He dropped his own weapon and grabbed the wound. Blood poured through his hands as he fell to his knees. I stepped over his body just in time to dodge another Fae strike. Magic poured off my blade, crackling through the air. A Fae in front of me staggered back, eyes widened as he gazed at my edge.

I grinned. *That’s right, I thought viciously, this time, I’m the one with the upper hand.*

I stepped forward, blood dripping from the blade of my sword.

A snarl sounded to my side. Haulfrun, in his dark brown wolf shape, barreled into a Fae behind me. He knocked a tall, dazed Fae to the ground, then buried his teeth in the Fae’s neck. Blood poured from the wound. The

Fae roared, then slammed a knife into Haulfrun's side and twisted. Haulfrun howled in rage, then with a crackle of magic, he shifted back into his human form. He gazed down at the wound in his ribs, deep and gushing blood. The shifter met my eyes, wide-eyed and terrified, and then collapsed.

For me. He saved me at his own life's expense.

The Fae pushed Haulfrun's body off of himself and staggered up to his feet, his neck still bleeding from the wolf's teeth. With a scream of rage and despair I charged him, dodged his blade, and then drove my sword through his chest with all the strength I could muster.

"For Nightfall," I hissed. I pulled the blade out of his chest, and the soldier slumped down dead.

I whirled around, sword still drawn, ready to take down this entire Fae army myself.

"Reyna!" A man screeched. His deep voice was tinged with the inhuman high pitch of the Fae war cry.

I turned toward the sound. Eodwin stood in a clearing of bodies, both Fae and wolf. His armor was stained with blood, and his eyes were pale and wild as he bared his sharp teeth at me. He took a step toward me. His sword was so long that its tip dragged through the earth, still wet with blood.

"Foolish girl," he snarled. "You think your wolves can defeat the Fae? Your little swords are a cute trick. You think that will be enough to save you?"

I said nothing. I held up my sword in front of my eyes. Blood dripped from the steel.

Eodwin laughed, high and cruel, and then lunged forward with stunning Fae speed. He brought his sword down in a high arc, I parried it, and as our blades connected, sparks of powerful magic flew off, like flame from flint striking. I dug my feet into the earth and pushed his blade back. I dodged his next blow and aimed a strike at his side. He stepped out of reach and the blade clattered against his armor.

I'd sparred with many wolves, and fought some, but I'd never stood against a foe like Eodwin. He moved fast, and his strikes were punishingly strong. I met him with all the strength I had left in me. I was able to land a few blows on his arms, and one on his shoulder, but even enhanced, my sword did little damage. His armor and sword had been enhanced with some old Fae magic of their own, something that rendered the alchemized moonstone no worse than a mild itch.

I had to rely on my skills. I met his sword with mine. Clang. Clang. His eyes burned with rage as he pushed me backward. He grinned that sharp-toothed smile, like he wanted to devour me himself. He pushed his blade against me, forcing me back step by step, then suddenly he lunged down and dragged his claws — claws?! — over the meat of my thigh. His fingers, like his teeth, were sharp and threatening, like that of a beast, and with ease he opened four gashes in my muscle. Pain seared through me, and I gasped as my knees quivered. I lost my balance and fell backward. But I still had my sword.

“Silly wolf,” Eodwin sneered. “Thinking you’re a warrior. You’re nothing but a lost little girl out here on the battlefield.”

“I am more than a wolf,” I said through gritted teeth. I pushed through the pain and clambered back up to my feet. My sword weighed heavily in my hand, but I narrowed my eyes and lifted it up. “I am a Queen.”

Eodwin laughed. The made the hair on my nape stand on end. I gripped my sword, ready to strike him down.

He extended his clawed hand. Magic sprang through the air. Bright white light exploded from his hand, lanced toward me, and struck me deep in my gut. I screamed in shock and agony and was driven backward, flat onto my back. I dropped my sword. Then all I knew was pain — burning, sparking pain, deep inside me, like the magic was eating away at my very organs. The energy burned at my lungs, wrapping around them and squeezing. Every breath burned. I gazed up at the sky, mouth open as I gasped for air.

Overhead, the sky was bright with early morning light. The sky was blue and cloudless where it wasn’t marred by the dark portal. No eagles or dragons streaked across the sky. I wondered if the gryphon had taken down the dragons. I wondered if Efra still stood. I wondered if the citizens were still safe in the forests north.

I wondered how Elias would lead without me.

Eodwin stepped forward with terrifying deliberateness. He stood over me, looming like a mountain, then lifted his sword, saying nothing. He just smiled.

Then an immense wolf barreled into Eodwin, knocking him back. The animal snarled, his gold eyes burning with rage.

Elias.

His pelt was matted to his body with blood, and he was riddled with shallow gashes. The king’s maw was stained with gore as he snarled his rage.

Eodwin's eyes widened as he scrambled backward, but there were too many bodies surrounding us for him to get away. He barely had time to open his mouth before Elias lunged forward. He gripped the general's head in his jaws and with one hard shake, tore it clean off.

With a toss of his neck, Elias threw the general's head into the fray of battle. The body beneath him twitched once and fell still.

I collapsed back onto the grass. As much as my heart soared to see Elias, it did nothing to ease the pain still burning through every inch of my body. Though Eodwin hadn't been able to kill me, whatever spell he inflicted on me certainly would.

“**R**eyna!” Elias’ voice was faraway. I felt like I was deep underwater, sinking lower and lower, and each cry of sounded more and more distant to my ears.

