

BLAKE GALLOWS

THE MOON RAVEN TRILOGY



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UNKINDNESS

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This book has adult and dark themes that may not be suited for all readers. For a list, see my linktree landing page. @blakegallows

**YOUR MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS**

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To those who have hidden in the shadows of the past, do not dwell there  
when you have the light amongst you.

## PRONUNCIATIONS

ALDRAMANI (AL-DRA-MAN-EE)

RAVENDENE (RAVEN- DEAN)

LOEMA (LOW-MAH)

DEMETREY (DE-MEH-TRAY)

LESA (LEE-SAH)

CASTENELLE (CAS-TEN-EL)

CREALE SEA (CRAY-EL)

RASKIN (RASK-IN)

RAELLE (RAY- EL)

AMBRIEL (AM-BREE-EL)

ALARIC (A-LAR-ICK)

CANO (KAY-NO)

SERIAH (SIR-I-AH)





Should you like to listen to music while you read. Here is a Playlist I created, that gave me Fated Unkindness vibes. Enjoy!

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4sGMtzYXvHR0YCOLLPsAch?si=2d2d9ce270be4139>



## CHAPTER ONE

DEATH IS STRANGE WHEN I really think about it—much as I try not to, I can't seem to evade it. I wonder about the moment when all I ever knew of a person ceases to exist. The memories that flash to the forefront of my mind and the ones I know I'll miss out on now that they're gone. I wipe my hand down my face as the thoughts eat at me. What was I doing the moment my family's lives were taken? Did my soul notice theirs leaving this dimension? Did they feel any pain? Are they watching over me with the gods at their side? That's not going to happen this time. This time, I have a chance.

Dax has been an asshole to everyone since I've been in Ravendene, but he's Trent's brother and Kait's best friend, and no matter what I tell myself... I'm drawn to him. My stride doesn't slow as I pass people waking up and getting to work around the territory. I woke up with a feeling of urgency to go see him, so that's what I'm going to do. I don't care what the rules are. The more I think about it, the more I know that what he was doing to break the rules was justified. I would have done anything to save my own family had I been given the chance. He was taking the only chance he thought he had.

“Stop. You can’t go in there.” A round guard who barely fits into his leather armor says as he hobbles over to where I have my hand on the handle of the infirmary room door. My gaze meets his just before Trent steps into the hall, barring his advance on me.

“Morning, Sweetheart, causing trouble already?” He teases, patting the burly guard on the chest. “We’re going in to see my brother. Fuck off for a little bit, yeah?” The guard looks around, unsure of what to do now. He puffs out a heavy breath, cursing before turning around and taking his seat at the end of the hall again. Trent beams as he crosses his arms over his broad chest. “You had the same idea as me this morning?”

“I need to see him.” I wish I knew why he didn’t tell us he was going out on his own, but honestly, he didn’t do anything I wouldn’t have done. He tried to go about it differently, but when it came down to it, he had to do what was right for him. For his family. What he did for the love of his family earned all my respect.

The space is dimly lit, with only a dwindling fire lighting the room. The sun isn’t in the sky yet, so the lone window only lets in a faint glow of light. Trent walks in behind me, and with a flick of his wrist, the fire roars back to life. Dax is unmoving as he lays in the bed. His chest is bare, littered with tattoos and scars. My chest tightens as I look down at him. Taking his hand in mine, I feel the tingle as soon as our skin touches. I think my magic is beginning to manifest, and something about it is telling me I need to help him.

Trent, Kait, and I have a plan, and today, in just an hour, we are leaving Ravendene on an unsanctioned mission. Looking down at the hand that is resting in mine, my brows furrow as I think about what he must have been going through. I never thought that the hollowness in my chest would have been filled again, but slowly the Fae around me have been doing just that. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I’d not found solace here.

I searched for nearly a year for answers about what happened to my family, but to no avail. Each potential lead turned out to be a dead end; over and over, the failure of my search did nothing but weigh me down emotionally. I know the pain that Dax felt when he left because I’ve lived through it every day.

I’ve come to understand that Dax was saying goodbye to me all those weeks ago. Though he kept that fact to himself, I see it for what it is now. He knew the risks. He knew that something could have happened to him by

leaving alone. He knew he may not have returned to us, but that didn't stop him. I don't blame him. It wouldn't have stopped me, either. I would have taken every risk. That's why this is so important to me. I must do everything I can to find the cure, and then we will finish the mission he set out to do.

“Dax, you sorry bastard. Don't fucking die. We've got you, brother.” Trent rests his hand over mine, where it holds Dax's, squeezes it, and looks down at me. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Good. Kait's waiting in the woods.”



I move into a crouch below the broken window of a ramshackle cottage. The night is quiet—only the sound of glass crunching under my boots and my heart pounding in my ears interrupt it. No one has arrived yet.

A sigh escapes me as I tilt my head back, resting it on the crumbling wall. This is what our lives have come to. An endless cycle of waiting, watching, and searching. The darkness that surrounds me brings my mood down with it. If we don't get what we need soon, I'm afraid that all of this will be for nothing, and Dax will be lost to this world. Tears well in my eyes as my thoughts drift. I've tried not to think about it too much; the what if—what if we are too late? What if we can't find what we're looking for? I've tried relentlessly to keep my mind and body busy so I don't have to, but on nights like this... in the still moments of life... it's when the reality of what I've lost and what is at stake racks me—it's when the pain is at its worst.

The feeling of being perpetually alone, having no one, and the never-ending disappointment. I don't want that for Trent. I keep reminding myself



of that as we wait. Trying to not allow my mind to wander in the direction of failure. Tears burn my eyes as I scan the area for any sign of movement.

This is one of the many leads we've followed in the recent weeks since leaving Ravendene. At the base of the Soule Mountains, we wait for a convoy coming through that is said to have one of the items we are looking for. A blade of silver, the hilt inlaid with moonstone and intricate carvings on each side. I fear that we are growing short on time, and Dax's death is imminent if we don't find what we need soon. This has to be the right lead.

We are here earlier than we anticipated, and it brings about a strange feeling. I've been to this place once before in my search for answers about my family's untimely demise, but this time something feels off. There is a shift in the air. Bringing my fist up to my chest, I rub the burn that has started there. A feeling is trying to manifest that I can't quite read. My pulse increases with anticipation for what is to come.

I rise to my tiptoes so I can get a better look into the dusty, cobweb-covered window, allowing myself a better view into the cabin. Trent is around the other side of the cottage, near the front entrance, and Kait remains in the treeline, high up in one of the pines.

A cold sweat envelops me, sending a chill down my spine as I sense their arrival. I look out in the distance just as the first of the horses breaks through the trees.

The convoy sentries split up surrounding the area, staying mostly confined to the line of pines. I hope that Kait keeps herself hidden; they didn't conduct a thorough sweep of the area before posting at their locations, so Trent and I are still hidden.

When I was here before, all I witnessed was a meeting take place. There was discussion of property exchange and the ongoing efforts to find a priority asset, but they never gave away anything that could be used for—well, anything.

A cloaked male enters the room first, judging by the large size of the silhouette. He enters from the side of the small cottage. While Trent likely didn't get a view of him, I have the perfect position. He saunters to a small liquor cart in the corner of the room, pours a measure, and takes a long pull from the glass of amber liquid without removing his gloves. Another much smaller, cloaked figure arrives next in a cloud of black and green smoke, but I can't tell if this figure is male or female by stature alone. The smoke seeps through the broken window, leaving a foul taste in the back of my throat.

Dark magic.

They move to the hearth as a fire ignites and talk in hushed voices. The sense of darkness in the air is stifling. It's not just that thought, something is off. Maybe it's just me... My ascension should have come already. Most ascend by the time they are twenty-one; it hasn't happened for me yet, even two years later. Now would not be an ideal time for my ascension, but I have to remain hopeful that I will eventually gain my full magic.

Pushing the thought from my head, I focus on what is unfolding in front of me. Although, if this is like the last time I was here, I'll be left with no more answers than before. However, this time, we are searching for more than just answers. We need that dagger.

The smaller, cloaked figure speaks so quietly that they may as well be saying nothing at all, but the male's voice is deep and commanding in comparison as he curses.

"I'm doing all I fucking can," he says, and my eyes widen.

The cloaked figure lifts a hand with painted red nails to the male's face and drags the sharp tips from his temple and to his jawline in a quick swipe. Blood blooms where she's raked them across his face, though most of his face is shrouded in darkness. Blood trickles down his exposed jaw, dripping towards his neck. My eyes grow even wider as I witness the scene unfold, but that voice... a heaviness presses on my chest as the realization sets in. I recognize his voice. My heart begins to race as I wonder what has caused the cloaked female to lose composure and thoughts spin at why he would be here. He cringes away from her touch, knocks back his drink, and says firmly. "I will find the heir."

I suck in a sharp breath, the shock of that statement causing me to take a step back in disbelief. They are looking for an heir to the fallen kingdom? If there was an heir, I have to wonder why would anyone follow them after everything? The people have been struggling since the collapse of the kingdom, with each passing day getting worse. Demetrey, being the largest and most demanding of the territories, has claimed to be the ruler of the kingdom, but territories like Ravendene and Loema have stood their ground and refused to bend to their will. The people of Demetrey and the territories they are ruling are far worse off than any other.

It says something about the character of an heir who hides away for this long, allowing their people to suffer. The bigger question, though, is why are these Fae looking for this mystery heir? If they are from Demetrey, I worry

that only evil would come from them finding the heir, if there even is one.

Lost in my thoughts, I stumble when inching away from the window, causing a bucket and shovel to fall with a loud crash. I scrunch my face up at my mistake. My eyes immediately snap up to the window, where the shadows of cloaked figures scramble to get a view of who made the ruckus. "Fuck." I curse and spin from the window, my feet struggling to find purchase before I run as fast as I can manage into the night. I hope like hell these Fae aren't shifters. At least then I'd have some chance at getting away.

I hear shouts coming from men back at the cottage, then in the trees, as the sentries are deployed. Shit. I hope that Kait or Trent can get the dagger and stay safe. We had a plan. If something like this were to happen, we knew where to meet... I have to trust that the plan was solid as I run in the direction we planned.

As I weave through the dense woods, a man drops from a tree, shifting mid-air. His large brown wolf form lands with a heavy thud, and he snaps his sharp teeth in my direction. Ducking low, I pull the knife from my boot. I tuck and roll, sliding under him. I plunge the blade into the soft spot just below his ribs and pull it through the soft flesh of his underbelly. The garbled, wet howl he lets out will echo through my nightmares.

There is a ripple of magic as his Fae form returns, and the dark-skinned male lies dead at my feet. Bowels spilled out in front of him, and his dark gaze fixed on my own.

I can't think about what I just did, though I'm sure it will catch up to me if I survive this. I do the only thing I can and continue to run. A sense of dread and darkness washes over me, the scent of sulfur in the air, and I crane my neck, looking over my shoulder, just as the cloaked woman appears in a cloud of black and green smoke. She whips a hand out, and a black wolf blasts through the smoke, pummeling toward me. I pump my arms and legs as hard as I can, running for my life. Shifters are too fucking quick. I'm going to die.

The underbrush is thick, but I make my way through it, only to realize a beat too late that the ground I was running on has come to an end, and I have just launched myself off the cliff edge. *Fuck*. A cliff dive was not in the plan. None of this is going the way I hoped.

The fall is rough. I land on the right side of my body, my hip taking the initial impact, but my head hits a boulder with a sickening crack. Rolling to my stomach, I groan as the pain blooming across my body is almost too much



to bear. I need to hide; if I'm not dead when they find me, I'm not sure what will happen.

I hear the rush of a nearby river and decide I can take to the water and hide my tracks, but just before reaching it, a white wolf tears through the trees, coming straight for me. I barely notice the hatch in the earth, partially covered in dirt and rocks. I recall my father telling me about the underground mines and tunnels in these mountains that were used back when the kingdom was thriving; that must be what this is.

I have no time to consider whether this is a bad idea or not. I know that this wasn't part of the plan to get to our meeting point, but I have no choice in the situation. Jumping off a fucking cliff wasn't in the plan either. The hatch is hard to open, sealed shut from years of no use, and I grunt with the effort it takes. My aching body protests with every move, but I get it to open, and I jump in without a second thought. The ground is much farther down than I expected, and my body crumples as it hits the hard-packed dirt floor once again. My silver blonde hair is stained crimson from the blood that coats the side of my head and face, and I feel the stinging pain in my hip and leg from the cuts and bruising already painted on my skin. I'm not healing quickly yet. Which could only mean, I haven't crossed to Ravendene yet. The damn barriers prevent anyone without the mark from accessing their magic, and I surely don't have the mark of Demetrey.

The tunnel system is dark, and the air is stagnant. I can't tell if my head is pounding from the pain or if my heart is beating so hard I feel every pulse of it in my ears. The rocky ground crunches under my boots as I limp forward. Heavy footfalls sound behind me—likely the wolf trailing me. I didn't think it possible, but my heart quickens its beat as the darkness makes it nearly impossible to see more than a couple of feet in front of me and the imminent threat at my back.

I press myself against the cold stone wall, closing my eyes as I try to steady my racing heart to prepare for a fight. I don't even hear the wolf before it lunges. Its huge paws slam into my chest, sending my head back, and it ricochets off of the stone wall. Quickly, I bring my blade up and thrust it deep into the wolf's throat, sinking into its flesh up to the hilt. With a cry of effort, the blade pierces the shifter's brain, killing it immediately. Pulling the blade free, a gush of blood coats my hand, but I hold the blade tight. The body slumps to the ground in front of me.

There is ripple of magic before the wolf shifts back to its Fae form, but

thankfully, I am unable to see their face. I don't know if I could handle seeing the vacant eyes of another life taken by my hand.

Breathing heavily, I swallow the emotion and slide along the wall until I turn a corner and fall unexpectedly from a ledge, but to my surprise, someone catches me. A large hand covers my mouth as his deep voice whispers in my ear.

“I’m sorry,” as my consciousness slips away into nothing.



## CHAPTER TWO

I WAKE UP WITH a jolt. A whoosh like when water engulfs you as you jump into deep depths, the sound thrashes through my ears, and darkness surrounds me. My skin is cold and tingling, but also burning in areas where the pain radiates. Blinking rapidly, I try to dissipate the darkness, but I see nothing. My bones are aching, and the metallic, tangy scent of fresh blood and salt causes my stomach to roil. Clapping my hand over my swollen lips, I am able to hold back the wrenching I feel trying to grip me. Judging by the sticky feel of the wetness of my skin, it's not water I'm coated with. The smell, the pain, it's my blood and sweat that has me drenched. Beads of moisture gather and trickle down my forehead, and I swipe it away with the palm of my hand.

My breath comes in short spurts as panic tries to seize me. I squeeze my eyes shut. Behind them, a pounding pressure is building. Pain and weakness cause me to be disoriented, but I notice my vision is trying to bubble back to me. White dots flicker in and out of existence, but try as I might, I can't see through the darkness that surrounds me yet. Rubbing my eyes I take a deep, steady breath.

*Calm down, Raelle, no good comes from panic.*

When I open them again, I notice a soft glow of light not far ahead, but I lay there for a moment longer. Trying to recall anything that led me to wake up here... wherever the hell here is.

Slowly, I regain some sense of self, but airing on the side of caution, I still don't move. Afraid that if I'm in a situation I need to have the upper hand in, I need to be smart about things. I tilt my head as I listen intently for any sounds, but the ringing in my ears is making it utterly impossible. Though, it does seem to be beginning to ease. I reach an arm out to feel my surroundings, and the rough surface I'm lying on moves and crunches under the palm of my outstretched hand. My brow furrows as I consider how I could have gotten here and why? Slowly, I rise to my knees in the gravel, the bite of it causing a silent wince to form on my face, and I quickly grasp how unsteady and sore I am.

The deep breath I take to calm my racing heart does nothing as it pounds furiously in my chest. The need to get out of the dark racking me. I hold my breath, noticing a noise other than the pulsing in my ears. Multiple sets of boots are thundering at a quick pace toward me. Staying as quiet as I can manage, I press myself against the wall as I tilt my head, listening, and waiting for their approach.

"She was taken down. I'm sure she's good as dead, it's not the plan, but we can work with that outcome. Even with any abilities she may have, they are dampened here without the mark," I look down at my body. He's right; I wouldn't heal without the mark in Demetrey. But I am healed. In the areas where my skin is exposed from the ripped and tattered clothing, nothing is there but faint pink marks where the injuries once bled. *Where the fuck am I?* "You can have a crew come back in the morning to search for a body and clean up what remains. That is, if there is anything left when the creatures are done with her." I hear a female voice remark.

In response, the deep male voice questions, "Would you like me to have a crew stay in the tunnels to be sure she doesn't get out somehow? If she is alive?"

The woman snorts a laugh. "Like you said, with as much blood as we saw back there, she's likely already dead. I don't need to risk good Fae soldiers on something so pointless. I don't think she's who we thought, anyway. If she were, she would have fought harder, she didn't even use magic. You need to get back, or you will be missed. We don't want suspicions to rise." Hearing

boots shuffling once again I suspect she didn't wait for a response, but I suck in a breath as I notice her coming closer to where I am. Her shadow casts out, melting into the darkness I hide in. Leaning further back against the cold stone wall I brace myself. I'm in no condition for a fight. Whoever these people are, they either want me dead or don't care that I die, and I'd rather find out why after I get the hell out of here alive.

I can't make out any details of her face, the shadows shrouding it within the cloak. She whispers something I can't hear, and as she turns around, she swipes one hand out with a roll of her fingers, nails painted blood red; they gleam in the low light. There is a second of nothing, and then darkness eats her up entirely, and she vanishes. She is gone with nothing but a clap of magic, and only an eerie green-black smoke lingers where she stands.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding, the putrid smell in the air clogging my throat, but still, I wait cautiously, making sure I am truly alone. I didn't see the male, but I assume that he's gone at the female's command. After a few silent minutes, I determine it's clear. I slowly begin to creep towards the platform where she stood.

It's still sharp in my mind that she *clearly* thought that if I were to survive, it wouldn't be long before something *else* would ensure my death. I'm not willing to wait too long to find out what that could be. As I reach the platform where the cloaked female was standing, I painfully pull myself over the ledge.

The magical glow coming from the caged light on the stone wall makes me pause. I run my fingertips over the rough stone archway. It appears that I'm in some sort of underground tunnel, possibly an old mining tunnel. A wrinkle forms between my eyes as I look around at the space I find myself in. My father used to tell me stories about these tunnels... My brows stitch tightly together in confusion and I shake my head, trying to clear the fog still lingering there. I need to find out wherever the hell I am and figure out why I can't remember how I got here.

Limping along the dimly lit hallway, I tuck myself close to the wall, readying for an attack, just in case. I didn't see the men leave. The tunnel is long but eventually takes me to a stairway leading to an upper level. Hopeful for an exit, I make the climb.

At the top of the stairs, a dark steel door lies just on the other side of the hallway. It's still quiet where I am, the ringing in my ears finally gone. I place my ear to the door before I try to open it. Afraid of what might be on the

other side. I turn the handle when I don't hear anything concerning coming from the other side. The door opens with a click, and I'm startled as there is an unconscious male now lying at my feet, his body pushing the door open fully.

He must have been leaning against the door, and when I opened it he fell through. He's covered in blood, the door and ground below him as well. I push him forward, his weight making it difficult, but I manage to get him into a sitting position. Shutting the door behind him to keep him there. I brush his long dark golden brown hair away from his face to get a good look at him. My brows furrow as I take in his handsome features, a defined jaw, straight nose, and dark, perfectly arched brows. Something about him seems familiar, but I don't know who this Fae is... I start backing away to make my run for the tree line.

I make it only a few steps when I get an electric buzzing in my fingertips and up my arms. The sensation foreign to me makes me pause. I crane my neck to look back at the Fae on the ground, and I wonder if this feeling could be a sign... maybe this man knows how I got here. We are both in rough condition. Was this someone trying to kill me? Did I fight him?

Deciding to trust my gut, I walk back over to him and look at his wounds. He has a hole that appears to be a stab wound through his leathers at his shoulder; the nasty gash is still bleeding. Leading me to believe he's not native to whatever territory we're in. I'm starting to freak out, there is no way this is just a coincidence. The clenching in my gut is making me believe this is something else.

Sitting back on my heels, I stare at the man in front of me. My brow furrows more the deeper I concentrate. Why do I have this feeling not to leave him? He looks to be my age maybe younger but, just barely, is my guess. I don't recognize him, but that feeling in my gut... the buzzing sort of energy deep in my chest is telling me that he's important and not a danger to me somehow.

Blowing out my breath, I sit in silence for a long moment as I try to decipher the new feeling. My mother was a seer. She always taught me to follow my instincts. From the time I was a small girl, she would brush my silver blonde hair at night, tying it into a pleat down my back. She would tell me stories of the moon and the power of her silver light. She would say,

*“Raelle, one day, things will be different in Aldramani. Dad and I won't be around forever, but just remember, always follow your instincts. You are*

*destined for greatness, you know.*” I haven’t found the greatness she’s told me I was destined for yet, but I will always hold on to the belief that maybe one day she would be right. So, I sit and wait for him to come to—trusting my instinct to guide me. I watch our surroundings for anything or anyone who might cause us harm.

The door ended up leading me under a decrepit moss-covered bridge, with large boulders and rocks piled all around where they had fallen from place... Nothing looks familiar about my surroundings. If I’m in Demetrey the territory is large, and I don’t know every region.

As I sit there, I bite at the skin on the inside of my cheek. My mind fumbles through everything I’ve been through since I woke up and as hard as I try to think about what brought me to this situation... I don’t remember anything leading up to my waking in the darkness of the underground tunnel system. I sit down in front of the man, scooting back until my back rests against a large boulder. Tilting my head back, I look at the fading stars in the sky and wonder if my family is looking down on me from beyond the veil right now, with the gods at their sides. My eyes flutter closed, and a tear escapes beyond my lashes, as the sense of overwhelming longing and defeat washes over me. I wish my brother was here with me.

I wish all of my family were still alive.



## CHAPTER THREE

I MUST HAVE FALLEN asleep, but I jump awake when I hear movement in front of me. The male is finally starting to stir. Preparing myself to fight, I move to my feet. If he wakes up and tries to attack me, I'll be as prepared as I can be. I palm a fist-sized rock, wishing for a dagger, but I will make do with what I have. Watching him closely, I wait as he groggily begins to open his eyes. When I come into focus, he lifts his hand to his forehead rubbing the crease that's formed at the center. He looks around his gaze locking with mine as he winces and whispers confused.

“What the hell, Raelle? Why do you look like you're about to hit me with a rock?” he groans, “ugh, and why does it feel like you *already* hit me with a rock?” Lifting the rock defensively, I prepare for his attack.

*Wait, did he just call me by my name?*

His voice raises into a whisper yell as he looks around. The sun starts to rise on the horizon, painting everything in a purple hue. “What in the actual fuck, Rae. This isn't some game. Put the godsdamn rock down would you?!”

We just stare at each other for a long moment, me debating what to say to this person who clearly knows who I am. I for which, have no godsdamn idea



who he is, and it's honestly freaking me out. He is the one who breaks the silence, his eyebrows raised to his hairline. "Why are you looking at me like that? Don't you know where we are? We need to get the hell out of here, and quick. Do you know how long I've been out this time?"

*This time?*

I stare blankly at him, but I lower the rock to my side. My fist still clenched tightly around it, the sharp edges biting into my palm. I don't know what he's talking about. I don't know where we are, not really. The thought pulls my mouth down into a frown. I don't know how long I was out, let alone him... I don't even know who he is.

*What the fuck is going on?*

All I can manage is a shrug as I shift my gaze to the ground to escape his eyes. He stumbles to his feet and grabs my arm gently. I agree we need to get out of here, and he isn't being aggressive. So, for now, I allow him to guide me away. He leads us from the bridge toward the tree line in the distance. Both of us are uncoordinated in our movements, from all we've been through, but he eventually lets me walk on my own. Confident that I won't fall on my ass, I stumble along behind him.

"Hey, have you seen Kait? When we split up, I lost her too. I don't know if they managed to capture her..." He trails off, a frown threading his brows together. "Or worse." He whispers ominously as he looks back in the direction we came from and the ever-brightening sky. "I thought they got you..." Sadness flickers in his eyes as he cranes his neck to look at me over his shoulder. "We need to get to cover quickly, and try to cover our scent the best we can," He scrapes out, brushing his cheek with the back of his hand. "I know with all this blood on us, it's going to be hard..." He takes a deep breath and shakes his head, steely determination replacing the sadness. "If she were caught, she would want us to keep going. We will come back once we have reinforcements. If there is one thing that Kait is, it's resourceful. She wouldn't want us sticking around worrying about her."

He doesn't wait for a response from me, but rather turns his head and keeps trudging further into the trees and the dark cover of the forest in front of us. As we get further in, he begins to slow our trek. It's brisk under the cover of the trees. The morning air is crisp with moisture, but the sky is clear where I am able to see through the breaks in the canopy of pines, the stars gone from the sky, replaced by the blue cloudless sky.

We walk for what seems like hours. When we come to the edge of a large

clearing where there is a cluster of large boulders, we silently decide to rest for a short time. I still haven't spoken to the male, though I have an overwhelming sense of safety with him. I still don't recall his name or anything about him. It's *unsettling*. I try to will a memory I should have back into place without success.

He notices me staring at him and gives me a puzzled look, his lip twitching into a smirk, quirking his right eyebrow and showing a dimple on the opposite cheek. The smile doesn't quite touch his golden hazel eyes. The deep sadness pulls his shoulders down, the look of devastation making me feel sad too. He closes his eyes and shakes his dark brown hair to the side, clearing it from his grief-stricken face. His hair is almost long enough to touch his shoulders; he reaches back and ties it at the nape of his neck with a leather band.

"You okay?" He wrings his hands in front of him as he begins to pace. "I know things look bad right now. Really bad, but we knew this was a possibility when we went out on our own." He pushes dirt around with the toe of his black boot.

*On our own? Shit, this is wrong... something is broken in me.* Should I tell him I don't remember who he is? I remember who I am, at least... I try to work through what I do remember. My family all died while I was in Lesa in combat training. I went out looking for answers because their deaths didn't make sense. But after that? I don't recall any of my searching. My face must show some of the turmoil that I'm going through internally because the male I'm sitting with looks at me like my puppy just died.

"Seriously, Rae, you haven't said a word. Are you ok?" He looks at me pointedly. He's not giving me a pass this time. I take a breath to collect myself. I can feel my heart start to race in my chest. A sheen of sweat collects at the nape of my neck then, a prickling sensation runs down my spine that has me looking around. The sense of someone watching us growing. Someone is close.

The male notices my attention and begins to look around as well. It's quiet where we are, and a slight breeze has picked up. I know there were birds chirping and small animals in the distance rustling about just moments ago. The sudden stillness of the forest puts us both on high alert. We are both completely frozen, sitting in a way that has us ready to launch if needed.

There is a sudden crack of a twig, causing me to whip my head in the direction of the sound. A disheveled pale-skinned, dirty blonde female

covered in muck and blood stumbles into the space we occupy. She collapses hard to the ground in front of us with a thud. Wrenching upright at the same time, I am ready for a fight in case she's not alone, but no one else comes into the clearing. The male drops to the girl immediately. He sucks in a sharp breath reaching down and pulling her into his lap.

"FUCK! KAIT! Oh. No. No. No... Gods, they really did a number on you. Wake up, you beautiful girl, I need to know you're okay. Were you followed?" he gently taps her cheek with his fingers. His gaze breaks from her face to mine, then scans the surrounding forest, and concern brackets his mouth. She shakes her head only the slightest amount. A moan barely audible breaks from her busted, bleeding lips. Whether she was indicating if she was not followed or not okay, it's unclear. Before she can elaborate, the lights go out in her deep blue eyes, and they roll back into her head as she loses consciousness.

He fusses over her, ensuring she is in the most comfortable position he can manage in the woods, and takes note of all the injuries she has suffered. Which, from what I can see, it's a hell of a lot. He curses under his breath multiple times as he takes in all the damage to her. She is badly beaten.

"This is going to take longer than normal to heal because of where we are. We're going to have to make shelter probably for at least a couple of days if we can...If we have any hopes of her being able to travel through the Soule mountains to get back to Ravendene." He starts gathering branches and shuffling logs from nearby fallen trees to create a makeshift shelter. He looks over at me with worry bracketing his mouth, but tries to bring a smile to his face with words to reassure me. "We will get out of this Rae. I promised myself I'd bring you both back. I promised we would all make it and I don't take that lightly."

My eyes are wet with genuine sadness, and at that moment I decide to trust him. A hum starts in my chest as I mentally make the decision and finally, I find my voice.

"I'm sorry I've been quiet. I—" I take a deep breath. I don't know what to say to him, so I just say the first thing that comes to mind. "I can tell you know who I am, but I don't remember who you are... Either of you," I wave my hand between him and Kait. "I don't know who we are running from, and I don't know where we are going back to, and I don't know why, I don't fucking know." My head is pounding again and I reach up and rub at my temple a bit where the cut had been.

I can't take my eyes off him. He doesn't say anything at first just stares at me with those golden hazel eyes round in shock or disbelief. What happens next catches me in surprise, as he takes two long strides toward me. I see that he is going to make contact with my body, and I tense for impact.

*Gods I hope I didn't read him wrong, he's going to kill me.* I close my eyes hoping that intrusive thought is wrong, and the feeling I've gotten about him is leading me in the right direction. His arms envelop me completely and he squeezes me tightly.

"I'm so sorry Rae I should have known something was up with you. Fuck, I should have known." He pushes me out at an arm's distance. "We will figure this out. *Together.*" A wry smile spreads across his face. "It's Trent, by the way. Me, you, and Kait..." He turns waving toward the unconscious female. "We came out on our own into Demetrey territory to find things needed for a cure to a curse that Dax got himself into... He's back home in Ravendene and last we knew he wasn't doing very well. This was a double rescue mission in a sense. Mel, my baby sister. We are also keeping a lookout for any sign of her because she was kidnapped..." He squeezes me into him once more and lets go. I reach my hand up across my body to brush my upper arm nervously. My brows pinch as I think about what he's told me. I wish I knew what he was talking about. I wish more than anything my memories would come back to me. Especially after hearing his story. But I don't. I don't have the slightest clue.

"I'm sorry, Trent... but who are Dax and Mel?"



## CHAPTER FOUR

“DAMMIT TRENT.” I CURSE myself under my breath. I should have realized something was off with Rae. She’s quite possibly never *this* quiet. She doesn’t know who any of us are. Where do I even start in trying to tell her what she’s forgotten? How do I explain everything?

*Fuck. I don’t even know everything.* All that has happened over the last year, as well as the bigger question, what the fuck happened to her to cause the memory loss?

“It’s a long story. I can start with a simple version if you want.” We need to rest and then get moving. It’s already sketchy as fuck being holed up here still on Demetrey territory with everything that has happened. They are looking for us, and it’s only a matter of time before they find us. I shift my gaze to where I laid Kait to recover and heal. Needing to see the steady rise and fall of her chest, proof that she’s still alive.

“Maybe we should just wait to talk about specifics until after we get some rest,” she agrees. “My head is pounding, and my body has a weird buzzing feeling crawling all over it.” Rae drawls out as she pinches the bridge of her nose. She doesn’t sound like herself. The confidence that she normally carries

herself with isn't there. She worries her lip between her teeth, and her brows furrow as she folds in on herself where she sits. She sounds timid and unsure. Now that I know, I don't know how I missed it.

I dip my chin in the direction of the makeshift shelter I created. "It's not much but with the circumstances..." I shrug. She smiles shyly hiding behind her thick lashes as she looks to where her hands rest on her knees. A shiver breaks out across her skin—just enough that it's noticeable to me. I shrug off my cloak and push it out toward her. "Here Rae, it's chilly. I'll take the first watch. I'm nearly all healed up anyway." I make a show of flexing my muscles which brings a half laugh out of her, which she then snorts at. A cheesy grin breaks across my face unabated. It's the first time she's sounded like herself since this shit show all went down, and we found each other after being separated. "Try and get some rest, yeah?" She nods again, her lips curling up at the ends before she tips her head back looking to the sky.

I venture out into the trees a bit further searching for a good lookout point. Not too far from where Rae and Kait rest, I need to keep them in view. I find the perfect tree to use as a lookout post, the low branches allow me to get the footing I need to pull myself into the climb. I want to get a good vantage point so I can see if someone is coming before they get close enough to spot our camp. That way we can get fucking moving with quickness if needed. We need every advantage we can get. We are in no position for a fight right now. With Rae's memory on the fritz, who knows if she even remembers her training?

Kait is... well, Kait will be out of commission for a minimum of maybe a full day if we're lucky, and that's if she only has the injuries I can see. If we have visitors before, then I'll have to carry her ass to wherever we run off because I know I can't take on the trained Demetrey guards that are out searching for us on my own. This whole mission has been a shit show of epic proportions. Dax will be giving me shit for this for a long time to come... if we manage to save the asshole.

My gaze snags on the shelter again. Rae is still sitting up, taking in her surroundings. I guess some things come naturally. I stare at her for a long moment trying to see any changes in her. I don't see anything other than her confusion and timidness, though I don't really know what I'm looking for. It's just Raelle sitting down there. I don't think they did anything freaking weird to her like, replace her with a clone, brainwash her, or something equally disturbing. You can't be overly cautious with the Demetrey scum,

though. She does seem a little less fierce than usual and a little bit scared, but isn't that to be expected after a traumatic event? I don't think I've ever seen fear on Raelle's face though. It makes me worry for her. Our eyes meet briefly, and I try to give her a reassuring smile before I salute her and return to my patrolling of the area.

Hours go by with no sign of Demetrey soldiers, which could be our first bit of good luck since leaving Ravendene. Jumping out of the tree, I trek a little deeper into the woods to scout for some semblance of food or water. I'm able to snare some small game and berries to make a small meal. It would be so much easier to find food if I could shift but with the barriers on the territory, I can't shift until we cross the border, which doesn't help us at the moment. I'm just hopeful that Rae or Kait are getting the rest they need to heal. If we were out of these damn barriers though, they could heal much quicker, but it dampens our ability to heal rapidly unless we have the mark of Demetrey. Which we sure as hell do not have.

I come around a large pine tree, stepping into camp, and a branch snaps under my boot. Rae is up in a matter of seconds in a fighting stance ready to take me down. I smile at her and laugh quietly, "Calm down killer. I'm glad to see your reflexes are still intact. We've got to count our blessings at this point, am I right?" She takes a deep breath and physically relaxes a little, dropping her shoulders a fraction. Which makes me feel good knowing she can trust me enough to not be on the defense, even though she doesn't currently remember who we are to one another. "Did you get some sleep?" I ask. She responds with a small nod but her stomach growls at the same moment. I step forward and place my palm up, offering her berries with a smile.

"Thank you, Trent." Her lips curve up at the corners as she reaches out and takes the berries from my palm. Hearing her call me by my name sends a pang of sadness into my heart because I know her; she's only just learned it, but she is someone I have grown close to. We will get through this. We will get home with the cure for Dax. We have to.



Time is passing too slowly while we wait. It's always like that when you know something bad could happen at any moment. *Focus on the positives, Trent.* We have each other, and that in itself is a blessing from the gods. I know we need to get moving, but Kait has barely moved in the last day. Rae is showing more and more trust in me, so I guess that's a positive. Rae and I have taken turns on sentry duty, so we can each get rest while we wait out Kait's healing.

Dusk is falling on us, and if Kait doesn't wake up by dawn tomorrow, I will need to carry her. There will be no avoiding it; we need to get on the move. We won't be able to stay any longer. We are sitting ducks out here right now, it's only a matter of time before—

I'm not able to finish the thought before a loud thumping vibrates the forest floor beyond our perimeter. It's Rae's watch right now, but I happen to still be awake. I rise from my resting area stretching as I try to listen for any other noises. Rae comes tearing through the trees and slams right into me. "We need to run, NOW!" She yells in my face, fisting my leathers with both hands. I don't ask questions. I pivot, bending down, I grab Kait and throw her over my shoulder. We take off to the east toward the Soule Mountains like we planned for if anything like this happened.