Elias fell to his knees at my side. He’d shifted back into his human form. His leather armor was bloodstained and pockmarked from swords and arrows, and his skin was darkened with blood and dirt. He gazed down at me with his dark, gold-flecked eyes, and even with the pain still burning through me, I felt soothed.

He hauled me close, his arms tight around my body. Being close to him was like being in the eye of a hurricane. Around us, Ealric and Kodan fought back the Fae with a flurry of ruthless, unstoppable strikes.

Elias tipped his forehead against mine. His hands were firm on my waist, holding me close. I gasped and twitched in his hold as a new rush of pain surged through me. It was like Eodwin had his claws deep in my gut and was twisting hard. I tried to choke out Elias’ name, but I couldn’t make the words form.

“Please,” Elias whispered. He closed his eyes tightly as a tear slipped from the corner of his retina and fell softly onto my cheek. “Just hold on. Hold on, Reyna.”

He kept speaking to me, but I couldn’t understand his words, not over the chaos surrounding him and the blood pounding in my ears. It just hurt so much — ceaseless pain unlike anything I’d ever felt before. At some point I managed to form words.

“Hurts,” I said, clinging to him. “Please.”

Please *what*, I wasn't sure. The pain was so fierce, so overwhelming, that I trembled and twitched with the force of it.

I just wanted it to end. Maybe I wanted him to let me go.

Anything. Anything but this endless torture. My eyes rolled back as the pain crawled into my throat, burning and scratching and tearing me from the inside.

"Elias!" Ealric shouted. He held back a wild-eyed Fae, gnashing its sharp teeth as it lunged for him. "The ring! Use the ring!"

"Ring." Elias' eyes widened, then he grasped the necklace and wrenched it from beneath the collar of my shirt. He tore the chain with one strong pull. The fang fell into the earth, but Elias hardly noticed. He held the delicate ring in the palm of his hand.

"The moonstone!" Ealric drove his sword through the Fae's neck. "Use the moonstone!"

"I've got you, Reyna," Elias said. "I'm here." Then he crushed the ring in his hand.

Power melted into the air. It was a strange blend of clarity and separation — as if I was drawn up from the underwater depths where I was trapped, and brought up into Elias' arms. But I couldn't hear the battle around us anymore. All I could hear was the pounding of my own heart.

Elias pressed his hand to my chest.

I took a deep, gasping breath, like I had just broken through the surface of the sea, as cool power rolled through me. My hands flew to Elias' arms and clung desperately, as the moonstone power coursed through my veins. It eliminated the burning inside me and even stitched up the terrible gashes in my thighs. My vision cleared, and the fog lifted from my mind.

"Reyna?" Elias smoothed the hair from my forehead. His brow was still deeply furrowed in concern.

"Hi," I whispered.

"Gods above," Elias choked out. He leaned down and kissed me fiercely. "I thought I lost you."

The moonstone ring was obviously enchanted differently than the swords were — it had healing properties in it. Thank God Ealric had been here to tell Elias what to do. My whole body ached with exhaustion, but the pain had dissipated. I returned Elias' kiss, then he helped me sit up.

"We need to get you back to the manor," he said. Around us, the battle still raged, and the Fae were raging at Kodan and Ealric in their attempts to

get to us both. “Now.”

I shook my head. Then, with some effort, I staggered to my feet. Elias jumped up next to me, steadying me with one hand on my waist. “No,” I said. “This isn’t over.”

I picked up my sword from where it had fallen into the dirt. My grip was tight on the hilt despite my exhaustion, but this time something had changed. I could feel the magic coursing through it, moonstone and alchemy both - the sword seemed charged with power, as if it were alive.

“Reyna,” Elias said, “you’ve done enough, now we need to--”

A shrill laugh broke through the noise of the battle. The Fae suddenly stopped in their attacks and retreated, forming a solid line of defense across the battlefield. Then, the line parted in the center, and Corinne stepped forward.

She looked untouched, as if she hadn’t been a part of the battle at all. I would’ve thought that were the case, were it not for the blood staining her long, thin silver sword.

Wolf blood. Nightfall blood.

Rage ran electric through me, setting my nerves alight.

Elias growled, showing his teeth. His eyes burned gold. He moved to stand in front of me, to defend me from the Fae Queen, but I caught him by the upper arm.

“No,” I said. “She’s mine.”

He looked back at me, and his lips parted in shock. “Reyna, your eyes...”

“The moonstone,” I said. “I can handle her, Elias.”

Whatever power was in the moonstone ring was in me now, wrapped around my bones, vibrating through me and driving away the last vestiges of exhaustion. Perhaps it was visible in my eyes, swirling with my shifter magic.

To my surprise, Elias’ lips curled into a pleased smirk. He took a step back. “I’m right behind you.”

I took a step closer to Corinne, my sword in hand. Power, anger, and determination surged through me. Corinne had brought so much despair to my realm, her soldiers had killed so many of my wolves, and now their blood stained the scorched balds of Frasia.

“Let’s finish this,” I snarled. “Just me and you.”

“**Y**ou foolish girl,” Corinne hissed. She took a step forward. The blood-soaked mud sucked at her boots. She was indifferent to the bodies she stepped over, both Fae and wolf. Somehow, her long white hair was still perfect, hanging like a sheet around her sharp features. “Frasia is mine. This whole Realm is mine. First, I’ll take your quaint little city and install myself as Queen. Then it will be easy for my armies to overrun the other little towns throughout Frasia. The wolves can join me or die.” She narrowed her eyes. “You still have a choice here, Reyna. You can still join me in ruling this realm.”