Before we get very far, I hear Kait groan. "What the hell?" she croaks out from my back.

"Kait! Impeccable timing, beautiful. How are you feeling?" I ask between panting breaths, dodging random low branches and hopping fallen logs. Kait screams and starts slamming her fists on my ass.



“Let me down! That thing is going to bite my godsdamn head off!” A loud snap and snarl sound right behind me, and as I crane my neck, I see the shifter right on my heels in their wolf form, teeth snarling and snapping for Kait's head as it dangles over my shoulder. I curse flipping her back to her feet so she can run with me. I hope like hell that she's healed enough and ready for this. We are faster running individually, but in shifted form, the wolf is going to take one or all of us out if we don't take care of it first.

I see a large branch coming up in my path. “I'm going to run ahead and grab that branch. When I get in range, tuck, and roll. I'm going to show this wolf my best dinger.” I yell, not waiting for a response. I know she will follow through with what I say. I push myself into a sprint passing Kait. I swoop down and grab the branch in a fluid movement. Gripping the branch like a sword, I swing. Hard. Putting all the shifter strength I can manage into my hit.

Kait does as I instructed, tucking low and rolling out of the way just in time for my branch to meet its target in the form of a big ugly ass dingey gray wolf shifter's smug face. CRACK. There is a ripple of power that is visible as the lights go out on the shifter's eyes and a male takes the place of where the wolf was. His face bashed the fuck in. My stomach clenches at the sight, but I reach my hand out to Kait, she threads her fingers through mine and we keep running. There is no time to risk talking about what just happened. We catch up to Rae but none of us slow down in case the shifter isn't alone we need to get distance between us.

That was too close. The darkness of night is fully upon us now, and while it's dark, we are still exposed. There is more to worry about than a shifter in these woods at night without shelter, but I recall there are caves that we can take shelter in at the base of the mountains. If we can make it that far, we will be able to wait the night out and leave at first light, and now that Kait is awake, we can start the journey back to Ravendene.

“Why are we heading in the wrong direction?” Kait asks. “We still need to get the cure for Dax. We can't go back empty-handed, especially after everything we have been through.” Anger flashes in her eyes as she burrows her gaze into me.

“Kait— “I try to interrupt.

“They can't just run us out, Trent. It's all those Demetrey bitches are doing! You know I'm right! I'm going to fucking rip Elenora Demetrey's head off her bony ass shoulders one day. You mark my words!” Kait growls.

“Kait before you go off the deep end, there’s something you need to know.” I look at Rae to seek her approval. Kait needs to know that Raelle doesn’t have her memory, and we need to figure that out before we are able to get anywhere with getting the cure for Dax.

Kait picks up on the way I’m looking at Rae and looks back and forth between us with her eyes wide and eyebrows raised, waiting for an explanation. “Well, what is it? Spit it out already. We don’t have time for this.”

“I lost my memory. I don’t know who either of you are or who Dax is or why we’re trying to find a cure for him or what the cure is.” Kait steps closer to Rae, her bottom lip pops open as a rebuttal tries to form at her mouth.

“No... you’re—you’re not serious.” Kait stumbles her words, looking at me and back to Rae, denial painted on her face.

“I’m sorry, Kait. I wish it wasn’t true.” Rae looks to the ground, but her eyebrows furrow as she purses her lips. She has anger and confusion in her eyes. Anger about what has happened to her, what’s missing from her, blooms in her eyes. When she lifts her head, there is determination in its place. “I’m going to help you. I will do whatever it takes to get whatever is needed for this cure and I will go with you back to wherever it is you—er, we came from. I don’t know much right now, but I have a buzzing sort of energy moving over my whole body with the two of you. My gut is telling me I need to help you and I need to get back to Ravendene,” Rae says to us.

I turn my gaze to Kait, whose face is showing every emotion she is feeling like words on the page of a tome. Her cheeks bloom with red blotches as the answer surfaces, and tears fill her eyes. Her fingers clench then open repeatedly, telling me she’s ready to kick some ass.

“For now, let’s get to the caves; they should be close now since we walked the dog so far...” I snort a laugh. “We’ll discuss a plan and wait out the night before we take any action. We need to be smart about this,” I say as I place a hand on Kait’s. She folds hers over mine, meeting my eye. Everyone agrees with a nod, and we continue our trek in silence.

When we reach some of the smaller caves at the foothills of the Soule Mountains, I tell Rae and Kait to wait near the entrance of one of the caves we’ve come to. While I head inside to ensure it’s safe for us to make camp. I don’t like leaving them vulnerable, but I have confidence that they would be able to hold their own enough right now. I’m going to be quick so they will only be alone briefly. There is little light in the cave but luckily, I can still

cast a small amount of fire to see by, thankful that the territory boundaries haven't taken some of my most basic magic from me. I hover a half fist-sized ball of fire as high as the low cave ceiling will allow, so I can get a good view of the space. We've found the perfect cave for our needs. It's small but has enough space for a fire for warmth and holds the three of us comfortably with only one way in and one way out.

"Come on in, it's safe. Let's try and get some rest, and we will head out at sunrise," I tell them as they follow me into our shelter for the night.

Kait rolls her eyes at me. "Who decided you were in charge, buddy?" She strides past me into the cave and bumps her shoulder into mine playfully. I knock my head back as laughter escapes my throat. I'm so glad she's feeling back to herself. I turn to Rae, including her in my jovial laughter, but she narrows her eyes at me, and a wry smile spreads across her face slowly.

Rae heads into the cave after Kait and I follow suit. "Are you guys like a couple or something?" she asks.

"No." We both respond at the same time. I can feel heat running up my neck. Pressing my back against the cave wall, I slide down to sit, placing myself between the girls and the entrance.

"We have some things to, er, catch you up on..." I cast a small fire for warmth between the three of us, and we all get settled into the cave. We probably have at least six or so hours of rest before we are going to head out. While I know we all need to sleep while we can, I also know it's important that we explain at least some things before we get back to Ravendene. Especially before she has to encounter Cano, that's going to be interesting, to say the least. Cano is going to be so livid, the controlling bastard he is.

I think he means well, but sometimes he doesn't know when to just let go and let people make their own choices. I guess that's what happens when you become a Lord and General of a territory at twenty-six. I can't blame him entirely. We have all lost family, but he and Raelle have it a little harder because they are the only ones left of their line. I at least have Dax and Mel, thankfully. Massaging my temples the ominous thought creeps in... *At least for now.* Dax being cursed is one thing. We are working on getting the cure and at least we know there is one out there. Mel on the other hand. Wiping my hand down my face I take a deep breath. Normally once someone goes missing, they aren't found again.

I shift my gaze to Kait because I really don't know where to start. I'm not the best with this emotional shit, and I'm sure there are going to be some

tears shed depending on what she remembers. *Fuck, this is going to suck.* Kait shrugs at me and looks at Rae.

“How could you forget a bitch like me?” She laughs, trying to lighten the mood. Rae doesn’t though. Sitting pressed against the wall of the cave she curls into herself and stares into the fire, her face scrunched in concentration. She’s going to have an aneurysm from just trying to will memories into place.

“Look we don’t have to do this right now; we can rest first... or we can just go over a few things. We have at least two days of travel. We can catch you up as much as possible before we reach the city.” There is a howl carried to us on the wind, and all of our gazes snap to the cave entrance. Pain laced and mourning, the wolf’s howl breaks, and multiple join in the call. They’ve found the male I killed. I only hope that we have done enough to cover our tracks to the cave so they don’t reach us before we can get out of here.

Raelle takes a deep breath and a long exhale while closing her eyes. It’s so much like what she always does before making a big decision, or talking to the group back home before all hell broke loose with Mel’s disappearance, that it’s hard to believe she’s not the same old Rae we remember. I know that this has to be taking a toll on her. She opens her eyes and nods slowly.

“I’m ready; let’s just get on with it. Tell me what you think I need to know first, and we can use the time we have getting back to Ravendene to fill me in on whatever else you can.”

Thinking of where to start, I realize I don’t know what she does or doesn’t remember. “I guess before I know where to start, I need you to tell me what you remember last.”



## CHAPTER FIVE

### ONE YEAR AGO

I GRIND MY TEETH as my gaze burns a hole into Cano's fucking forehead. These meetings with him are pointless. Just ceaseless arguments, as we can't agree on a godsdamn thing. This asshole always pisses on every plan I make to infiltrate the Demetrey territory. Damn coward, that's what he is. I'm sick of sitting around while our people go missing, likely forced into becoming Demetrey brainwashed fools. Gods only know what they want them for. Elenora Demetrey is an evil twat, and needs to be knocked down a peg or two. I'm not afraid to go toe to toe with her, or any of the Fae she has at her beck and call. "Stop pussyfooting around. We both know the issue here, Cano. The real problem is that I devised this plan and not you or one of your men." I shake my head; stalk to the bar, and fill my glass with whiskey.

He paces back and forth in front of the large, open, stained glass balcony doors of the library. "I don't know who the fuck you think you are. Talking to

your general like that? You need to—” Before he can finish, I interrupt. “Don’t fuck with me, Cano. You were my friend a long time before you were my *‘Lord and General’*. One thing I’m never going to do is bow down to you, or anyone else, for that matter. Not now, or ever. I just want you to hear me out; this is a solid plan.” He turns to face me, seething and pinning me with his dark gaze. “We can infiltrate enemy territory from the inside. We have a Fae here in our own regime who has the power to shield like no one I have ever seen. If we train them, they can get in. All they have to do is put on a show to convince Demetrey they are one of their brainwashed twats and BAM! They get us in, and we take the whole thing down. I know it’s a long game, but this is what we need. If we do it any other way, they will—” Cano comes to a stop and slams his hand down on the planning table, interrupting me. The wood damn near splitting from the force.

“Enough Dax!” He bellows. “I’m not entertaining this any longer. You are a commander. You will not demonstrate such insubordinate behavior, and trust me when I say, if you mention this again in front of the task force, I will make a spectacle of you.” He turns on his heel and leaves the library, slamming the heavy wood door behind him. The shelf-lined walls vibrate and protest. Unable to keep my anger contained, I throw my whiskey glass at the door he just exited, with a growl escaping through my teeth. Shattered glass and whiskey shower the door.



I end up drinking more than my share of whiskey over the next couple of hours. I stumble from the main square, heading out to the boat house. This is usually where I like to sit and clear my head from all the bullshit when the

town alarm goes off. Typically, this leads to someone getting caught crossing the town border unannounced and through a restricted area. I trip over my own feet, trying to turn around and head back to the center of town, where the offender will be brought in for questioning.

When I bring myself back upright, Kait stands there, arms crossed with a huge grin on her face and eyebrows raised to her hairline. “The fuck happened to you?” she asks me, laughing under her breath. Before my Ma passed away, she used to hint at it all the time that Kait and I should try dating, but it never happened. Don’t get me wrong, the girl is beautiful. Dirty blonde hair, dark blue eyes, and curves for days, but it’s never gone anywhere with us other than friendship. She is like a sister to me. My best friend now, considering that Cano is such an asshole. He once filled that role.

“Whiskey happened to me, asshole. Let’s just get to the square so we can see the prick who tried to cross the border without permission.”

She smiles even wider. “That’s right; I guess you wouldn’t know in your drunken stupor.” She laughs, “There is no prick. It was *actually* an unmarked female. She was running from Demetrey. She stumbled in bloody as shit, asking for asylum.” I look at her like she’s nuts, but shake my head, stray hair falling into my eyes. *Didn’t the alarm just ring out? Did I pass out?*

“You look like hell. Maybe since it wasn’t some asshole trying to steal shit or people, you can just go sleep it off?” She suggests with a laugh under her breath.

“Yeah, I guess it wouldn’t hurt. You’re going to be there to question her, right?” I ask.

“Yep, I wouldn’t miss it. Because she was injured, they are doing the questioning in the morning. The girl sounds like a badass though, Dax. And you know, I can never have too many badass friends. Honestly, I hope she sticks around, judging only by what I know now.” She says this as she puts her arm around my waist to help me. She guides me up to the boat house. There’s a small living quarter above it that I tend to spend more time in than I do in my room at the estate. Kait stays at the door as I stumble into the living space and flop down onto the settee, legs wide and arms crossed beneath my head. I pass out almost immediately. The last thing I hear as I drift off to sleep is Kait laughing, closing the door, and locking it with a firm click.

I sleep my drunken rage off and wake up early the next morning. I bathe and come out to the kitchen in my towel, hopeful that coffee will help with

this splitting headache I woke up with. I know I could just heal myself with an elixir, but it's a sick sort of game I play with myself because I know I deserve the pain and I'm already healing quickly without intervention. I stand on the balcony of the boat house, drinking my coffee, when the door opens and my little brother and Kait come in with a plate full of my favorite breakfast foods. The scent of melted cheese, eggs, potatoes, and peppers makes my mouth water.

"Ah, now that's what I'm talking about." I groan and grab Kait, holding her face between both of my palms. I kiss her on the forehead.

"Hey! The food was my idea! Where is my kiss!?" Trent whines playfully. I punch him in the arm and snatch the plate of deliciousness from him.

"Thanks for the breakfast, but I'm not kissing your ugly mug," I laugh out at him.

He gives me a dirty look and says, "Jokes on you bro, everyone says I look just like you when you were my age."

"Damn. Well in that case..." I grab him and pull him into a headlock rubbing his hair with my knuckles and starting to take him down combat style, in the living room, just like Ma never liked. I don't know what has gotten into me. I haven't felt this cheerful and awake in ages, but there is a weird tingly feeling brushing at my skin causing me to want it... *happiness*.

Kait is laughing and picking up a fork she stabs a large bite of meat and potatoes off my plate. Talking around her food she says, "Enough fucking around assholes. Let's get down to the square before Cano gets back in there with her. Shit got weird last night."

I look at her with a sour face. "What do you mean shit got weird last night? I thought she wasn't being interrogated until this morning?"

Trent slaps me on the back. "The female that crossed the border last night is built different, bro. She's powerful, and not just like normal powerful... like, could be the change we need in the battle with Demetrey powerful, but that's not the weird part." He shares a look with Kait who just looks kind of shocked, her brows raised and one quirked higher than the other.

"Cano lost his shit last night when he took this female into questioning. People are talking and think that they may be mates because of the sudden change in him." That gets my attention. There haven't been *actual* mates in the kingdom in years because of the poison the Demetrey are spewing.

I don't say anything else. I just walk to the closet and get dressed. I keep a few changes of clothes here for when nights like last night happen. This tends



to happen more often than not these days because of the fact that I can't stand being around Cano more than I need to be. Black training gear, leathers and boots unlaced, because it bothers Cano. I smirk at them knowingly, and march from the boat house without another word. Kait and Trent don't need me to say anything to know where I'm going.

We get to the square just after sunrise, but Cano is already there. He's speaking to the guards at the front door in a hushed voice, which isn't uncommon. It doesn't go unnoticed that he's been extra secretive lately. I don't pay him any fucking mind as I stride right up to the doors to wrench them open. As the commander, it's my job to question those who enter our town unannounced. Before my foot steps through the door though, Cano's fist slams into the side of my head. I react immediately, even with my slower reflexes due to my excessive drinking last night.

Grabbing his wrist, I grunt and flip him over me. He lands on his back, the breath whooshing from his lungs, and me standing over his face. I crouch down and whisper through clenched teeth, for only him to hear.

"You may think you are more powerful than me, but let me remind you... I chose not to be in your seat. I choose every day not to take your place. Put your fucking hands on me again, you won't stroke yourself again for the rest of your life because I will *take* them. Do you understand me?" He growls in response, kicking dirt trying to get up from where I have him laid out, but his feet struggle to find purchase.

When he finally stands, he takes a step back and says loudly. "No one is to enter the questioning center. Only me and my direct crew. So, 'commander' I suggest you and your little friends take a hike until we get this settled."

I narrow my eyes on him, but I don't have to say anything because at that precise moment, the front door opens and a beautiful woman walks out onto the colonnade, all confidence. She puts one hand on her hip and looks between the two of us. Her silver blonde hair is down in loose curls to her mid-back. She has emerald green eyes and lightly sun-kissed skin. I clench my jaw to stop it from dropping. I have never seen a female as beautiful as her. No wonder Cano is losing his shit. Power wrapped up into a pretty, curvy, little package. I have the urge to drop to one knee and pledge myself to this perfect deity, but I resist that urge. I fight and grind my teeth until I think they may *actually* turn to sand in my mouth.

Cano on the other hand... he's on both knees apologizing for waking her. My face contorts showing my disgust for his display openly. She is staring at

him, her arched brows pulled together then she tilts her head in my direction. Our eyes lock. I feel it again then. The pulse of power radiating from her. Not only that, though, there is something else. I can't quite place it. The tingling feeling I felt brushing my skin at the boat house, like pins and needles prickling my palms, but it was starting in my gut. Before I pay it any more attention she speaks again demanding my attention, and I am again hoping I have teeth left in my mouth when I am done with this interaction.

"I think I am more than capable of deciding who I speak to, thank you Cano. Please stand, I am more than happy to answer any questions. I came here for shelter and to help with the Demetrey problem, and not cause more trouble for you and your territory." She says as she walks down the stairs and puts her hand on Cano's shoulder urging him to stand. I can see the puppy eyes Cano is giving her. I see what he is seeing. Power. He is not weak by any means, but he is not the strongest among us. That role lands on my shoulders. However, not many know that because I keep it locked down. I'm not one for leadership, not anymore. I'm Dax, the asshole who gets drunk and passes out at the boat house. I'm the asshole who killed his own family when my anger became too much for me to handle, and I lost control of my power.

"You heard her Cano. She wants to talk to me." I smirk at him just because I know it will piss him off then strut into the inquisition center and the female whispers to him loud enough, I can hear. This is no mate situation for Cano, I know that much. This is Cano wanting to seize more power for himself. He's a power-hungry fool.

"You don't need to fuss over me, I can handle myself."