“Never,” I snarled.

“You wolves are losing,” she said. “Look around you.”

I didn’t. I didn’t need to shift my gaze to know that soldiers were strewn across the fields, cut down by Fae blades - I didn’t need to count the Fae bodies littering the grass, nor the eagles and dragons behind me.

“Soon your body will be just another corpse on the battlefield,” Corinne said with a grin. “It’s a shame to see such a bright wolf die. But I will still enjoy doing it.”

Bright white tendrils of magic oozed from her hand, then wound around the hilt of her sword and its thin silver blade. Her eyes glowed with the same shining white, and her face transformed just slightly. It was barely noticeable, only the sharpening of her teeth and the heightening of her cheekbones, but it was enough to make her look slightly monstrous. Slightly different, like the mind-controlled Fae I’d encountered at the Cruoran border.

But there was no fear in me. Resolve straightened my spine and narrowed

my focus.

The cool, sweet power of the moonstone coursed through me. I lifted my sword. The magic —whatever it was — danced from my fingertips in pale lavender sparks and skipped down the handle of my sword. The sparks lingered, hovering around the steel. Corinne’s eyes widened briefly, but the shock passed like a flash of lightning. She bared her sharp teeth, then charged forward with a blood-curdling shriek.

The first clash of our swords sent me reeling backward. The Fae power burned through me, like Eodwin’s lightning strike, but this time the pain didn’t linger. It ran through me and dissipated. I dug my heels into the dirt and held strong against her, as her white stare fixed on mine. It was an expression I’d never seen on her, full of manic rage, hungry for power. More lavender sparks danced up my blade, and when they touched Corinne’s magic, they burned through the white tendrils. She hissed in pain.

Around us, more Fae rushed in, launching snarling attacks on Elias, Ealric, and Kodan. I trusted them to hold their own and hold the soldiers back from me as I focused my attacks on Corinne.

I grinned at her. “That all you got, Queen?”

She shrieked again, then swung her sword back and brought it down with the force of a warhammer.

The world seemed to slow down. Each breath burned in my throat. The sun glinted off Corinne’s white hair, and off her bloodstained blade, as she turned on her heel to follow my movements. I parried her sword, the sound of steel clashing against steel drowned out by the crackle of our competing magics. I roared and bared my own teeth. Then, driving my foot hard into her shin, I sent her stumbling backward. I launched forward, slashing my sword at her throat, but she dodged, knocked me backward with a punch, and then swung her sword in another high arc.

Corinne was fast, faster than anyone I’d ever fought, yet the moonstone quickened my heart and my feet as well. I ducked under her sword and nearly caught an elbow to the face, took it to the shoulder instead, then slid the edge of my blade across her hip where her armor ended. She snarled in pain and whirled on me, rebutting with a hard blow from her sword into my side. Despite the sword’s thin blade, it hit like a horse’s kick and nearly knocked the breath from my lungs.

Our battle raged on, our blades clashing against each other under the golden morning light. Each attack brought more sparks dancing out of my

hands, until my blade nearly glowed lavender with power. The moonstone's magic cut through Corinne's, until the tendrils of magic had been sliced to nearly nothing. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and her perfect hair finally grew tangled and stained with blood as we drew it from each other in shallow cuts.

Despite the exertion, I wasn't tired. Each blow only made me feel stronger, alight with power, hungry for more. My power was draining hers, leaving her gaunt and exhausted as we clashed in the center of the balds.

Finally, she swung her sword too high. I darted forward and dragged my blade across her upper arm, leaving a deep gash. She gasped and dropped her sword as blood gushed from the wound. Then I drove a hard kick into her midsection, right against her silver armor, and the force of it sent her flying backwards and onto her ass.

She scrambled backward, hands and feet both in the blood-soaked mud. Her eyes were no longer shining white. Even her hair was dark with sweat and dirt. Blood gushed from the wound on her arm, and her silver armor was now stained.

She didn't look like a Queen at all. She looked like a terrified girl, wide-eyed and stammering.

"You won't face your fate with honor?" I snarled as I stepped forward.

"Reyna," Corinne gasped. "Please—don't you remember—in the caverns, how close we were—we could still—please—"

The desperation in her voice made my stomach turn. I was a merciful leader, but this wasn't a request for mercy. It was pathetic. A real leader would accept defeat honorably, and be glad to die for the safety of her soldiers.

All Corinne wanted was power.

And now, she'd never have it. Never again.

Internally I gathered all the power running through me, then with a focused effort, pushed it into my sword. The blade glowed with power.

Corinne's eyes widened.

I stood over her. I met her eyes.

Then I drove the blade through her armor and into her heart. Smooth as butter.

She gasped. Blood gushed around the wound and slid over her silver breastplate and into the mud. I held her gaze as her head fell back. She coughed blood - it stained her lips and pallid skin.

The light drained from her eyes. Her body fell still.

White light burst from her like a sonic boom. It rushed over me in a burning hot wind, but left no marks or residue in its wake. The power traveled across the battlefield, ripping through the chaos. Fae shrieks filled the air for one long, earsplitting moment.

Then, silence.

Fae soldiers crumpled to the earth like puppets with their strings cut. The wolves and eagles were left standing, confused and stunned. With a rush of cold wind, the portal snapped closed.

I sheathed my sword, still wet with Corinne's blood.

Elias stood over a crumpled Fae soldier. His sword was bloodied, as was his leather armor, and his eyes burned gold as my husband's gaze caught mine.

"It's over," I whispered.

I thought he couldn't hear me, but perhaps the wind caught my words and carried them to his ears, because he sheathed his sword and smiled.

I stood near the southern gates of the city with Elias at my side. Shoulder-to-shoulder, we looked over the battlefield.

We'd lost wolves and eagles alike. The Fae who had collapsed hadn't been killed, as I'd thought—they'd been knocked unconscious, and now were beginning to rustle back into consciousness, confused and unsure. Fina was leading the soldiers in finding the Fae who still lived, cuffing them in copper, and then taking them to the dungeons.

Kodan guided the soldiers in gathering the bodies of the dead. She picked her way through the battlefield carefully, slowly, peering at the fallen like she was looking for something. Someone. After a few moments, she found him: Haulfrun, the promising young private, his body bloodied and lifeless. Kodan lifted him into her arms wordlessly and carried his body across the battlefield to the edge, where the grass was undamaged, and the bodies of the soldiers lay side-by-side.

There were so many dead. So many lost. Even dragons had fallen from the sky, their bellies clawed open by eagle talons.

"You did well," Elias said, low. "Efra still stands."

"At what cost, though?" I asked. "We lost so many."

"We did," he said. "But not everyone. And Corinne is defeated. Decisively."

"It shouldn't have happened at all," I whispered. Guilt chewed at me like a hungry dog. "These soldiers should be alive."

"Reyna." Elias put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face him. "You can't think like that."

“Like what?” I asked.

His golden gaze burned into mine. “You can’t undo what’s been done. Our subjects need us now more than ever.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “How can they trust us after so many have died?” I asked quietly. “What will we say when the citizens return from the forests?”

“We say the war is over,” Elias said fiercely. “That the Fae Queen is defeated, and Frasia remains free. And we stand strong for our pack.”

I closed my eyes briefly. He was right. After so much death and turmoil, the wolves of Nightfall needed to be able to rely on us.

“Your pain only shows you are a good Queen,” Elias said. “It doesn’t mean we made the wrong decision.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I murmured.

“I wish it was,” Elias said.

I embraced him, indifferent to the blood and dirt still caked on our skin. Standing here and gazing at the battlefield would do nothing to help the pack though. Elias went into the field to help move bodies. I found Adora, and after a brief hug, she led me to the scorched space in the gardens, where she and many of the manor servants were cutting wood and building a funeral pyre.

We worked in silence, chopping logs and building the monument in silence. We worked through the afternoon, and as the sun fell low onto the horizon, we carried the bodies to the pyre and laid them atop the structure.

Elias walked from the battlefield last, carrying the body of the young Haulfrun in his arms. He laid his body on the pyre. Then he gazed out over the wooden structure, built quickly but with care.

He stepped back, and I stepped forward. I laid a few white flowers upon Haulfrun’s chest. His body was still dirtied, bloodstained, but his face was calm, at peace, as if he were merely asleep. I brushed a strand of dark hair off his forehead.

Guilt and grief made my chest pull tight. There was so much loss. So much death. It filled the atmosphere like fog, surrounding me, and all the surviving soldiers who looked on with expressions pinched and aching.

Elias faced the pyres. “Soldiers of Nightfall,” he said in a deep, rumbling voice, “you have defended your pack well. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

There was nothing more to say.

He nodded to me. Adora handed us each a torch, then lit them both. Her face was stony with resolve, but grief still shone in her blue eyes.

Elias and I stood at either end of the pyre. Flames crackled as I held it skyward, and Elias did the same. The flickering light cast his face in deep shadow. Our eyes met, and without speaking, we both lowered the torches to the base. The flames caught the dry brush built into the base, then climbed up the wooden structure. In the space of a few breaths the pyre was engulfed, and the bodies were as well. The fire bathed us all in orange light and dark shadow as the lost soldiers became silhouettes within it.

My chest felt tighter, and tighter, until something deep within me snapped. My wolf surged forward and I shifted without thinking, without even deciding. The grief and pain ran so deep I could only express it in my wolf shape. I sat back on my haunches and sounded a low, sonorous howl.

At my side, Elias shifted too, and his howl joined mine. Magic crackled around us as all the wolves transformed and sang our losses to the rising moon.

In the week after the battle, Elias and I hardly left our chambers.

We never really got a honeymoon, not after the Choice, our marriage, and that ill-fated trip to Shianga. The wolves and eagles all needed some time to recover after the battle, and before the reconstruction efforts began in earnest, so we took a few days to live in that limbo: recovering, grieving, and savoring each others' company.

It was early evening, and the sun was low in the sky, painting our chambers with beams of golden light. I sprawled on the bed in just a soft dressing gown, skin still damp from my long, luxurious bath. We'd spent most of the day in bed, lounging — I'd reviewed a few more maps sent over from Cruora, for pleasure more than anything else, while Elias reviewed the accounting of the resources we'd used in the battle. As the afternoon lazily ambled toward evening, we'd both known we had to eventually prepare for the upcoming celebration. The manor was open to the citizens tonight, for dinner and dancing and wine, to celebrate our victory and mourn our dead.

I was looking forward to the dinner, but even after a week I still felt exhausted. And the bed was so comfortable.