"It's not you I'm worried about." Cano huffs out, his eyes throwing daggers in my direction. She touches his cheek and smiles lightly. The look she gives him is placating and intentional. When she turns to follow me into the building, she winks and my skin vibrates in response. *Fucking hell*. I do everything I can to stay true to my normal asshole self. I don't need people talking about my business, but I feel a pull to her.

"My name is Raelle. And you are?" She asks chin high, but the tone is much more interested than when she was speaking to Cano. At least I think it is.

I stare at her for a moment and pull a chair out. She thinks I'm offering her a seat but that isn't my norm, so instead I twist the chair around and sit on it backward. "Dax. I'm not here to be your friend Rae... I'm here to see if your story checks out. I'm here to get to the bottom of this, and find out what

cracks I can see in your bullshit.” She looks at me completely stone-faced. Kait walks in about halfway through my introduction and when I look at her she’s looking at me like I’ve completely lost it. I ignore her and turn to face Raelle.

She is still standing when I face her again. She sits directly across from me and folds her hands on the table, saying. “Dax. I like you. No bullshit. You have questions? Let’s have them. I will answer anything you want. I have nothing to hide. Oh, and can we lose the asshole shit? I don’t want to have to bring my bitch out to play.” At this point, I’m sure I have no teeth left in my mouth. My lips twitch wanting to smile at that hot-as-shit response. I can feel Kait’s eyes burrowing into me, but I can’t make eye contact with her. I can’t peel my eyes off Raelle. The balls on this girl...

Kait is my second in command, and I always allow her in to question with me. We normally have a good back-and-forth we do with offenders or trespassers, but this is different. Kait can feel the tension in me. I see it in the creases on her forehead and the way her lips are pulled down at the corners. She knows me better than anyone and she knows that I’m struggling to keep my power hidden. My hands tremble and I fold my arms to hide it. I don’t know what it is, but it almost feels like the power in Raelle is seeking mine out.

So, I sit quietly and listen as Kait questions Raelle. She does as she says she will, and answers all the questions asked without hesitation, but never takes her eyes off me. I don’t move, afraid that I’m going to lose my control at any second. A cold sweat starts to develop at the nape of my neck. We spend the good part of three hours sitting in the same position as they go over all the questions Kait has for her. When Kait is out of questions she looks at me with a dip of her chin. I stand, spin my chair back around, and push it into the table, pivoting to walk out of the room.

“Wait, that’s all? You aren’t going to say anything? After all that chest puffing with Cano?” She asks one brow hitched.

I don’t turn to face her fully. But I say “I don’t need to explain myself to you. We are done here. I will submit my report and we will determine if you are a candidate to stay in our city under asylum.” I continue my way to the hall and leave the door open behind me for Kait to follow. What surprises me is that it’s not Kait who follows, but Raelle. She grabs me by the crook of my elbow to stop me. She pulls hard for me to face her. I allow it because well, the girl has mirth. I look down at her hand where it still remains on my arm.

She notices my gaze, and quickly removes her hand tucking it back into her body, but before she lets go I swear I feel a zap, and the way her eyes light I think she felt it too. My power is so close to being known, my emotions too wild. I need to get out of here.

“I’m sorry, I don’t say that lightly. I know this is a lot. I understand if you want to send me away or don’t want to trust me, but I do hope you come to understand that I am here to help. I was drawn to this place. Something or someone here is meant to cross my path. I feel it. I feel a humming presence deep in my gut, and its only gotten stronger the longer I’ve stayed.” I clear my throat as I feel it constricting, and I say to her in the most placating tone I can manage.

“Oh Rae, don’t think I want to send you away...” I take a step closer to her, so we are less than a foot apart, and look down at her. She has to raise her chin to make eye contact with me. My skin is vibrating, and my chest is tight like the air is being sucked from my lungs. “I would rather lock you up and wait until you are of use to us, and then let you out to unleash your power on the motherfuckers who think they are better than us. After that, I couldn’t care less what happens to you.”

She steps back and raises her hand to hold her throat as if trying to restrict the emotion she has building. Her silence is deafening, her eyes narrow and I feel it again deep in my gut. The same humming she spoke of then it’s gone as quick as it came, almost as if I imagined it completely.

*Raelle is going to either be my making or breaking, I feel it in my bones.*



## CHAPTER SIX

AFTER THE SHIFTER ATTACK and running for our lives, I have a hard time settling my racing heart. Breathing is difficult with the overwhelming pressure I feel sitting on my chest. I need to figure out what the hell is happening in my life. Being stuffed into this cave, the small space is suffocating. Not only our bodies fill the space, but all the questions we have clog the air too. Trent and Kait look at me like I have all the answers, which—I don't. I don't have a godsdamn one. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to take a deep breath but the weight of everything is making it difficult. My back presses against the cold cave wall where I sit and I pull my knees up to my chest, hugging them. I try to relieve the tightness there.

Trent asks me a question, but I can't hear him over the pounding of my heart in my ears. I feel the panic attack creeping in, my breaths growing shorter with each influx of air. I close my eyes and rest my forehead on my knees, my arms squeeze around my legs tighter as I try to force my breathing into submission. Pulling in a breath as deep and slow as I can to get past this without either of the two... I guess, not strangers from figuring out that I'm freaking out.

“I’m sorry, I need a second,” I say between pants, my voice muffled into my knees. Neither Trent nor Kait says anything, at least nothing I can hear. I sit there for a minute, or has it been an hour? I’m not sure.

Finally feeling steady enough to breathe, I lift my gaze up to theirs. Taking one more deep breath; I’m prepared to have this conversation. No matter how nervous I am to find out what I’ve lost. “Okay, So I know I’m Raelle Apus. I was a cadet at the Lesa Combat Training Center for two years but when my parents and brother died a year ago, I dropped out. I was looking into their deaths because I never got straight answers from the Lord of Castenelle. I think that’s when things started getting weird for me. I felt like I was being watched or tracked. So, I tried to go off-grid for a while. I—I followed a lead to what I was told was Demetrey territory but just on the outskirts.” Trent nods like he knows the story and looks hopeful. I nervously push dirt around with my finger, leaving small swirls drawn on the cave floor, and reluctantly continue. “I don’t remember what happened when I followed that lead though. I mean, I remember bits and pieces, but I—I remember running from someone. I felt a pull in the direction of a nearby town. I trudged on foot as long as I could while trying to hide from those chasing me. I finally made it through a small patch of forest after having a run-in with a wolf shifter. The town there... As I got closer, it was like a beacon calling me home. I was planning to seek refuge, but I—I don’t remember anything after that.”

Kait lets out a breath with a whoosh. “This is going to be fun to explain to Cano.” She says, making eye contact with Trent as she scrunches up her nose. Trent runs both hands through his long hair and links his fingers behind his head.

“Well shitty as it is beautiful, that is the precise moment you landed with all of us miscreants. Cano is the Lord and General of Ravendene. He’s um, also kind of your... boyfriend? I think...” Kait snorts, rolling her eyes at his words, but doesn’t say anything else. Trent pulls his hands down his face, bringing them down to slap his thighs. “I guess that’s where we start. Huh? About eleven months ago, when you crashed into our lives,” he says with a rueful grin.

*Eleven* months of memories are gone, if not more. I’m having trouble remembering even some of the time before then. Everything that happened after I found out about my family’s deaths is spotty; chunks of my life are missing and out of line. I feel as though time has been ripped away from me.

How did this happen? I think I fell back in the tunnels when Trent, Kait, and I were apparently split up, but what if something else happened? What if whoever was chasing me did this to me? Quietly, I say to them both, "There was a woman back in the tunnels. Before I was able to escape. She wasn't alone. There was a man too."

"Did you see them?!" Trent exclaims.

"I did. I mean I saw the female, but I couldn't get a good look at her. The tunnels were poorly lit. I couldn't see her face. She was cloaked and the shadows were too thick." I shake my head with disappointment. "I'm sorry."

Kait scoots a little closer to me and rests her hand on my elbow which is still holding my knees. "It's ok Rae. We will figure out the details later, and in the meantime, we will get the cure for Dax. Dax needs to be our main priority. Then we need to get back home to make a plan to take out these Demetrey. They are the cause of all our trouble. They don't deserve their position in the Kingdom they have, and they have done enough to innocent people. They deserve an ending full of pain and suffering." She squeezes my arm, tilting her head so she can get a better view of my face. "Is there anything else from the tunnels you remember?"

I think back on when I woke up underground, what I could remember. I was pretty shaken and trying to recover from whatever had happened to me. "I don't remember anything else."

"Entering the territory of Demetrey without prior approval isn't punishable by death. Unless something has changed.... Do you think everything with Dax has changed things?" Kait says as she pinches the bridge of her nose and then groans, gritting her teeth. "This is so frustrating. We just need to get to the cure. Snagging some simple ingredients shouldn't be this difficult!" She slams a fist to the ground and then lays on her side. She lets out a huff of breath and closes her eyes. "I'm going to get some rest. One of you can have the first watch, I don't care who." She rolls over, putting her back to us.

Kait doesn't say so much as another word for the rest of the night. She needs to sleep to heal quicker in these lands. It's an old magic that many territories practice now. It wasn't that way when the King and Queen were alive, but it was never outlawed. However, that doesn't necessarily matter when the kingdom fell just over two decades ago, and the Demetrey has taken rule for the most part, at least that's what they've been trying to do.

"I don't think I could sleep right now if I tried. So, if you'd like me to take

the first watch, you can get some rest. I have no problem with that.” I tell Trent.

“Thanks, but I’m not sure I could sleep either right now. Is there anything you want to know about since we have time for a chat? I mean about life the last... almost year?” He asks with a forced smile.

I do have so many questions, but I don’t know where to start. I want to know everything. I want to know if I ever found anything out about my family’s deaths, what happened to get me into the tunnels, my life back in Ravendene... I think back on what they have already told me. I have a boyfriend in Ravendene, I suppose I should know a little about that. “You mentioned I had um...had a boyfriend? Cano, right? If we are together, why didn’t he come with us on this mission?” I ask after many moments of reluctance.

Trent snorts a little laugh then clears his throat. “I’m going to tell you about Cano with as many unbiased opinions as I can.” He rolls his eyes and takes a deep breath. “So, like I told you before, Cano is our leader. The Lord of Ravendene, General of the Ravendene Regime. He’s a strict leader when it comes to sanctioned and unsanctioned missions, the latter is a most definite no...” He pauses for a moment. “That is what resulted in the curse placed on Dax, which we are currently trying to find the cure for. So, we kind of figured that he wouldn’t approve of this request either.” He shrugs. “He has made it fairly clear he thinks Dax got what he deserved. For defying him. Dax and Cano butt heads on the best of days so to be honest, I don’t think Cano would have approved regardless of if he had given him permission or not. So, we planned to leave while Cano was on a run of his own.” Trent’s gaze is trained on me, the way his eyes follow my every movement. I know he’s trying to figure out if I recall any of what he’s telling me. I don’t.

I raise my eyebrows as I shake my head as I try to understand what he’s telling me. “So just for clarification, I lied to my boyfriend about this mission? Snuck out of the place I was safe in, and into enemy territory, only to lose all memory of the last year or more of my life. Including memories of ever meeting him... I see why you both are concerned about telling Cano when we return.” I laugh a little. “Tell me we at least left a note and he’s not out searching for us.”

Trent’s lips split into a wide smile, “We paid off one of the gatekeepers to keep our secret until his return. Once Cano returned to the village, he was to inform him of our escapade. You made it very clear in your missive that you



wanted him aware of what we were doing and why you felt it justified.” He laughs.

I feel the heat rise to my neck a little with embarrassment. I know I can be... passionate about things. So, I can only imagine how colorful that message could be. I don't dwell on minor details though and I ask the pressing question. “Why did I think it was justified to lie to my boyfriend and Lord of Ravendene though? To risk my life, and both of yours, to try and find this cure for a curse Dax got himself into?” I see Trent tense the smallest amount telling me he's worried that whatever it is he tells me I may not feel the same way now that I don't have my memories.

Trent sucks his teeth then says, “Well... it's been an ongoing issue with members of our village going missing, it's not just ours either the other territories are also noticing the problem. Seems they have just vanished. Which shouldn't be possible when we have a shield in place on our territory much like the Demetrey territory has in a way. Anyway, most people who have vanished have been elderly... people of low skill sets or power levels. But recently they have been taking more high-profile members of the community, and people who have more power.” I see emotion building in his eyes. He clears his throat and starts again. “The reason Dax left on an unsanctioned mission was because the last person to go missing was our younger sister. Mel was only 11 years old, and showing signs of power that 11-year-olds don't typically show. Cano wouldn't allow a search party for her.” His throat bobs as he swallows back the emotion clogging there. This is a hard conversation for him.

“Dax is your brother.” It's not a question. After hearing about the young girl and why Dax went on the mission, I understand why he did it. I would do anything to get to my brother had the roles been reversed. My voice is low, and heavy with emotion when I speak again. “Dax did the right thing. I understand now why I would have agreed to do everything I could to help. I would do anything to be able to see my brother again.” I tell him as I reach for his hand and give it a light squeeze. Surprisingly, it doesn't feel foreign to do. Which makes me wonder if I have done this with him many times. He smiles knowingly at me, giving my hand a gentle squeeze in return.

“You tried to convince Cano. You all but begged for him to allow just a small search party to look for Mel. You did it for Dax, as much as you did it for me, but I know that it was the love for your brother that fueled your reasoning. I honestly thought if anyone could convince Cano it would be his

—er, girlfriend. He just wouldn't do it. He and Dax have grown further and further apart since my parents passed away. Since Cano's parents passed. Dax was... Well, he's an asshole, but he is my brother first and I can't see him die too. Before he left it seemed like the two of you were starting to open up to each other... I could be totally wrong because you are both secretive fucks." He laughs then gripping the back of his neck. "But on more than one occasion I had a feeling I was um... interrupting an important... conversation." I stich my brows together trying to remember anything, but I get nothing yet again.

"You and me, we have become pretty close in the weeks before we left while planning this mission—even before that. Cano kind of kept you to himself until Mel disappeared, but I think with you and Dax going at him with the mission requests he kinda backed off somewhat. I'm sorry about how royally fucked it turned out, but at the very least I'm grateful it brought us close. Well... at least until you lost all memory of me." He laughs a little and I smile at it. "I really do consider you one of my best friends Rae." He says as he strokes his thumb over the back of my hand.

"I can feel that's true and that is probably why I had a sense about you the moment I saw you unconscious on the other side of that tunnel door." I smile at him, and he returns it. "Can you tell me more about your siblings?" I ask, my heart squeezing a small amount because I miss my own sibling so much. I force a smile as my eyes well with tears.

"I'd love to. I'm the only one left if we don't find Mel or the cure in time for Dax. The three of us are all that's left of the Fornax line."

I know the feeling, and it makes my heart crack for Trent.

We spent hours talking about Dax, Mel, and things that have happened over the last year I've been in Ravendene. It's no wonder I feel passionate about helping Dax. He was only trying to help his sister, trying to keep his family together. I would do the same for my brother. Wren wasn't much younger than me when they were ripped away from this world. He would have been going into combat training the following year. We were only just over a year apart. He was bummed when I couldn't come with them. It was going to be our first-ever visit to the Creale Sea. It was meant to be a magical place where beautiful creatures and people thrived. Places as such were few and far between since the fall of the kingdom. He promised me that since I couldn't go this time, we would make a trip on our own one day. A promise he will never be able to keep now. They never made it there either.

I try not to dwell too much on the negative feelings I have about my family passing, and try to remind myself that, technically, I have had time to process their deaths. It only just feels fresh in my mind because of the memory loss situation I've found myself in. Either way, it hurts knowing they're gone. I want to know more, but we have discussed so much already my head is hurting. After too many hours of talking, I start feeling tired. We agreed that I would sleep, and Trent would wake me in a couple of hours so we could swap. We agree that Kait needed more rest than both of us, so we leave her to it.



I wake up to light shining brightly in my eyes. At first, it doesn't register to me that I'm waking up in the cave. I feel like I had a bit too much fun the night before, a hangover from hell causing my head to throb and my body to ache. I roll in my half-sleep, bumping into a warm body, and it makes me jump. I punch out with my right arm out of pure instinct, remembering a little too late that I slept in a cramped cave with Trent and Kait. "Oh sorry!" I rush to say to Trent who was on the receiving end of my fist a moment ago. He's already got a large knife in his hand and the look on his face says he's ready to get stabby. I raise my brows at him with a tight-lipped smile.

"I wasn't going to stab you. I had it out prepared just in case, but dozed off and you scared the shit outta me." He yawns and winks, putting the large hunting knife back in its holster at his hip. "It's probably good to get on the move sooner rather than later. It looks like the sun is just rising." He says as he starts to gently wake Kait.

Kait grumbles a string of profanity aimed mostly at Trent for his 'loud ass

mouth,' but eventually, she stretches and calms down enough to listen to what we were talking about. We fill her in on the plan that Trent and I discussed the night before. Her lips curl into a smile as we tell her we want to take the risk and circle back to try and get the cure for Dax. We need to carry out what we came here to do. Otherwise, all of this was for nothing. One thing hasn't changed, though; even without the memories from the last year, I don't like to lose. If I give up now, that's exactly what would be happening, and losing Dax is not an option. Kait doesn't take any convincing. Within the next breath, we are out of the cave, probably doing something incredibly stupid. Heading directly back towards the people hunting us.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ELEVEN MONTHS AGO

A TINGLE CREEPS DOWN my spine right as my hand touches the handle on the training center doors, and I close my eyes in anticipation. I've come to realize that the feeling only ever happens when she is around. Clenching my jaw, I thrust the door open and stride into the space that used to be one of the only places I've felt any sort of relief from the chaos that lives under my skin. These days, I don't get much reprieve. Every time I turn around, she's near, and the magic I hide stirs more than ever before.

"Did you get wasted again last night, Dax?" Cano says, laughing as he wraps his arms around Raelle's waist. The look on her face is kind, despite his words. She looks as though she's sorry for his outburst. I wish I was fucking wasted right now. Maybe then I would be numb.

"Fuck off. Who's first on the roster this morning, Flynn?" I bite out as I stride across the already full room. I stop in the center of the sparring ring

and fold my arms across my chest as I wait for him to check who is up first for a match.