Elias stepped out of the washroom as steam rolled out from behind him. He only had a towel wrapped around his hips, and he scrubbed another towel roughly over dark hair. The motion made his his face blacken, and he nearly growled as he did it, like a wolf unhappy it was being bathed. Then he tossed it aside and raked his fingers through his hair. His cheeks were flushed from the heat of his bath.

Funny. I never thought I would ever consider Elias of Nightfall *cute*.

I let my gaze wander down the bare expanse of his muscular torso, the familiar curve of his defined pecs, the dip of his waist, his abs, down to the hand holding up a towel around his hips. I bit my lower lip as heat pooled low in my gut, and fiddled with the thin strip of silk keeping my dressing gown closed.

Elias smirked and lifted an eyebrow. "What's that look mean?"

"Come here," I demanded. "Kiss me."

"Love it when you're so nice and polite like that," Elias teased.

He climbed onto the bed and crawled over me, letting the towel slide from his hips. He knocked my fingers away from the string on my dressing gown and unfastened it himself, then slid the soft fabric open. He caught my lips in a sweet kiss as he flattened his hand on my belly and smoothed over my skin. I hummed into Elias' lips as I slid my hands over the strong planes of his back, and down to his pert ass. I squeezed.

He chuckled into the kiss, then dropped his weight atop me hard enough to make me huff out in a surprised "Oof!" That only made him laugh again as he kissed my cheek, my jaw, my neck.

I hummed in pleasure and wrapped my arms around him tightly, keeping his body pressed close to mine. I loved being this close, loved the feeling of all that warm muscle pinning me down, keeping me safe. We kissed for a few long, lazy minutes, slow and luxurious, until the heat building low in me had started to become an insistent pressure between my legs. I hooked one leg around his and rocked my hips up, hungry for more contact. Already his desire was a hot, insistent press against my hip. The motion of my hips made him growl, but it did nothing to pick up the pace. He still kissed me slowly, adoringly.

"Need you," I sighed into him.

That worked. He bared his teeth briefly against my neck, then kissed me in the same place. Internally, my wolf wagged her tail in delight, at the closeness, at the thought of submitting to our mate. Elias rolled off me, but only so he could set a hand at my waist and guide me onto my side. He pressed his chest flush to my back and kissed my neck again, over my sensitive nape, and that made my wolf even more delighted. I gasped with pleasure and tilted my head back to give him more skin to kiss.

He pressed his hand against my chest, then his touch trailed lower, over my breasts, my waist, my belly, and then down to cup between my legs, where I was already dripping wet with desire. He pressed his hand against me

possessively, and the touch made me gasp and rock my hips.

“Please,” I insisted. I turned my head to catch his lips in a searing, messy kiss. Suddenly my desire was a lot more urgent, hungrier — I needed him *now*. It was as if I wanted to make up for lost time.

“Anything you want, little wolf,” Elias growled. Then he grasped my thigh in one strong hand, guiding me to raise it just enough. The manhandling only made desire burn hotter in my core. The hard, hot promise of him slid through my wet folds, and I gasped, legs twitching with the desire to snap closed and hold him in place. But I couldn’t, not with his hand still grasping my thigh.

I groaned. I wanted him so, so badly.

I didn’t have to say anything. He pressed his lips to my nape, then slowly, slowly, slid his length inside me.

Ecstasy surged through me, from my hips all the way to the crown of my head, and down to my curling toes. I reached back and ran my fingers through his hair, holding him close as he panted into the curve of my neck. He pulled his hips back just enough to rock forward, more of a grind than a thrust, and it was so deep and pleasurable, it nearly knocked the breath from my lungs.

He released my leg and slid his hand over my belly instead, possessively, then dipped his fingers lower to my most sensitive place. I gasped as he worked my body expertly, sending dizzying feelings that skittered electric over my skin.

I felt it then, the sensations I’d had throughout the week. The moonstone magic hummed in my chest, heightening the responses. The same pale lavender sparks that I’d sent dancing over the blade of my sword moved over my skin now, but not with the same angry energy I’d had on the battlefield. This was just joy. Overwhelming. The sparks didn’t harm Elias, but he noticed them, I knew he did from the small gasp of recognition and the stutter in his hips.

“Don’t stop,” I urged. “Please.”

Elias hummed agreeably, and thrust into me with a deep, steady rhythm, working his fingers at the same pace. I kept clinging to his hair, arching my back desperately as I lost myself to the throes of pleasure. He knew my body, could read all of my unspoken signals even when the lavender sparks danced over my skin. Pleasure coiled tight, low in my gut. I gasped, my muscles clenched tight, and then released all at once as my orgasm crashed through

me. I saw stars and sparks behind my eyelids and felt overjoyed by my release, shivering through it. Elias groaned my name, low and long. He set his teeth at my nape and bit gently as my release brought him over the edge to his own.

I was still shuddering when he stilled. He rubbed his hand over my belly again, keeping me close, still seated inside me. I folded my hand over his. My wolf was pleased at the touch, and I couldn't help but wonder if maybe... maybe now that the war was over, now that we were together, settling into a rhythm of leadership...maybe soon, I'd be carrying our heir.

Elias nuzzled his nose behind my ear. "Love you," he murmured sleepily.

My heart somersaulted. I squeezed his forearm and wriggled happily, despite the exhaustion, the sweat on my just-bathed skin, and the now fading lavender sparks. "Love you too."

In the afterglow, I leaned against the headboard of our bed with the blankets pulled up to my hips. Amity and Rue had delivered a small meal a few hours ago, and Elias carried the tray from the table to the bed. We shared a few bites of fruit and soft bread with butter, and Elias poured us each a small glass of fragrant red wine.

It felt indulgent, luxurious — like we were the leaders of a wealthy and peaceful nation. It was a glimpse of what life could be like once Frasia has recovered.

Elias popped a grape into his mouth, then settled on the bed next to me, careful not to jostle the tray at the foot of the bed. He smoothed his hand over my thigh and squeezed. "So you still have your magic," he murmured.

I laughed and squirmed a little closer to him, despite the nervousness curling in my chest at the mention of it. "I guess so," I said. "I thought it'd go away eventually, but..."

"It hasn't changed?" he asked.

I shook my head. "It feels like it's settling." I rubbed my hand over my sternum. "Like it's becoming more a part of me."

"Are you able to control it?"

"I think I will be," I admitted. "On the battlefield, I was able to. I was able to harness it and direct it into the sword to kill Corinne." The memory still made me shiver. Elias squeezed my thigh again, soothingly. "It was instinctive, then," I continued. "Like a muscle contraction. But I think I could learn to do it again, with the right help."

"We'll have to ask Ealric about it," Elias said. "He must know what kind

of magic was added to that moonstone.”

I folded my hand over Elias’. He turned his hand so we were palm-to-palm, then interlaced my fingers.

“I wish we had found your father’s fang,” I whispered.

Elias sighed in agreement. When he had pulled the necklace off to crush the ring, the fang had fallen into the mud, and had not been recovered in the mess of the battlefield. It still felt strange to go about my days without the familiar smooth ivory resting against my sternum. Elias still had his, but had not been wearing it in the days after the battle.

He kissed my temple briefly. “It’s a small price to pay for your life.”

I nodded, but still the loss ached.

“We’ll get something else made,” he said. “Perhaps some fine Fae jewelry? We’ll see what Lynx and Aerika can whip up.”

I giggled, surprised by the tease, then turned my head to catch his lips in a brief kiss. “I think they’d be relieved for a chance to make jewelry instead of weapons.”

“Maybe something that could help you channel the magic,” Elias said. “Similar to the sword.”

My heart swelled with affection. Even though I didn’t understand what the moonstone had done to me, I found I wasn’t afraid of it. With Corinne gone, there was a chance that things could change between Frasia and Faerie. Maybe there would be someone like Aerika — or even Aerika’s family — who could help me understand it. Perhaps what had happened to me could become a way to bridge our relations.

And Elias would help. He’d be at my side the entire time.

I caught his lips again in another kiss, which quickly became more heated. Soon his hand was back on my thigh, then sliding to my waist. Love and desire ran warmly through me, and just as I was about to climb into Elias’ lap for round two, he laughed into the kiss and squeezed my waist. “We have a dinner to get to.”

“What are they going to do if we’re late?” I teased. “Start without us?”

Elias laughed. “Good point.”

He kissed me again, but then I did sigh and pull back, with both hands on his chest.

“Not exactly a great look for us, though,” I said. “Being late to the celebratory dinner.”

“I agree,” he said, chasing my lips for another kiss, “but you almost had

me convinced.”

With some reluctance, we climbed out of bed and got ready for the dinner. I wore a dress, but it was nothing like the complicated, heavy gowns I wore for the events of the King’s Choice: it was a simple dark silk gown, with thin straps, that I wore with a warm fur-lined cloak over it. Elias dressed in black trousers and a white shirt. We both were barefoot as we made our way through the halls of the manor to the main banquet room.

Only court members were present in the main hall, feasting on wine and small plates as the servants finished setting the long banquet tables placed along the edges of the room, and the band tuned their instruments. Soon, the doors of the manor would be open to all the wolves of Nightfall, to come and eat and drink and dance and celebrate, but right now in the quiet of the early evening, it was just us. There was no fanfare as we made our way inside. I strolled toward the dais with its low table with my arm in the crook of Elias’ elbow.

Ealric was seated at the table on the low dais. As we approached, he stood and bowed respectfully. I hurried up the dais, holding my skirt up, and then surprised him by swinging my arms around his neck and pulling him down for a hug.

“Oh,” Ealric said. When he pulled away, he was smiling. He nodded at me. “You look lovely, Queen Reyna. You’ve recovered well?”

“As much as can be expected,” I said. Elias and I sat at the center of the table. Ealric sat at my right. He poured wine for us both.

I took a sip of the sweet red drink as the others filtered in. Aerika joined as at the table, seated with Lynx, as did other members of the Nightfall court, and soon low conversation filled the air.

I leaned closer to Ealric. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he said. “Anything.”

“Do you know what was in the ring you gave me?” I asked. “The one you had made for my mother?”

He pressed his lips together. “I wondered if you might ask that.”

“Did you know?” I pressed. “That it would affect me like that?”

He shook his head. “I knew it had healing properties,” he said. “Or...I hoped it did. I bought it off a Fae jeweler outside of Starcrest, before relations with Faerie worsened. I thought it was beautiful, and I wanted something she couldn’t get in Frasia proper.” He chuckled to himself. “I wanted to impress her. The jeweler told me it had healing properties — that it had strong, old

Fae magic. I never had a chance to give it to her. But I did have it looked at again, when I was older, to learn more about the magic. But there wasn't much the scholars of Starcrest could tell me. I knew it had healing powers, and I knew it was strong. But I didn't know..."

"That it would affect me like that," I said.

"That you would be able to wield it," he said. "You surprise me at every turn. Just like your mother did."