“Kait Divins and Raelle Apus.” My eyes flick up to meet Raelle’s. She pries Cano’s hands from her body as she moves to join the circle. He laughs, saying something under his breath that I don’t catch. However, the snickers from the Fae around him and the blush running up Raelle’s cheeks tells me that it was likely something at her expense. He slaps his hand down hard on her ass as she walks away, the red in her cheeks deepening. My magic swims, darkening my vision for a moment before I get a grip on it. Breathing slowly, I take a deep breath. The scent of stale sweat and dried blood from the training center filling my senses.

“If you’re done, we can get started,” I say as the two females join the circle standing on either side of me. I can honestly say I don’t know what she sees in Cano. He’s only ever been an ass to the females he is with. Even when we were younger, he’s treated women as though they were nothing but disposable. A distraction that feels good on his cock.

“Sorry.” Raelle swallows but lifts her chin proudly as she stands before me. It’s the reason I don’t understand the pairing. She is powerful. I’ve not seen her magic at play, but I and everyone else sense the power she holds, even from day one. No doubt the reason Cano has been so attached. More attached than he has ever been to a female. I don’t understand what it is she thinks she’s getting out of it.

“We don’t need your apology. Get into formation.” I bark out as I step back and allow the two some space to ready themselves for the match. Kait’s mouth lifts at the corner. A shit-eating grin on her face, taunting Raelle. She doesn’t take the bait, though. I see her vision narrow as she crouches down and is ready.

Kait, being Kait, is the first to move. She drops her body, aiming to pummel Raelle, taking her body down to the ground with force, but Raelle is quick. She sidesteps, kicking her foot low, and she trips Kait. She recovers quickly though, rolling with the fall, and is back on her feet before you can even tell that she was taken down in the first place. She laughs as the two of them circle slowly across from each other.

I can see that Kait is going to go with another large power move, and the quick footwork from Raelle says she sees it too. She moves before Kait can think twice about it. Raelle comes in close, and her fist comes up in a quick jab to Kait’s throat. Raelle’s foot hooks behind Kait’s the moment she reaches

up to grasp at her neck. Raelle pins Kait to the ground, her arm tight under her chin and her legs straddled over her, pinning her arms to her chest.

“Shit!” Trent is laughing from the front row of seats. “Kait, she just handed your ass to you!” Raelle removes herself from Kait and offers her a hand to stand.

“Fucking shit is right. What the fuck was that?” Raelle shrugs. She’s been here for only a month, and I can tell that she excels in close combat. She knows how to use her quick feet and smaller stature to her advantage.

“Who’s taking on the winner?” It’s not the normal way we do training, but I feel like challenging her.

“Uh, we have the next pairing. Bran Mannix and Trent Fornax-Ravendene.” I hear Trent laugh and turn to face the ginger-haired, lanky male as he stands.

“Sit,” I order, jabbing my finger at him and then at his seat. He spreads his arms wide, a rebuttal ready on his lips. “Mannix, on the mat.” I turn to face Raelle. Her brows are puckered, in confusion but she dusts herself off nonetheless.

“What is this about?” Kait whispers as she leaves the circle to stand by my side.

“What?” Crossing my arms, I watch as the two begin sparring. The male that was paired with Trent is larger than Raelle, but only just. He is a much smaller opponent than if I were to have her face, my brother.

“Having Raelle fight twice in a row?” I turn my head to my second in command, angling it so she can see the irritation in my eyes. “I’m just saying... kind of a dick move.”

“It’s a challenge. That’s what we spar for.” I don’t mention the fact that I’m irritated at the fact that she is always around. That she makes my fucking skin itch with the way my magic wants to be free around her. That she causes my jaw to ache with how hard I clench it, seeing the way she allows Cano to paw at her in front of the whole fucking territory.

Cano watches with rapt attention as Raelle manages to still take down the challenge I gave her. A devilish grin spread across his smug face. Raelle meets his gaze as she beams from the defeat of another opponent.

“Again! Who is next?” I bellow through clenched teeth. Faces all turn to confusion as I continue the challenge for Raelle. Flynn fumbles with the parchment and scans his finger down the list. Swallowing hard, he looks up to meet my eye before clearing his throat.

“Dax Fornax-Ravendene and Cano Croix,” Now it’s my turn to smile because I take the opportunity to tell Cano to sit the fuck down. Stepping into the ring, I roll my shoulders, meeting Raelle’s eyes.

“You’ve got to be fucking *kidding* me,” Raelle mutters under her breath as she tries to catch it. I’m close enough now that I hear it, though.

“*Not* fucking kidding. If you want to smile smugly after beating a challenge, then perhaps you need to know what it feels like to lose.” I growl the words, but just as I move to begin the challenge, I’m grabbed from behind, stopping my advance. Spinning, I turn to find a face I didn’t expect. Trent stands ramrod straight, boldly stopping me—a challenge in front of all the Fae here. My blood boils.

“This isn’t something we do, Dax.” He says in a low voice, still gripping my wrist. I move to yank my arm away from him, but he keeps his hold on it. My power is a fucking frenzy just below the surface right now. A deadly silent killer, no one in the room knows what they are in danger of. I take a step back, seething. Especially as I see Cano enter the ring next. Pulling Raelle to him by the back of her neck. She spins in his arms, and he angles her head up so he can ram his tongue down her throat.

Fire erupts along my forearms and hands. Trent hisses as he flinches back, his hand now burned where he held me. I extinguished the flames almost immediately, but the damage has been done. The room is buzzing with hushed conversation. No doubt, speaking of my momentary lapse of control.

“Give up the show, brother. Jealousy doesn’t suit you.” Cano sneers, his arm slung over Raelle’s shoulders. She looks at me with something like pity in her eyes, and the sight of it causes a vibration to roll up my spine.

“Jealous?” I spit the word at his feet, but my eyes flick to Raelle as I swallow. Keeping my eyes locked with hers, I continue, “There is nothing to be jealous about...”

Spinning from the group of them, I turn on my heel and storm from the center, yelling over my shoulder, “Sparring is fucking done for the day.” The moment I’m out of the doors, my wings burst from my back, and I head for the sky.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” I growl into the sky, taking off toward the lake. I land at the edge, raking a hand through my hair. How am I supposed to command a regime if I can’t even control my own fucking magic when she is around? I don’t understand why she fucking pisses me off so much. It’s everything and nothing all at once. The feeling she gives me. The



reminder of my magic that stirs under my skin; a silent reminder of the darkness that holds me a prisoner. The way she almost cringes away from Cano but allows his tongue to evade her mouth and his hands to roam her body.

It's not fucking jealousy. I refuse to admit my growing attraction to her. I can't get close to anyone. Not knowing the danger I am to those who get close to me. Not knowing what I'm capable of. I don't care that she makes me feel something I've never felt before. I don't fucking care that my magic seems to guide me to her at every chance it has. If anything, it's more of a reason to stay the fuck away from her. I don't trust my magic, not after what I did.

My breaths are coming out in ragged puffs as I pace the area. My feet digging grooves into the soft soil around the lake. I stop abruptly as the shiver rolls up my spine and my shoulders stiffen as she says my name.

"Dax?" Her voice is hesitant and distant. When I don't turn around, or even acknowledge her, she continues anyway. "I wanted to check on you. Are you doing ok?" Fuck, why does she have to be so caring and courageous? After the display I just gave? One would think to steer clear of the raging monster of a man, but here she is... asking if *I'm* ok.

I turn to face her then. Her cheeks are flush, and her perfectly arched eyebrows are pulled down as she looks me over. Head to toe, she takes my posture in, and as I take a step forward, she takes one back. Smart. As always. "I'm only going to say this one more time, Raelle. Stop fucking showing up for people who don't deserve it." The look in her eyes tells me she understands that this is meant to have a double meaning.

"I don't think that's in my nature, Dax. I know you don't like me..."

"You know nothing," I growl, cutting her off. My long strides have allowed me to catch up to her, and as her steps falter on the uneven ground, I reach out on instinct to right her balance.

"And who's fault is that? Its not for lack of trying!" She shouts in my face, and I have to give her credit. Her voice stays as even as the glare she holds my eyes with.

"Stay away from me, Raelle." My grip tightens on her arm as I lean into her body. "Train at a different time. With a different instructor." Her chin lifts, but I see the hurt flash in her eyes. It fucks with something in my chest, but I push it away. We are only inches apart; I have to look down to meet her eyes. I feel my raven pressing to the surface, my eyes shifting for only a

moment, but I push it all away. Just as I push everyone away. “If you *refuse* to leave Ravendene, just fucking stay. Away. From. Me... I don’t want to be around you.” She flinches, but I can’t care.

I won't.

A moment of silence passes as we both stand only inches apart, but the space feels like miles of endless pain.

“Ok, Dax.” She blinks slowly, surprising me as she relents. She gives me a long look one more time before she turns and walks away. The emptiness I feel makes my brows cinch together as I watch her fade into the distance.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

“PREPARE THE CREW, FLYNN. If we are not out of here within the next hour, it’s your ass on the line.” I growl at my second in command. I’m tired of being on the road. I hate going on these pointless missions. Someone in my position shouldn’t be out here at risk for such niceties. A supply-run. This is grunt work. However, I go out on them nonetheless because it is expected by my people as their dutiful leader. I’ve only started going on these pointless escapades since Raelle has been accepted into Ravendene. Since then, I have made my best effort to make a show of becoming a better man.

However, every time I find myself out here, we also end up looking for those who have gone missing, and then I just get annoyed, especially since I am the one responsible for their disappearances. Regardless, I am still at risk being out here if there was a Raskin attack or something equally disturbing. I, for one, am not willing to use the limited resources and men we have to separate these trips like some. Dax for instance. Those who are missing won’t be returned to us. Anyone who has been out in the kingdom, outside of the shields of the territories, understands this concept. The untrained and low-power victims wouldn’t stand a chance if they were out here on their own. Looking for whoever is missing would be a recovery, not a rescue mission.

It should be clear to every person who lives in Ravendene, that it's not safe outside of the barriers. Especially after what happened to Dax. Even if they

feign unaware, they would have to know his lineage and what that would mean. Some extent of the power he houses. The fool went off on his own to try to rescue his young sister. I understand the thoughts behind it. She is family. One of the only family members he has left, but he is the commander of our regime, or I suppose was... He should've known better than anyone. Not to mention Mel is an eleven-year-old female who is not fully trained. Regardless of her power level. They should believe she is either long gone, sold to the less civilized nomads of the wastelands, or the creatures that roam the unshielded areas of Aldramani. Surely they got to her, or that's what they should think.

It's unfortunate really, for the Fornax-Ravendene lineage. Such an influential family name hanging by a thread... The youngest sister is missing, and the oldest brother is cursed. All that is left is that loudmouth Trent. Arrogant dick.

I use the time I have preparing my horse and sharpening my short sword. The back and forth of the whetstone lulling me into a more calm state of mind. I watch as the small crew I brought with me packs up camp to head home to Ravendene. I never thought I'd come to miss Raelle something this fierce, that foul mouth of hers wrapped around my cock will be a homecoming I can't wait to accept. It's been nearly a week since we left on this mission. Which was only supposed to be three days, but we hit a snag with some road runners in the outlying villages. Things on this side of Ravendene have gotten rough. People are desperate. I will be happy to be home in the capital and not have to concern myself with these lands for, hopefully, a long time.

"Lord Cano, the scouts have returned to camp. It appears that the route is currently clear for travel. The crew should be ready to head out within half an hour."

It's about time. I roll my shoulders as I stand placing my short sword back in its scabbard. I look down at Flynn. I look down at nearly everyone with my nearly 6'4 height. The only person I see eye to eye with is Dax, and that is only in the literal form of the saying. Well, I did, before he was laid out cursed and dumped on our doorstep. Such an unfortunate circumstance. "Good to hear " I say flatly. I catch Flynn briefly turning his lips down at the corners, worrying his bottom lip, but he says nothing else. Just gives me a curt nod and heads back to help with preparations for the journey. I don't care enough to ask what is bothering him. He's a good enough commander, but

just as the last one, if he is more loyal to Ravendene than me, he will find himself a head shorter.

We are currently only a day and a half ride back to town and since this particular trip was not at all fruitful, we don't have any additional weight dragging us down. What do you know... I informed the crew this morning that we are to travel nonstop to reach Ravendene within a day to be done with it. They all agreed reluctantly.

The ride back to the village was swift but uneventful. I cannot say the same about the return home.

Upon returning to Ravendene I expect the same welcome as we always get. However, that is not the case today. The face I have been longing to see is not in the group greeting us. The look on all the faces that are there to welcome us home are somber. Something has happened.

"I urge someone to speak swiftly about what is causing the taste of duress in the air right now." I boom from my horse. A guard flinches and another begins to walk up to where I am, handing me an envelope. My heart skips a beat at the handwriting addressing the letter to me.

*Cano,*

*I'm so very sorry we cannot have this conversation in person, as I would have loved to see the look on your face as you read this. You of all people know how much I love a good debate. However, this particular subject was not one that was up for debate any longer – I have left Ravendene to continue Dax's mission. We are looking for his and Trent's younger sister Mel. It is dear to my heart that she is searched for as thoroughly as possible and you of all people should understand why I feel this way. It hurt me that you are the*

*reason Dax went out on his own when you denied his request for a rescue party. As I knew you would deny my own. I only wish that Dax had asked me for help, maybe then he wouldn't be in the situation he has found himself in. We are also getting what is needed to cure Dax of this curse he is under. Hopefully, before it's too late. I know this is unsanctioned, and quite frankly, I couldn't care less.*

*You should be with us. With me. If you truly cared for me, you would have been. We will return as soon as we can. Do. Not. Come looking for us. We are all trained well and will be fine. Even though I'm pissed at you. I am sorry to worry you, nonetheless.*

*I'm sorry it had to come to this,*

*Raelle Apus*

I'd say I was speechless but I'm not. This is exactly something that Raelle would pull, and I can only guess who the 'we' is. Trent and Kait are surely right alongside her. "Motherfuckers." I spit out as I dismount my horse handing the reins to the stable boy who has come running to assist.

"Sir, I—I'm sorry I couldn't stop them. They left this note with another

and crossed through the boundaries somehow undetected. I—I didn't know they were gone until I found—”

“ENOUGH,” I shout. Stopping the stuttering fool of a guard before he can say any more. I'm so angry that I can feel myself starting to lose control of my form. My claws begin pressing at the backs of my hands wanting to burst through and shred something. I clamp it down as best I can as an animalistic growl bursts from my throat in Flynn's red face. “Bring a bottle of my best bourbon to my library and confirm my suspicions for me, would you? Check to see if you can locate Kait Divins and Trent Fornax...”

I sit in the wingback chair behind my desk in the library. The leather is cool against my burning skin, and I swirl the golden liquid before knocking it back in one go. Fucking Dax. I suck my teeth as the bourbon's smooth burn works its way down my throat. Dax is always at the heart of my problems. Now here I am, fuming over Raelle making this decision without my approval. Without even consulting with me, before sneaking off in the night. I knew she wanted a rescue mission to be deployed. I didn't think she was stupid enough to be a part of it. Flynn returned not long after I left him confirming what I already knew. Kait and Trent are gone as well.

With the last of the sun breaking into the library, and after more than a few measures of bourbon, I make my way to the infirmary to pay my good friend Dax a visit. Walking into the dank room I sigh; the only sound is the door clicking shut behind me and a crackle of the fire in the far side of the otherwise small room. “Dax you fucking asshole. I hope you can hear me” I say, as I sit in one of the chairs at his bedside. It has been nearly a month of him laid up in here. His body wasting away. Such a shame. “You know...” I splay myself out on the chair and kick my head back to look at the ceiling. “I never wanted things to be this way. Raelle left with your annoying-as-shit little brother. You know that? The fierce amazing woman I never would have expected to land in my lap, that I care for ever so deeply. Ran off into the night looking for a flower... and a girl she will never find...” I raise my voice some, sitting up to look Dax in the face. I wish he could see the wrath in my eyes as I narrow them on him. “To fix your godsdamned mistake!”

I rub my hand down my face, and chase the anger with a swig of bourbon from the bottle I brought with me. “I wish I could kill you, you know? Solve all my problems in one swift push of my blade. Of course, I wouldn't be so lucky though. I know this curse you have upon you. And I know that only it will kill you. Your last breath will come brother and soon, I promise you that.

Unfortunately, it will not be me who takes it from you. This curse will eat away at your body and soul until there is nothing left unless you get the cure.”

I laugh darkly, as I stand sauntering over to the fire. I place my bottle on the mantle and turn to look at him again. Raelle will not be the one who will break this curse. She won't find the Moon Flower. That is only part of this curse that is on him anyway. The other part will be much harder to find because it simply does not exist. The book detailing everything needed and how to create the elixir was destroyed in the fire Dax created. The same fire that took his parents' life. Ironic really. Dax was dead as soon as he decided to cross that line into the caves of Castenelle. I will be here for Raelle when she returns and realizes the flower is not enough. I get why she wants to save him. Her family was killed, and she would do anything to help someone be reunited with their family members. She knows what it's like to feel that desperation. But I too know that pain, that desperate ache deep inside, and it's precisely why I've chosen this path. I know Dax is responsible for my own parent's death. His parents hiding the fact.

What she doesn't know is that the girl is safe enough, and being cared for very close to home. That's also something that she will not find out for a long time to come. Young Mel has an important role in my plans for the future, as does Raelle. Little does she know; I was the reason she found Ravendene. She was corralled right to my clutches. Dax was right about the long game. He just didn't realize I was already playing, and he was just a pawn.

I stride over to the bedside once more, leaning down to whisper in Dax's ear. “I can't wait for the day you take your last breath and your power transfers. I will be one step closer to the redemption I seek.” I nearly spit the last part through my teeth. I stand and turn on my heel leaving the room and the stagnant air around the shell of a man that once was. Dax Fornax-Ravendene has been dead to me for years. This just brings me one step closer to seeing it happen literally.

My dreams troubled me while I slept last night. Sticky with sweat, the stench of smoke clings to my skin burning my nostrils. *It was only a dream, fucker. Brush it off*, I tell myself before splashing my face with water at the sink and deciding that is not going to cut it. I strip down and take a cold shower. I feel like it will take hours to wash the feel of that dream off of me.