"I wish I could've met her," I said softly.

"I do, too." He folded his hand over mine on the table. "When you and Elias visit Starcrest next, I'll show you where she's buried. It's a beautiful part of the woods outside the city."

"I'd love that," I said around the sudden lump in my throat. Tears prickled hot behind my eyes, threatening to fall, which made Ealric stammer around a change of subject and pour more wine. Laughing, I blinked away the sheen of tears. "I mean that, though. We'll come visit as soon as things settle back to normal."

"Good," Ealric said. "You're welcome any time. As for the ring..." He glanced down the table at Aerika and Lynx, where they were deep in discussion. "You might have more luck asking them."

"I expect I will," I said. "Aerika!"

Aerika looked up, blinking curiously at me. "Yes, milady?"

"How goes the travel preparations?"

A huge grin appeared on her face. "Just wonderfully," she said. "Likely a few more weeks before we leave, as there's still much to do at the blacksmith's, but I'm quite excited."

"She'll make a fine alchemist," Lynx said, then patted Aerika's shoulder. Since the battle, Aerika had noticed a few slight changes in the Realm — she couldn't quite explain it to me, but she'd said it was like smelling a campfire in the distance. Something was changing. She was traveling back to Cruora with Lynx soon to hone both of their magics, and hopefully learn more about the moonstone, as well as reconnecting with Faerie. And with Lynx's messenger Falcon, it'd be much easier for us to communicate between the kingdoms.

"And that's a fine bit of diplomacy," Elias murmured, as if he could read my mind. "I hope we can send some wolves to join her once she's settled."

"And perhaps we can host some eagles more permanently, too," I agreed.

Then, laughter rang through the room as Fina, Kodan, and Adora all

walked into the main hall. Fina was in slacks, boots, and a fitted shirt, with a sword in a finely decorated sheath swung over her back. She looked fierce, with her head held high and her shoulders square, more confident than I'd ever seen her. Kodan was dressed in fine slacks and a dark shirt, with her feet bare, and her red hair tied up in a high bun. Adora hung off her arm, dressed in a fine cream and pale blue gown, the colors of Starcrest, with her blonde hair spilling loose over her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes closed tight as she laughed loud and bell-like at something Kodan said, which made Kodan flush slightly, grinning with pleasure at the sound. Kodan wound her arm around Adora's waist and pulled her closer.

I leaned into Elias' side. "They're cute, aren't they?"

He chuckled. "You know, when we were setting up the Choice, I didn't think I'd get a spy, a girlfriend for Kodan, and a Queen all in one fell swoop."

"Worked out pretty well, don't you think?" I kissed his cheek.

Under the table, he slid his hand over my knee. "I think it did."

The band began to play one of the quick-tempo jigs of Nightfall, the songs I'd learned to love so much. The guards swung open the doors to the manor, and the wolves of Efra began to filter in with laughter and shouts of delight, quickly filling the floor. The revelry began in earnest, then, as the wine flowed, and the room filled with joyous dance.

I stood from the dais, slid off my cloak, and then held out my hand to Elias. "Dance with me?" I asked.

He smiled, arching one brow. "You're sure?"

"I'm not very good at the jigs, yet," I admitted, "but if you're leading, I think I can keep up."

He stood up, then wrapped his arm around my waist and swept me into a kiss so full of love and affection my toes curled with it. Claps and cheers filled the room, but I hardly noticed, as all I cared about was the press of his lips against mine, and the gold in his eyes when he pulled away just enough to gaze at me.

"Yes," he agreed, "I think you can."

Six months later

“So you see,” the young wolf from Duskmoon said, “if the Court would be so kind as to offer us a line of credit to invest in developing the new aqueduct by the design I’ve showed you here, then I expect our crop output will be able to triple within the next two years.”

The boy couldn’t have been more than fifteen. He was bright-eyed and trembling with nerves as he laid out his plans to improve the farming mechanisms in Duskmoon. I leaned back in my seat, where I was seated on the low dais in the main room, and caught Elias’ eye next to me.

“It sounds like a good plan to me,” Elias murmured. “These are the kinds of innovations we should be encouraging, don’t you agree?”

I nodded. In the months since the war, reconstruction had started across Frasia. We’d rebuilt the manor, as well as the walls of the city. The buildings damaged in the fighting had been repaired as best we could. Then after that, Elias and I arranged for convoys to travel to each of the packs, providing resources and answers to all of those who had been affected by the fighting.

Everything was going well. But to my embarrassment, I often found myself a little...bored.

Fina caught my eye from where she stood in front of the dais. She raised one eyebrow, and I straightened up to better give the young wolf my full attention.

Since the end of the war, Fina had been working as my head spy, occasionally running missions to other packs and nations with Kodan. She’d come into her own as a spy of Nightfall, and when I saw her training with Adora in the barracks, she always stunned me with her new skill and speed. Admittedly at times I found myself jealous of her role in the Court. The regular business of leadership, like these meetings, was sometimes quite dull. I wanted to be traveling across Frasia again, camping, fighting, running in my wolf form.

“Um,” the boy said. “That’s... That’s my whole presentation.”

“Approved,” Elias said warmly. “Good work on this. My staff will meet you in the front room to discuss details.”

The boy’s eyes lit up. “Oh gods above,” he said, “of course, yes, thank you your Highness!” He swept into a deep bow, then hurried out of the main room with Nightfall servants at his back.

But there were benefits to leading. Seeing the skip in the boy's step did remind me of why Elias and I held these monthly meetings.

The doors to the main room swung open, and a wide-eyed guard rushed in. "Your Majesties," he said breathlessly, "there's a convoy here to see you."

"A convoy?" I asked.

Before the guard could explain, oddly familiar magic vibrated through the air. Internally, my wolf lifted her hackles. I stood up from my seat with one hand on the hilt of my sword.

A Fae strode through the doors of the hall. He was tall and lean, with shining white hair cropped close to his skull, bright blue eyes, and narrow features. His face was similar to the ones that still appeared in my nightmares: Corinne, flashing a white, sharp-toothed grin as she stepped over dead wolf after dead wolf. He wore no armor, just plain, fine white clothing, embroidered with the Fae insignia.

Behind him, two other Fae dressed in plain leather armor but without weapons walked behind him.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

Fina stepped in front of the dais and drew her sword.

"It's all right, Fina," I said. I stepped off the dais. Behind me, Elias was standing too, watching the Fae with careful, suspicious attention.

My hand was still on the hilt of my sword. Ever since Elias had used the moonstone to heal me, the Fae magic had remained. I felt it crackle now, its lavender light glowing from the sliver of blade visible at my hip.

The Fae noticed it too. His eyes widened slightly, and he took a small step back. He lifted both hands in a sign of surrender, and then inclined his head slightly.

"I only wish to speak to the Queen and King of Frasia," he said. "I come unarmed, and in good faith."

"Who are you?" I asked again, in a sharper tone.

"I am Dorian of the Fae," he said. "Heir to the throne, and brother of the late Corinne."

"Her brother?" Elias snarled. "How dare you darken our doorstep with your presence?"

"She was related to me by blood, but I did not consider her a true sister," Dorian said. "She hated me, and had me exiled from our kingdom to ensure I would not usurp her throne. I've finally made my way back, and those of us in Faerie are rebuilding, just as you are here in Frasia."

I dropped my hand from the hilt of my sword. This Fae seemed trustworthy. “Then what brings you to Frasia at all?”

“I hope to make amends,” Dorian said. “Corinne has damaged both of our Realms, though the damage is not irreparable.”

“Amends?” I asked. “How?”

“Before Corinne was abducted by the dragons of Shianga, there was some trade between the Realms,” Dorian said. “I’d hoped we could start there. Then, if trading relations are good, perhaps we could engage in more diplomacy.” He bowed again. “Our Realms are connected. We’re not meant to be so separate from each other. As the King of Faerie, I’d like to repair the relationships between our Courts, and show the shifters the Fae are not as bloodthirsty as Corinne would have you think.”

“A mad Fae,” Elias said. “I know that one leader’s behavior does not speak for all its people.”

Dorian nodded. “I’ve heard word of your father, King Elias,” he said, but there was no accusation in his voice. “I’ve seen what you’ve done to protect your pack and bring stability back to Frasia. I’d hoped you might understand I am trying to do the same.” Then he turned his gaze to me. “And Queen Reyna, the Fae owe you a great debt for deposing Corinne. I hope to show you our gratitude as our relationships heal.”

I looked over my shoulder. I met Elias’ eyes. He ducked his chin minutely.

“We’ll grant you a meeting,” I said. “The rift between shifters and Fae has gone on for too long. We will hear what you have to say.”

Dorian beamed, then swept into another dramatic bow. “I look forward to it.”

Fina escorted Dorian and his guards out of the manor, with instruction to follow them to their campsite and investigate it for anything suspicious. Dorian was more than happy to grant her access, and he chatted with her as they left as if they were old friends.

I sank back into my throne with a sigh.

“Still bored?” Elias murmured with a playful look.

I swatted his forearm as I bit back a laugh. “We still have a lot of meetings left for today,” I said. “But yes, that was a nice injection of excitement.”

“Perhaps he’ll be able to answer our questions,” Elias said, “about the moonstone, and your powers.”

I nodded. “And maybe about Aerika, too. Maybe there are more half-Fae hiding in Frasia or Faerie. There’s still so many questions.”

“Indeed,” Elias said. He folded his hand over mine and squeezed. “But perhaps this will be the start of a new era. For Faerie and Frasia both.”

I leaned over the space between our thrones and caught his lips in a brief, searing kiss. I smiled against his lips. I hadn’t told him yet, I wanted to be sure — but I was late.

There was a chance, just a chance, that we’d have our first child sooner rather than later. “And I’m honored to start it with you at my side, Elias.”

He smiled into the kiss. “And I you.” He sat back. “Now, are you looking forward to this next meeting? According to this list, another Duskmooon wolf is here with a new design for...” He squinted at the parchment. “Ah. Plumbing improvements.”

I grinned. Perhaps there were some dull parts to being Queen, but there was nowhere else I wanted to be. “Never been more excited in my life.”

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All I've ever wanted is to be part of the pack, but it's difficult when you're human. It never stopped my adopted wolf mother from loving me, but now that the biggest bully of our pack Troy is about to become alpha, he plans to ruin any chance I've got of fitting in.

I've already got enough problems without adding 'kidnapped' to my list. But that's exactly what happens when we're attacked and I'm taken captive by the alpha of the enemy pack.

I should hate Night, but he's nicer to me than Troy ever was, not to mention a hell of a lot sexier. I know our attraction is dangerous, but our connection sparks something in me I never expected, revealing there's much more to me than my human side.

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WOLVES OF THE NIGHT: BOOK 3

Lindsey Devin

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