After getting dressed I glance out of the large arched window in the corridor. The sun is just cresting the mountains. It's early, but not too early



for a training session. I'll go work off this feeling. It's just something about it that brings a sense of déjà vu. Perhaps it wasn't merely a dream, but something I read of time or two. Maybe I should talk to one of the seers, the way it felt, it could have been a warning, or maybe the gods of old are approving of my plans.

"Or you could be a drunk asshole who has an overactive imagination." I chastise myself.

I've spent enough time thinking about it. The gods of old are dead and gone, and now it is my time to rise. I run my hand over my short hair and down my face, clearing the thoughts clouding my head, and make my way to the training center. Normally Raelle and I are getting up at this time, and going for our morning run to warm up for our session. It feels bizarre not to have her here after the year we have created this habit.

We haven't been separated since she arrived here in Ravendene. I haven't allowed it. It's too bad that she is such a big part of my plans. She's such a pretty thing and has such a fun, tight, curvy body. At least I was able to make use of her, while I wait for the right time to get rid of all the baggage weighing me down. Beginning with the reason I came into power of this territory, Dax Fornax-Ravendene will always have the upper hand on me, as long as he's breathing. When he is no longer in the picture, and the other two Fornax siblings are dealt with, I can complete the power transfer. No one will be able to challenge me for what I plan to claim. By the time I have everything lined up, Raelle will be mine to control, and when the time is right, she will join the rest of her family.



## CHAPTER NINE

THE CAVES WEREN'T TOO far out of the way, considering our situation. We were able to get some rest, regain our strength, and heal properly. It would be so much easier if we weren't on Demetrey territory, but we are still on their putrid land. Within a day we are creeping back to the edge of the village, near the bridge where Trent and I found each other. Luckily, I guess I had told him what flower we were looking for to break this curse on Dax.

My time in the library back in Ravdene served me well because that is where I had apparently found a book that told us all about different curses, magics, and elixirs. I had told Trent all about it. The dagger isn't the only thing we need though to make the cure elixir. We need the moonstone dagger, soil from blessed land, and blood as the substance of life. Not only that but we needed to hurry because none of us are sure how long he has before there is no coming back.

The town we arrive in is quaint. The dwellings that line the cobble streets are crumbling and small, the gardens that surround them barren. Many of them are not constructed well and more than a few of them we have passed would hardly be considered livable. One of the larger homes we see has a line

of clothes hanging out to dry which we take advantage of. There are only two cloaks, one looks like a good fit for Trent which is a blessing because the boy is not small and the one he allowed me to borrow is on its last wear with damage. The other would work for either myself or Kait.

“I got this. Stay here.” Kait runs the short distance between us and the clothesline. She hops over the short crumbling stone wall and snatches the cloaks. I guess our luck is holding steady because just across the way I see another cloak and a set of leggings that would be perfect for me, since mine are currently shredded. I motion to Kait pointing out what I see and she winks back as she stealthily hops the barrier between the two yards once more and snags them for me. Trent sticks his elbow in my side and smiles wide at me.

“Chill Rae. We will be fine.” We take only what’s needed for some coverage because Demetrey could still be looking for us. I don’t think they’ve caught onto our change in direction though and believe we are safe for now. I still have a hard time calming down though. I bite my lip as I look around the quiet village in the early morning hours, most are still sleeping. Only the sound of the birds waking and singing their early morning songs plays in my ears. I guess looping around so you’re heading toward those who wish you harm isn’t the normal decision one would typically make, and I try to infuse myself with some confidence.

We get away with swiping the items we need, then make our way into the town center. “We need to find the apothecary. They will either have what we are looking for or may be able to point us in the right direction.” I whisper, tucking my chin and draw up my hood to ensure my hair and face are covered. The brisk air worked in our favor, making it easier to hide our features.

“We can’t just walk in there asking for the flower. It’s rare and it may raise suspicions. We can’t be found out again while we are here. No splitting up this time either” Kait says, casting her eyes to the side in Trent’s direction. He just grins at her.

“Let me do the talking. Follow my lead.” Trent winks then picks up his stride a little. He sounds confident enough I don’t question him. I feel that the least amount of talking I do the better. We find the apothecary fairly quickly. It’s a quaint shop with a wooden sign painted yellow above the door naming the store Bella Luna Apothecary. When we enter, a bell above the door chimes. The thick scent of incense, earthy lavender, and sage envelops us, and I notice a hint of lemon verbena. The balmy lemon scent reminds me so

much of my mother that my heart drops into my stomach and takes my breath away as my grief tries to overwhelm me. The reminder of the salve my mother would use to ease the pains left by the hard days working in the fields makes my heart ache.

“Good morning, first customers of the day, I had a feeling I needed to open early today.” A thin, younger woman with bright green eyes and golden brown hair greets us. “Are you just passing through on your travels?” She is tying dried sage into bundles next to an older woman who says nothing but watches intently. I keep my cloak up to hide my hair and face within the shadows.

“Yes, good morning. We are here for a short stay passing through on our way back home, finally.” Trent tells her, sure not to mention too many details. He ambles up to the work table. Their lips curve into a warm smile as he approaches. The dimple on his right cheek is on show. “We are actually looking for a few different things. If you don’t mind helping us out.”

“Of course, what is it you are looking for?” the young woman asks just as kindly.

“Trent has pulled out all his charisma” Kait leans in close to whisper to me. He’s sugarcoating his words and it’s honestly making me want to gag. I love it a little too. A smile creeps onto my face as I turn from them. Trying to stay out of the way and not interested in being pulled into random niceties. I mosey around the store while Trent continues to talk to the store clerk.

As I make my way through the tight isles of odds and ends, I notice the same tingle running up my spine as I did when Kait burst through the trees in the forest. Now that I think of it, it almost feels like a warning, like an ominous feeling of someone watching me... I keep my head down, doing my best to keep my hair hidden. Hair like mine is pretty recognizable, so if the Demetrey’s have placed a caution out in the town, I would be an easy target with my almost waist-long, bright silver-blond locks. I have it tied back in a braid, so hopefully I don’t have to worry much and I don’t think I do, especially in this dimly lit shop.

I turn the corner to browse the salves they have on display. I leap so suddenly I nearly drop the eucalyptus balm I had picked up to smell because the older lady who was standing at the work table just came out of nowhere, appearing out of thin air next to me. In the startle, my cloak hood shifts back and exposes my face.

“My apologies, Luna. I didn’t mean to startle you.” She says, her voice a

rough croak. She smiles with narrowed eyes at me and I get that feeling again at the nape of my neck. Tingles spread from there and down my arms like a warm caress. She looks at me knowingly. “I believe you are in need of something special. Your mother would be proud,” she whispers the last part, but I heard what she said. Does this woman know who I am?

“We all know how your mother is, Luna.” She just smiles then takes my hand and places a jar into it. The contact sends a zap into my fingers just long enough to register the tingle then it’s gone. As she holds me there, we make eye contact for only a moment, her brown eyes look kind and full of knowledge, and skin golden and wrinkled with age.

“How? How do you know who I am?” Her grip loosens on my hand causing my arm to fall and my gaze sweeps down to the jar she has placed there. It’s not just any jar but a jar with three beautiful white flowers inside. They glow with the magic that flows through them.

“Anyone who knows the truth could see who you are as clearly as they can see the moon on a cloudless night.” My eyebrows knit together as I try to understand what she just said. “These flowers, how did you know we needed them?” I ask.

I look down at the ethereal flowers as she says, “Save him.” My eyes whip back up to her, but she is gone. Looking around confused I bite my lip but, without another hesitation, I simply tuck the jar into my cloak and turn to find Trent and Kait. I have the night-blooming moonflower. The woman knew what we needed the flower for? Save him? Does she know about Dax? Pulling my hood low again I bump Kait with my shoulder as I join them.

“Yes, I do need the dung of a Makeel beetle.” I hear Trent say assuredly, “And before you question me, yes, I know it’s a rare request. However, I would not request it if it was of no use to us. We are looking for other rare items as well. Do you have a section you can point us to in the store?” Trent says with a dead serious face. Honestly, I commend him for his efforts on that one. The dung of a Makeel beetle? Are there people who sit around waiting for a beetle to crap so they can bottle it up to sell? What would that even be used for? I make eye contact with Kait, lifting my eyebrow I incline my head gesturing to my hand where I let the bottle peek out from behind the cloak. Her eyes go wide momentarily, but she doesn’t skip a beat. She knows we need to get out of here, she yawns and grasps Trent’s arm by the crook of his elbow.

“My love, I’m feeling very tired. If she says she has never heard of such

rarity perhaps we can find what we are looking for elsewhere. I'd like to get going. We have quite the journey ahead of us still. I think we have all we need for today." She reaches up to run her fingers up into the hair, just behind his ear. His eyes go a little wide for a second, then they almost roll back into his head. His strong confidence in what he was talking about all but crashes and burns as he melts into her touch. It makes me bite back a laugh.

"Um yeah, okay. We—uh, I think we will just take some of this tea and um. This." He grabs a chicken foot from a dish and shoves it toward the woman. Her eyebrows twist up as she looks at him like he has lost his damn mind. To her defense, he does sound that way currently. I stifle a laugh, but as I wait for the transaction to finish, I still have that lingering sense sitting at the base of my skull, that someone is watching me.



## CHAPTER TEN

THE SENSATION OF BEING watched is different from what I felt in the forest. This feeling does not give me any unease, just a sense that I'm being watched and maybe warmth in my limbs. Like when you see someone you haven't seen for some time and need to hug them. It doesn't make any sense, and I shake my head trying to dispel the unease gathering.

I didn't see the older woman who gave me the night-blooming moonflowers again before we left the shop. I wonder about what she said to me about my mother, calling me Luna? The weird riddle about the moon? It was confusing; she knew what I needed, but could she have mistaken me for someone else? I don't think my mother had ever been to Demetrey before. She said 'save him' though... Was she a seer? I don't tell them about the conversation with the woman at the apothecary, mostly because I'm not sure what to think of it. Trent and Kait seem not to notice me at war with my senses.

When we make it back to the tree line and we are confident that we were not followed, Trent lets out a frustrated sigh. He's not aware that I have the flowers. Kait looks at me, knowing full well I have them tucked in my cloak

and she is grinning ear to ear. “Why are you cheesing so hard right now? At this rate, we’re never going to get the cure to Dax. First the dagger, and now the flowers. We are going to have to go back at some point, and we’re still empty-handed. I’m worried we are going to have to accept that we have failed.” He grips the back of his neck with one hand while rolling his head back in frustration, eyes pinched closed.

“Are we empty-handed though, Trent?” I say, as I pull the jar from my cloak and give it a little wiggle at him. When he looks at me, his eyes widen so much I feel like they may just pop from his skull.

“What?! How?” His shocked expression makes me giggle a little, which is a nice reprieve from the constant turmoil I’ve been going through in my head since I woke up a few days ago with no memory of the last year of my life. He rushes me then, lifting me up in a tight hug. “Seriously Rae! You are amazing! I can’t believe this! What are we doing?! Let’s get back to getting all we need so we can get to Ravendene and get those little bastards to my brother.” When he finally sits me down, we are both grinning ear to ear, but Trent has so much emotion in his eyes it nearly overwhelms me. Love. The love he has for his brother is so raw there, my heart squeezes.

“Ok, so we knew we had to get the flowers which was oddly easy considering the first task we set out for... Does it worry anyone else that they were that easy to retrieve? How did you find them so easy anyway?” Kait asks.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but did either of you get a prickly sensation going through you while in the apothecary? I’ve felt them before, like when Kait crashed into us in the forest and when I found you lying unconscious under the bridge.” I gesture to Trent. “It’s like someone was watching, but there was no one there? Well, I had that sensation back in the shoppe, and then the old woman that was helping with the sage binding just handed me the flowers.” I leave out what she said to me.

Both Kait and Trent turn to each other. “Rae, these feelings you have... Do they feel the same every time? And what old woman are you talking about? There was only one person working in the apothecary and we were the only customers there.” Trent says his lips tugging down at the corners.

I think back to the small handful of times it has happened. Does it feel the same in a way? My brows furrow as I think back on the tingle I get up my spine, at the base of my neck. When I found Trent the emotion was different. I felt like he was important, and I needed him. When we were in the forest, it



was urgent. In the apothecary, it had been warm? “I guess it's the same in a sense, but it's as though each time it has happened there is a different emotion tied to it. Then there is always this sense that I'm being watched, and I don't know how to explain that either.” I shake my head and continue. “But stop playing around; you had to have seen the old woman. She was standing right next to the woman who greeted us walking in. She found me when I was wandering around and gave me the jar. I didn't even have to ask for it.”

Saying all of that out loud makes me pull my bottom lip into my mouth, biting down on it with worry. I look around nervously because it could be a trap. I could have been recognized, and my taking the flowers was a confirmation of who I was. My pulse starts racing thinking about the danger I could have just put us in. The tingle creeps back up my spine, and just out of reflex, I reach up and brush my fingers at the nape of my neck and my eyebrows pinch.

“Let's get out of here. Trent, do you think you can hunt down some food for us?”

“Say no more.” He responds with a lopsided grin.

Over the next couple of hours, Trent snares a rabbit and two small squirrels. We share the meal of roasted meat, as we sit around the fire finally able to take a break.

“We need to hurry and get back to Ravendene. Before we can create the cure elixir, there is one more place we need to check out, and it's actually not far from here. The dagger could be at the outpost that Dax and I had claimed for our own. We need to get there to secure the moonstone dagger for the ritual.” Trent looks up to the sky and as he closes his eyes. “It's on the way back to Ravendene, just along the border. There is also land close by there that has been blessed by the gods themselves. We can collect the soil that's needed” Trent says as he turns to face just me. “You've mentioned your mother's power to me before, she was a seer, among other things, but the sight was her strongest gift, correct?”

I nod.

It was.

My mother was a powerful seer, but she didn't like to talk about her gift. She said that it was a gift and a curse. Regardless of what she saw, sometimes someone makes a decision that changes fate, and there is no running from fate once the path is paved.

“The feelings you are getting. I think they might be a sign of you

beginning to come into your power, Rae. I think you're beginning the ascension. If what's happening is your ascension... we need to be on Ravendene soil; otherwise, we are going to have a butt load of more problems than what we currently have. You will essentially become a beacon to the Demetrey if you Ascend here, being that you are the last of your line and clearly very powerful."

His face blanches, but he has a sort of hard determination settling in his eyes. I know he's right. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. It makes sense that I could carry the same power as my mother. When she passed away, her power would have transferred to me, but it doesn't always transfer exactly as it was before. Also, since I have not ascended yet, that power could have been dormant. But as we get closer to ascension, magic usually begins to surface.

Everyone ascends at different times in their life but most commonly it's at twenty-one, hardly ever later. I don't know what could have caused mine to be delayed. It's not what I'm most worried about though. I am the last of my line. I will carry all of the power in my line now, and though I know my parents weren't the most powerful, they had enough. I never thought about it before now, but I've felt the potency of it coursing through me even before my family passed away, and powerful is an understatement. If what I have felt grows? It's not something I'm prepared for. I don't think anyone is.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### SIX WEEKS AGO

“DAX!” MEL YELLS AS she bursts through the workroom doors of the barn. The door bangs as it bounces off the wall behind it. “I did it! I finally did it!” She’s laughing and has a wide smile that makes her big, green eyes scrunch. She looks so much like our mother, even more so when she’s laughing. I wish she could have known Ma longer.

“Whoa, careful Ella. I’ve got my tools out; I don’t want you getting hurt.” I’m the only one who calls her that anymore. Ma and Pop used to before they were killed. I couldn’t stop using the nickname. She keeps jumping and spinning around excitedly. “Melani Fornax-Ravendene. Sit.” I pull a stool out for her. She sits reluctantly, wobbling a bit with her enthusiastic plop onto it. I reach out and palm both sides of her face. Bending down, I put a kiss on the top of her head. “Settle down.” I laugh. “What did you do finally? Or do I even want to know?”

She looks up at me, still grinning from ear to ear, beaming. “Oh, you will want to know.” She giggles a little and starts fidgeting with some of the small tools I have on the worktop. “I was training with Trent, and I finally put him on his ass!” She says with a whoop and a fist in the air.

I’m not looking at her when she says it, so she can’t see the smile on my face. I hide it before I slowly turn toward her. I make my face as blank as possible, but it’s harder to do with her than it is with anyone else. Her smile starts pulling down at the corners and worry takes its place. I stare at her like that for another moment, then swiftly grab her shoulders and kick the stool out from under her as I guide her fall to the ground. With a sinister smile on my face, I tell her, “But you can’t take me down!” and I tickle her at the sides. She laughs and laughs until she’s snorting and out of breath. I laugh with her and help her sit up on the stool again. As she catches her breath, we just smile at each other.

“Really Dax, you should have seen it.” She goes on to tell me the story about how she accomplished knocking Trent on his ass. She’s very animated in her storytelling, jumping around, and reenacting her movements. I just watch her with a slight grin on my face. I should really tell her to stop using profanity, but I don’t think anyone would expect anything less from her, with guardians like me and Trent. Me being twenty-seven and Trent being just barely over twenty. Not to mention, we don’t exactly have the best reputation for being proper gentlemen either. Maybe once we did, but that was before. Trent is a hundred times better than my sorry ass, though.

“I’m proud of you, kid. Let me know when you want a real opponent, and we’ll see how you do.” I tease her. She laughs and pokes me in the side. “I’m just finishing my project here, and then I will be in for supper. Why don’t you go wash up? Yea?” She lets out a small giggle and shakes her head before hopping down from the stool and skipping out of the workroom.

I come out here to clear my mind. I’ve found myself out here more often in recent months, but it’s nights like these when I get some of my best work done. When I’m not training or reading in my library, I’m typically here in my workroom with my forge. Before he died, my uncle was one of the most widely known bladesmiths in the kingdom, and he taught me from a young age how to ease my mind and work out my frustrations while creating beautiful and deadly blades. I’ve been struggling recently to keep the damper on my power, so there are some nights I spend out here well into the dark hours. Actually, the struggle really seemed to start just before Raelle arrived

in Ravendene. My emotions have been running away with themselves at times, and when that happens, it's particularly hard to keep the power in me hidden and locked down tight. So, I've been here a lot. Away from Cano, away from Raelle, and away from anyone I could potentially hurt.

Trent pops his head into the workroom. "Hey man, you about done in here?" he looks around curiously. I don't like people being in my workroom. This is the only place where I can escape. I only ever make exceptions for Ella.

"I'm just cleaning up, I'll be out in five or so."

"Uh, I let the kitchen staff know that we will be entertaining tonight and we will be eating on the patio. Just a heads up" he says as he goes to shut the door.

I catch the door with my boot. "What company?" I snap. He knows I haven't been in a mood that screams *pleasure to be around*. I don't think anyone can say I'm ever really a pleasure to be around. Not now, anyway. I know I don't deserve happiness. I pretend as much as I can for Ella and sometimes Trent and Kait, but other than that, I'm an asshole and could care less about anyone else. Damn them all. Yet another reason why I passed the torch to Cano when it came to leading our territory. I would have let Trent, but he was too young, and with just losing our parents, he wouldn't have been ready anyway.

When I step out of the workroom, Trent is already at the main house. He's been showing signs of ascension already, though he still has a year until the normal age of twenty-one. Speed is clearly part of his gifts. We come from a long line of shifters, so it's no surprise really, more of an annoyance right now though. I let loose a sigh as I turn back to the forge and clean up my tools. I look around, eyeing the blade I've just finished. It gleams in the low light of the barn and brings a smile to my face. I let it stay there only a moment before it falls away, as I turn around and look up. "Sure Trent, let's have guests come to witness the depravity that is my life," I say under my breath, trudging the distance from the barn to the manor house.

I'm in my room getting dressed when I hear the hum of people talking downstairs. "Wonderful, our guests have arrived," I say blandly to the empty room as I get dressed. I'm not trying to impress anyone tonight, and this was not a planned gathering. I dress in my usual training gear: black pants, a tunic, and boots. If they wanted to be impressed by anything, they should not be here. There's a quick, quiet knock at my door, "Enter." I bark out.

“Sir, the guests have arrived, and everyone is being seated on the patio as we speak,” Miles tells me. Miles has been on my staff—well, on my parent’s staff—since before I was born. He’s essentially family, but keeps things very professional with me at least. He’s much more relaxed around Trent. “Thanks, Miles. I’ll be down shortly.” I wave him off. Taking the glass from the fireplace mantle, I pour a measure from the decanter. I’m not doing this sober, no matter who is down there.



I hear her laugh before I get to the patio. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I’m going to beat Trent’s ass if Cano is on that godsdamn patio. Sucking my teeth, I curse Trent for making me have to go through this. Cano is stuck to Raelle ever since she showed up in Ravendene. I at least know that Raelle is here; I would know that laugh anywhere. I can endure her company for a night, but only if Cano has fucked all the way off. Just because she has become close to Kait and Trent, I’ve had to be subjected to Cano’s company more frequently. Which partially explains why my moods have grown shittier by the day.

I turn the corner, almost to the patio, when I run directly into her. I have to catch her, so she doesn’t fall from the collision. I look down at the same time she looks up and our eyes lock to one another. There is a charge in the air at that moment and a spark on my skin that catches me by surprise. Her full lips part on a quick inhale, and she smiles shyly as a blush runs up her chest into her cheeks on her sun-kissed skin.

“Sorry, I—I was just going to wash up before we eat.” She stammers, brushing a stray hair behind her ear.

I let her go and the electric-charged feeling is gone, but there is still a hum of energy in my gut. The whole interaction was so quick it was almost as though it didn't happen, but I felt... something more the moment our skin touched. I tilt my head, and give her my most charming sarcastic half-grin. "No need to apologize, love. We can continue when you're done, if you're feeling like you need a little more attention than what Cano can give you. I could let you dance on me all night."

Her cheeks turn a deeper shade of pink, and then she rolls her eyes, turning to the washroom. "I'll pass thanks. Also, If Cano was here, and heard you say that, you would be on your ass so fast you wouldn't know what hit you." She says as she shuts the door. I purse my lips as a smile tries to creep across my face. *Doubtful*. I'll let Raelle keep thinking Cano could beat me somehow, for now. I saunter to the patio, and looking around, I see that just Trent and Kait are at the table. I guess that's some good news. Cano isn't here. At least I don't have to put up with the asshole.

Kait greets me when I come out to sit down with a raised eyebrow and side eye, saying she heard some, if not all, of Raelle's and my brief conversation in the hall. She has talked to me so many times about trying to be nicer to people, but she should know by now it's not going to happen. I give her a sly grin, skirting her to sit wide in one of the side chairs at the dining table. I don't sit at the head of the table. Nobody does. That was Pa's seat, and I can't bring myself to sit there, and I suppose Trent feels the same way. It's just something we do that goes unspoken.

Sipping my whiskey, I let the burn warm me as I listen to Kait and Trent talk amongst themselves. There is a fire burning in the outdoor fireplace to my right, and I use it as a distraction, zoning out the conversation around me, I focus on the flames. Using my gift, I do something I haven't felt compelled to do in years. I create pictures in the flames. Two fire foxes hopping around back and forth between the flames. I used to do this when Trent was a small boy to make him laugh. Ever since Ma and Pa were killed and I put a lid on my power, I don't use it for anything if I don't have to.

"I've never seen someone wield flames like that." Her voice cuts through my concentration, and the fire creatures sputter out returning to their normal lick of flames, reaching for the sky. I don't turn to look at her right away. "It's beautiful." She says I'm taken aback by the softness in her tone, even though I was just an arrogant prick in the hall, and she was just as brash back. If I were looking for friends and she wasn't with Cano nearly all hours of the

day, I would almost want to be friends with Raelle. She is soft and kind, but I've seen her in training when a wicked side has come out. She can put a man twice her size on their ass. Thinking back on the day we met and her confidence when telling me to stop with my shit. It makes my lips twitch—a smile, trying to break through my stony exterior. I can feel my magic humming in my chest already at her nearness. I know it's my power reaching out for hers.

Raelle doesn't wait for me to respond as she walks past me and sits in the chair to my left. She's been here enough times I think she realizes the unspoken rule that no one sits at the head of the table. That is unless Cano is here, he makes a point to take the head of the table every time. Even knowing it puts Trent and myself on edge. Disrespectful bastard.

“Can we eat already? I'd like to get this over with, so I can drown myself in whiskey in the shadows of my rooms.” I draw out turning to face the table once more, fixing my expression into a blank mask.

“Wow, that's... dark...” Kait laughs.

“Sorry, we're taking up your time, asshole. You don't have to be here. We just needed to unwind a bit. Training has been a shit storm of epic proportions lately, and with Cano out on a mission for a few days we thought, no time like the present. Why don't you ease up and have that whiskey with us?” Trent laughs as he pours drinks for everyone at the table.

I don't know what it is, but the idea of letting go for a night really does sound like something I'd like to let myself do. I know it probably won't happen, but the thought sounds good enough to consider. Ella comes skipping out of the house happy as always. I can't help but look up at the sound of her giggles as she greets everyone. She tells everyone how she beat Trent today in her training. Trent's eyes flash with pride as he watches her, his smile beaming.

Raelle leans in, bracing herself on the arm of my chair, “I don't think I've ever seen one of those on you.” I crane my neck to look at her, my eyebrow quirking.

“One of what?” I say, as my eyes are drawn to the full bottom lip she pulls between her teeth, and then snap back up to meet her gaze.

“A real smile.”

Dinner is served, and it effectively cuts whatever that conversation was turning into off. I hadn't realized I was smiling. There is a reason she has not seen that. Any sense of happiness is reserved for Ella, and Ella alone. Maybe



if she would have known me before, she would have seen a different side of me. I was a different person back then.

After we eat, there is more chatting, and Ella is very animatedly telling stories again. The girl has an imagination on her that would rival the best authors of all time. “Ella, it’s getting late. I think it’s time you head back to your room and ready yourself for bed. You still have studies with Ms. Fey tomorrow morning, do you not?” I ask her.

“I do, but I really wanted to—” she starts to argue.

“No, Ella. It’s time for you to head upstairs. There will be time for fun tomorrow after your lessons.”

“I understand.” She says with a sadness in her eyes. She hugs everyone goodnight, and I get another look from Raelle when Ella also hugs me.

“I love you, Dax.” She says as she attempts to wrap her arms around my broad frame. I close my eyes because I can feel everybody’s gazes burning into me. I wrap one arm around her and give her a light squeeze.

“I love you too, sweet girl. Get to bed,” I tell her with a kiss to the top of her head. Ella runs off and disappears into the house a moment later. Kait and Trent start playing some sort of drinking game, but I can feel Raelle’s stare on me.

“What?” I scowl into my glass and take a drink.

“Nothing. It’s just that I don’t think I’ve ever seen you as calm, or almost happy, as you just were with Mel. It’s just a vast contrast to the Dax I normally see, and I’ve been living here for close to a year now. Also, I’ve never heard anyone call her anything other than Mel or Melani, Ella is cute.” She folds into herself on the chair bringing her knees to her chin and resting it there, hugging her legs. I see a chill run down her arms causing goose flesh to appear. It’s early fall and while the days are still warm in Ravendene, as the sun sets the nights are getting cooler.

I stand, grabbing a throw off the chaise just inside the house. I swagger back to where we were sitting and offer the throw to her. She gives a small smile while accepting the blanket.

“Ella is the nickname our parents gave her. I have always called her that. Everyone else calls her Mel, but her real name is Melani. I’m different with her because she deserves it. She has been through enough with losing our parents at such a young age. Ella doesn’t need to have my usual shitty attitude bringing more darkness into her life.” Raelle looks sad for a moment, and then smiles at me causing my brows to stitch together in confusion. She

doesn't say anything else on the subject. However, she does reach over and takes my nearly full whiskey glass. Her eyes flick to mine, as she presses her lips to the glass, smiles, then drinks the whole lot. My eyebrows shoot to my hairline. I'd say something smart about her doing it, but I'm too dumbfounded to bring the words to my lips, and I'm kind of turned on by her gusto.

Raelle laughs, setting the glass down in front of me. Her eyes smolder as she licks the whiskey off her bottom lip. Standing, she makes her way to the space before the fire and begins to dance. Kait hops up to join her, while Trent moves to sit in the seat Raelle just vacated. He starts telling me his version of what happened in training with Ella, but I can't take my eyes off Raelle and Kait. They look so happy laughing and dancing to the music. I start to relax, for what could be the first time, since my parents were killed. Before long, Trent rises to his feet and saunters to Kait and begins dancing too. Raelle doesn't seem to mind that she has no partner to dance with, she just continues to sway her hips to the slow beat, eyes closed and face to the stars. She looks like a dream.

I'm splayed out in the chair, whiskey in hand. I let my head lull back as I close my eyes too and let the heaviness caused by the alcohol settle over me. Unexpectedly, I feel the brush of hands on my thighs. Before I can process what's happening, they move up from the tops of my knees, to the bend at my hip and stop with a heavy press. I slowly tilt my head down and open my eyes to see Raelle, nearly chest-to-chest with me. She's gripping the top of my thighs, bent at the waist, and leaning in to get close to my face. I smirk at her with amusement playing in my eyes.

"Easy sweetheart, if I didn't know any better I'd think you were looking for something." She grins locking her eyes with mine leaning in a fraction closer and whispers "I am."

My gaze drops to her lips once more, "Careful what you wish for, I'm not sure you could handle it."

"Dance with me." She laughs.

I don't know if it is the drinks that I've consumed, the fact that she is supposedly Cano's girl, or that I haven't felt this relaxed in years. I put my whiskey down on the table and bring my arms up, lacing my fingers at the back of my head. "I'm all for a dance, love." I jut my chin in the direction of my lap lifting my hips briefly, which causes our bodies to touch.

She laughs a little, and to my surprise she turns around, effectively sitting

in my lap, and begins to give me the most undeserving lap dance I have ever had.

I should put a stop to this. She must be drunk, that's the only explanation. I may be, in almost every way, fucked up, but I'm not into taking advantage of drunk girls. She lifts from my lap, dropping down between my legs. She begins the slow rise to standing, her ass brushing up my legs the entire way, while her hands wave seductively above her head. I take the chance and adjust myself in my pants before she realizes just how much I'm enjoying her... company.

I sit forward reaching out for her hips. She allows me to draw her back, slowly dropping into my lap. My arm wrapping around her waist, I pull her back into my chest and drop my mouth to her ear. "You have no idea what you're doing right now, do you?" I ask her with my voice low, brushing the shell of her ear with my lips. I hear the quick inhale she sucks in.

She turns her head slightly toward mine, matching my whisper. "I think I have some sort of idea." She grinds her hips in my lap at that very moment, causing a groan of approval to come from me unabated, and my fingers tighten at her hip. She leans forward slightly allowing space to open up between her back and my front. She turns her head a little more, and we make eye contact. Her lips slightly parted, are only a breath away from mine. I feel like all rational thought has left me entirely, as I stare into her beautiful pine-green eyes.

It's like she has taken my pain, and erased it completely with just that look alone. Like, I could actually feel more than soul-deep sorrow, something close to happiness again, if I could only allow myself. I know it's not real. I know I need to stop this, but the heat in her eyes, in the press of where her body connects with mine. I feel that electric sort of energy again in the air around us. It's everywhere our bodies touch, in the space between our lips. I pull my arm back and splay my hand across her stomach.

"Whhhaaat did I just walk in on?" Trent drawls out. The energy in the air snaps away like a bolt of lightning splitting a tree in half and taking my breath with it.

Raelle nearly jumps out of my lap and my reach. The cold rushes in at me all at once, and I rub my hand down my face. Looking up at Trent, I roll my eyes at the wide-eyed look he's giving me. I hadn't even noticed that Trent and Kait weren't on the patio with us anymore. My gaze drifts back to Raelle. A blush blooms across her face, and it's sexy as shit. I give her a

menacing grin locking my gaze with hers. The flush deepens, and she bites down on her bottom lip.

A bloodcurdling scream so loud it could have woken the entire kingdom comes from the garden on the side of the estate. Close. Too close. I stand abruptly, grabbing Trent by the front of his shirt with one fist. I'd know that scream anywhere.

"Ella." We gasp at the same time, as we immediately begin sprinting into the night.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### FOUR WEEKS AGO

I CLENCH AND UNCLENCH my fists, my heart is pounding in my ears as I purse my lips and stare at the uneaten lunch sitting on the table in front of me. How many times has this happened recently? The tension in town is running rampant and I'm starting to understand why. Cano is not showing the leadership he should be. Every time I turn around he's disappearing or not showing up to something we have planned. I push away from the table, the chair squeaking across the wood floors in protest. I'm done playing this game with him. Ravendene deserves better. Mel deserves better.

I stride into the training center late in the afternoon looking for Cano. He didn't show up to our lunch, yet again. Flynn came into the library at the time Cano was supposed to meet me saying that he was held up in a strategic

meeting with the regime. I call bullshit. Cano has been avoiding me for the last two weeks. Likely because I won't give up trying to convince him to allow a mission to try to find Mel. The poor girl was only eleven years old.

I forcefully shove the door open, it clunks against the wall and I look around the dimly lit space. Nobody is training in the late afternoon, only the smell of sweat and the metallic tang of blood clings to the air.

"What are you doing here, Raelle?" Cano's voice comes to me from a dark corner of the room where he's sitting in one of the spectator seats, his feet up on the chair in front of him.

"I'm here because you've been avoiding me." I pin him with narrowed eyes.

"I'm avoiding everyone." He says blandly.

"Cano, you have to understand. It's his sister. Mel is only eleven years old. If there was ever a cause for going out with a crew on a rescue mission it's now! It's already been two weeks since she went missing. Do you know what could happen in two weeks out there?"

"I know precisely what could happen!" He bellows, dropping his feet from the chair in front of him he stands and storms over to me. I lift my chin to meet his gaze.

"Do not yell at me, Cano Croix. Be the man I know you to be and talk to me in a way I deserve." I seethe with my lip curled in disgust. Cano looks down at me, his eyes clouded in darkness making his already dark eyes appear pitch black. He sucks his teeth, spinning on his heel as he aims to leave the training center.

"CANO!" I won't stand for him walking away from me like this.

"Don't follow me, Raelle. This conversation is over." He says without even turning to face me. I run to catch him, reaching out I wrap my fingers around the crook of his elbow pulling to stop him.

"Cano wait. Please just talk to me about this." My tone softens as I sense a shift in him.

Cano spins, his hand comes up to my throat and he slams me against the wall. My head bounces at the impact. I scrunch my face up, my eyes squeezed tight as I try to push out the instant ache ricocheting through my brain. His fingers tighten around my throat to the point of pain. My breath only sneaks through in wheezes. I reach up clawing into his hands trying to get a reprieve from his tight grip.

"I told you not to follow me. I'm done talking about this. I'm done talking

about him. The girl is gone. GET THE FUCK OVER IT.”

His grip is removed from my neck forcefully, and his body goes flying to the side in a flash of speed, the momentum takes me down with him. My elbow hits the hard stone floor splitting the skin there. The room grows darker by the second. My vision is tunneling, bright white spots bloom and float as I regain my breaths. Panting on the floor, I reach up, smoothing the ache in my throat. I look up to see Dax lifting Cano. He slides his body up the wall with only his toes touching the ground.

“How does it feel, motherfucker?” He growls. Cano’s feet struggle to find purchase as he grips Dax’s wrists, coughs, and sputters, spittle dribbling out of his gasping mouth. “You put your hands on her again, I’ll cut them from your body, one fucking finger at a time. Do you understand me?” Dax says through clenched teeth. He drops him to the ground like a child dropping a toy. Cano slumps down the wall in a heap gasping for air like a fish out of water. “I’m about done with this bullshit, Cano. I’m not going to warn you again. You are not the man I once knew if you’re willing to put your hands on a woman like that.”

“I’m not some defenseless damsel in distress,” I mutter. Dax pins me in his gaze.

“You’re not, but you were also not fighting back were you, Raelle?” He has a point. I wasn’t. I wanted to see how far Cano was willing to take his rage.

“I was making a point,”

“And what point was that?” He snorts a laugh turning on a heel to leave. A hum in my chest begins to build urging me to follow Dax and I grit my teeth as I watch him strut away. Turning back to Cano I narrow my eyes as I look down on him.

“He’s right, you know. You’re not even the same person I have come to know since arriving here in Ravendene.” He doesn’t say anything, just spits to the ground. His lips curl into a sneer as he moves to stand. I shake my head and storm from the training center aiming to catch up with Dax. Cano doesn’t follow.

Dax’s long strides have taken him farther than I thought and as I enter the square I see him turning a corner heading toward the boat house. I break into a run to catch up to him.

Finally, I see him standing by the bench at the water’s edge. The same bench Trent had brought me to all those moons ago.

“You shouldn’t have followed me,” he says flatly, his gaze fixed on the motionless water of the lake.

“Yeah, well, I guess I didn’t learn my lesson with the males around here.” I roll my eyes and he turns his body to face me.

“I would never hurt you like that.” His brows crease and his gaze flicks between my eyes like he is searching for something behind them. Dax and I haven’t talked about the night that Mel was abducted. Whatever was happening between us, if anything. Cano liked to surmise we were a couple, but warming each other’s beds didn’t entail a relationship. I also didn’t feel the need to deny anything, because well, it’s not anyone’s business. Since that night though, I’ve felt a pull toward Dax. But he’s pushed me away since the day I arrived in Ravendene. Recently though, I feel like something is shifting in him.

“I know.” Because I do. I’ve sensed that from him since the moment I met him. I could tell all of his asshole exterior was a ruse. The man who stands before me is a good man at the core, but something has got him trapped in the clutches of despair. He believes that he doesn’t deserve happiness and the guilt of what’s happened with Mel is making it worse. My chest hums as I reach out, capturing his hand in mine. “Thank you, for stepping in back there. I was only trying to help. Cano... something has gotten into him lately,” I shake my head as I move to drop his hand, but his grip tightens just enough to keep me there.

“Raelle, Cano has been changing for years. Don’t think that any of this is your doing. It’s not.” He pushes his other hand into his pocket, steering his gaze back to the water in front of us. The sun dips below the treeline, darkening the mountains on the horizon with shadows, the last of the sun’s warm light leaves the sky painted in pink and orange tones that reflect in the motionless water. I see why this place is somewhere Dax likes to come to calm down. “I appreciate you wanting to help, but after witnessing what just happened back there?” He shakes his head before turning his gaze back to me. “I need you to stay out of it, Raelle. I will work on Cano. One way or another I’m going to get my baby sister back.” His promise is firm, and his thumb strikes a line across the back of my hand sending warmth through me.

“I’m sorry Dax. You have to know I am. If it were up to me we would have left right away looking for her. If it were my brother...” I trail off and Dax cranes his neck in my direction, his arm brushes my shoulder.



“I know, Rae.” his shoulders drop a fraction as he takes a deep breath. “I know.”



Tonight when I lay in my bed my mind can't seem to find rest. The constant thoughts of finding Melani dig at me and my brain won't calm, bringing me to toss and turn. All the feelings of my own family surface and the overwhelming sadness I feel for not having them in my life anymore. We have to do something to find Mel, I don't want Dax and Trent to feel this pain I do for their sister. They already lost their parents.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, letting it out in a long puff of my cheeks. I roll over covering my head with my pillow. After what feels like hours I finally drift off but the thoughts of my loss heavy on my mind bring nightmares.

*I look down at the letter in my lap. Teardrops dot the page and smear the ink. My family is dead. My mother, father, and brother—all gone from my life in the blink of an eye. My hands are trembling, my stomach rolls, and I run from the training center. As soon as I break the tree line I lose my dinner. This can't be happening. They can't really be gone. I move to a large pine and sink to the ground resting against the rough bark. Pine needles find their way through the fabric of my training gear and poke into my skin, but I am numb to the world surrounding me.*

*“Raelle?” Claire’s voice cuts through my racing thoughts and I look up to her. “Oh, Rae. What’s wrong?” she drops to her knees next to me, using her water element she wicks the wetness from my face. But I know the redness in my eyes isn’t something that can be fixed with Magic. My broken heart can’t*

be fixed with Magic.

*“They’re all dead,” I say, my eyes fixed on nothing specific in the forest. “They are all dead.” I repeat under my breath.*

*“Oh my gods, who Raelle?” I push the letter into her hands. Her eyes scan the words and then well up with tears. She doesn’t say anything more. No more questions. Instead, she pulls my body to her and crushes me into her small frame. The gesture sends another wave of grief through me. I shudder and sob into my friend’s shoulder, breaking further at the news I just received.*

*Claire is silent as we walk. She doesn’t need to say anything because there is nothing to say. I look around as we make our way back to the training center, trying to process all of my thoughts, my eyebrows furrow, confusion setting in after the initial shock.*

*“Why were they in Castenelle?” I whisper mostly to myself.*

*“What do you mean?” Claire asks.*

*“Why were they in Castenelle? They were meant to be traveling to Loema, that’s what my mother told me. She had a meeting there. Why were they past Loema in Castenelle?” It doesn’t make sense. They would have had to travel straight through Loema to get there. If the timeline is right, they couldn’t have stopped in Loema at all. My mother wouldn’t have lied to me. What happened to make them change course?” Claire doesn’t answer my question outright and that’s okay because it was more rhetorical than anything. She can’t know the answer, but I plan to find out. There has to be more information than what this letter is giving me.*

*I pause at the door when we reach the training dorms, my hand resting on the handle. Claire meets my gaze and she sees the goodbye I’m about to give her. In the short amount of time that we have known each other, she has become a close friend. Well, my only friend. Growing up in the rural countryside of Ravendene didn’t give me much opportunity to make friendships. After begging and finally convincing my parents to allow me to begin formal combat training, something that most start younger than myself, they agreed to let me attend. This is the first time as far back as I can remember, I was able to make a friend.*

*“I have to find out what happened to them. This letter,” I lift the paper. “it’s too vague. Something feels off to me. I want to find out what they were doing in Castenelle.” Claire gives me a tight-lipped smile and pulls me into an embrace once more. Saying goodbye to her makes me feel even more*

*alone and tears mark paths along my cheeks once more.*

*“It's ok Raelle, just know that you will always have a place at my side. Find the answers you need and then come back, train, and prepare for your ascension. I'm so sorry about your family.” She steps back looking at my face once more, her smile is warm but her eyes show the pity she feels for me, sending a wave of nausea through me again.*

*“Thank you, Claire, I'll reach out when I get back to Lesa.” Her eyebrows stitch together as she smiles again then turns away, back to the training center. Leaving me truly alone.*



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THREE WEEKS AGO

TIME HAS DRAGGED SINCE Mel was taken. Cano returned the morning after the abduction. Every day since, the tension has been building through all of Ravendene. Dax has been beside himself with worry. Though, to most, he just seems more of an asshole than usual. The anger is almost a tangible entity surrounding him. I see through that, though. I know it too well myself. I wish there was something I could do for him, for Trent. At every opportunity, I mention as much to Cano. I know that Dax has been trying to get a sanctioned search party together, but Cano will not allow it, saying that it's too dangerous and we don't have the numbers. We can't risk the fallout of losing men, which is always his rebuttal. Dax asked me to stay out of it. I'm not sure I can.

I understand both sides in a way. I know we need to be smart about our numbers with the constant threat of Demetrey pushing against our territory. They want our land and our people, and we cannot allow that to happen at any cost. However, Mel was—is one of our people, and she's not just anyone. She's the sister to one of the pillars of Ravendene. Dax and even Trent play a huge role in keeping our community safe and running.

The Fornax siblings have been in my thoughts so much lately, but every night when I lay down to sleep, that night at the Fornax estate plays on repeat in my mind. I tell myself it is my subconscious analyzing everything that led up to when we heard the scream. We need to find Mel. However, I find myself lingering on what happened between myself and Dax. The warmth of his hand splayed across my stomach. The tickle of his lips brushing the shell of my ear as he whispered into it, the fire burning in his hazel green eyes. The scent of whiskey and cedar stuck to me for days after our brief contact. I don't know what had gotten into me, and we still haven't talked about it. Not with the situation that developed with Mel, it's not the time to. Trent hasn't mentioned what he walked in on either. I'm relieved because I don't even know what I would say. What would have happened if Trent hadn't walked in on that intense moment between us? Cano has been acting strangely since he returned also, but with all the tension in the air... I guess it's to be expected as the leader of the territory.

Dax is right, though. We need to find Mel. I know that he's been trying to get Cano to approve the mission, but he's not budging, and Dax is growing more impatient by the day. Training has become so intense that the other members of the guard are growing tired. The whole situation is causing mass unrest. Cano must see that too. It's something we don't need happening right now, not so close to the total eclipse. An event with so much natural power, we need to be ready for an attack when it comes. All this back and forth between Cano and Dax needs to stop so we can focus on our training and prepare the territory for something that could happen. There is potential for such a large power surge. They are blind to everything that is going on around them because they are too focused on themselves. There are so many problems that'll no doubt come along with it if there is a surge.



I'm tucked in a chair in the far corner of the library, in the square where Cano conducts most of his business. He and I were planning to meet for a late lunch, but yet again, his business took him elsewhere. This time I don't seek him out. Since he attacked me in the training center, we have only talked on a few occasions, mostly in passing. I asked for this lunch. I figured he would have another excuse not to make it. His news came right when lunch was served. Flynn just left. So, I came to the only place where I can feel respite from my feelings and wondering of my mind. I've just finished eating, curled up with a blanket, and one of my favorite books when the double doors at the entrance burst open forcefully. Dax storms into the space. Each step he takes is like a thunderclap to my awareness.

The fire that was dwindling down suddenly roars, tripling in size. No doubt it's a surge from his emotions causing the fire to amplify with his ability to wield it, but it's not the fire causing the heat to rush up my neck from my chest and into my cheeks. I feel a tingling sensation in my toes that makes them curl. Dax doesn't notice me sitting here though. I read the look on his face as he stomps his heavy boots across the dark wood floors of the library. His shoulders are rigid with tension. Lines bracket his mouth, and a deep furrow is carved at his brow. There is no doubt in my mind that he's had another unsuccessful meeting with Cano.

My heart squeezes for him, and the anguish I see on his face. He doesn't allow others to see such emotions from him. Typically, he is only showing a pissed-off, controlled anger or nothing at all. Since the abduction of Mel, though, his controlled anger has developed into something bigger. Right now,

when he is believed to be alone, I see it, and it cracks something inside of me. Because I recognize that anguish. I've lived it almost every day since I lost my own family. Dax moves over to the small bar by one of the beautiful arched windows and pours himself a measure of whiskey. He tugs his free hand through his shaggy, dark hair and rips his hand away with a growl of frustration, causing some of the hair to fall forward into his eyes that are now closed. As he lifts his chin to the sky, it appears as though he is in a silent prayer to the stars.

I feel uncomfortable not making myself known while he is having such a private moment. So, I shift, sitting up slightly, and clear my throat. The action does what I'd hoped, and Dax turns swiftly toward me. Our eyes meet, but before he shuts down all that emotion rolling through him, I see it. Dax's eyes were almost lit from behind. His normally hazel-green eyes are like molten copper. It stunned me, but I didn't react. Instead, I focus on the intensity of his stare and his posture.

"Raelle? I—What are you doing here?" He growls, but he doesn't come any closer; his shoulders are stiff, and his feet are planted where he stands.

"Sorry, I—I come here sometimes when I need to escape my head." I lift my book from my lap and wiggle it a little. I can see his eyes rapidly solidifying back into the cool, icy nothing he normally has in place, and it makes me hurt for him again. "I can go if you need time alone. I think I would understand that more than most. Or... You're more than welcome to come join me." I gesture to the chair opposite me.

Silently, he turns away from me, casting his gaze out of the window. He pours another drink at the bar and just stands there for a long moment. I can see him take a deep breath, and his shoulders drop slightly with the exhale. When he turns back to face me, his eyes are back to the warm hazel-green hue they normally are, and some of the stiffness in his shoulders is relaxed.

"I'm sorry, you know." He says in a low voice. "I'm sorry for so many things..." Dax slowly shakes his head, looking down at the floor. Fisting the two glasses he prepared, he prowls toward me offering one of the glasses. Now that he's closer, I can see the heavy pain in his eyes that he normally doesn't allow to show.

"One of those days, huh?" I ask as I reach out to take the glass, trying to lighten the mood, even if just a fraction. As he passes the glass to me, our fingers brush, sending a tingle through me. A warmth spreads in my chest, and as my gaze connects with his, a wry smile pulls up the corner of my lips.

I look at him, a little bemused and smile softly. “You don’t need to be sorry for anything with me, by the way.”

He sits down on the chair opposite me. Very much like he was sitting in the chair that night at his estate when something compelled me to behave in such a provocative way with him. I hadn’t even drunk all that much. His head’s tipped back, resting on the chair, eyes closed. Thinking about that night with him in such proximity makes a blush rise into my cheeks. I’m hopeful that he can’t see it, though it’s only late afternoon. The library tends to be dark regardless of the time of day, especially in the fall.

“You don’t know what I have to be sorry for. It doesn’t matter, though. Not anymore. Things are going to change. I’m not sitting around anymore. I can’t while my little sister is out there. I’ve already lost my parents; I won’t lose her too. Ella and Trent are all I have left. I’m supposed to be her guardian, and I’ve failed her. I’ve failed too many people in my life. I’m going to get her back, Raelle.” There is a desperate sort of rattle to his voice, and it makes me want to reach for him, to soothe and calm him, but I don’t; I just listen. “I wish that just once I could forget about things in the shadows of my past and live the way that was intended. I wouldn’t have to worry about any of this if I had just done what I was supposed to do so long ago. If I’d chosen a different path.”

I just watch him as he talks to me. He stands and saunters to the fire, placing his whiskey in hand on the mantle and leaning over it, looking into the flames.

The same sensation of tingles runs over me. They started the night at the Fornax Estate. When I ran into Dax in the hall before dinner. The first time our skin came into contact. It’s like my subconscious senses him, and wants me to be close and before I can even process what I’m doing, I find myself standing up... moving closer. I come to a stop behind him. I extend my arm, placing my hand between the tight muscles of his upper back, where I sense the tension.

“I think I understand how you’re feeling.” I say quietly as I make that contact. He goes still under my touch, and after a moment, he turns his body to face me. I keep my hand up, and it brushes along his shoulder blade, then the hard bicep in his long-sleeved tunic. I rest my hand on his chest, our bodies only a breath apart. Tilting his head downward, his gaze flicks across my face, his piercing eyes searching. He lifts his hand, brushing his fingertips along my jaw, pausing for a moment before he pulls by my bottom lip from



where it's caught between my teeth. I feel my pulse skitter as he blinks slowly, shifting his gaze back to my eyes.

“I wish things could have been different. I wish there was more time and I was a better man, but wishing is for dreamers, and the reality is... I’m no dreamer, Raelle. There is no dream for me. I’m the nightmare. Perhaps in another lifetime, it could have been different for me, for you... us.” He pauses, his eyes shifting between mine. My heart hammers in my chest. “ I know this isn’t fair, and I know it doesn’t make sense, but I feel a dangerous energy pushing me to do this.” His eyes darken a shade as he drops his eyes to my bottom lip, which he still has trapped under his thumb, then back up to my eyes.

The pounding in my chest intensifies as he takes a step closer. Closing any distance that was left between our bodies, and as he does, he lifts my chin, causing my lips to part slightly on an inhale. His heart thunders under my palm matching the rampant beat of my own as he brings his lips to hover over mine painfully slow. Pausing just a breath away, our lips brush as he whispers into them the scent of whiskey tickles my nose. “This is something I have to do before all things go to hell.” Our lips meet and the tingle turns erratic, my whole body burning under his touch. The kiss starts gently. Hesitant. I open my lips, inviting his tongue to meet mine. Reaching up, guiding my fingers into his dark hair, he wraps an arm behind my waist, pulling me further into his body, making my back arch and deepening the kiss. I drown in the scent of him, cedar and smoke swirling in the air around me making me dizzy, as he devours my lips. My hand slides down, fingers curling and brushing into the hair at the nape of his neck. His fingers that were on my jaw work their way into my hair as he holds me where he wants me. My eyes flutter open as the kiss slows, and an ache spreads through me, settling low in my core. When our lips part, we stay transfixed in each other’s gaze. Breathing the same air in quick pants.

The door to the library opens with a thud as it hits the wall behind it, but we are both too focused on each other to care; neither of us are looking at whoever's entering. Dax and I stand loosely intertwined in front of the lit hearth, basking in the warmth of what just overtook us.

“Whhhaat did I just walk in on?... *Again.*” He says with wide eyes, his brow lifted with a teasing grin.

Dax says nothing, but releases his hold on me. My own hands drop to my sides as he turns back to the fireplace mantle, effectively shielding his face

from his brother and me. My eyes snap to Trent and my brow furrows as I turn my head to look at Dax's back. I shake my head to expel the lightheadedness there as I turn for the door, where Trent stands still in shock. I know I won't be able to lie to him, but this is not the time or place for this conversation. "I—We... I was just leaving." I rush out, not even understanding what just happened. I turn and grab my discarded book, and steal a glance at Dax. He doesn't turn around or say anything to either of us; it causes my brow to crease deeper with worry.

"Looked like it," Trent laughs.

Feeling as though my heart is going to burst directly out of my chest, I tell them both I am going to retire early tonight and walk out of the library. I didn't notice how much time had actually gone by with me being in there, so when I step out of the door and the moon greets me, it comes as a little bit of a surprise.

"You shouldn't walk home alone." It's Dax's voice I hear so close behind me that I should have jumped from the proximity, but the deep lull of his voice doesn't startle me. I didn't realize anyone had followed me out of the library. I take a deep breath before I answer him, and he places a hand on the small of my back guiding me forward.

"I—uh... Where is Trent?" I whisper to him.

"He came to the library for research and said he would be there for at least a couple of hours. If it's okay with you, I'd like to walk you home." He whispers back.

"It is ok with me... but, Dax... We should—"

"I know. We will talk another day. I promise, love. Let's just get you home for now." He interrupts.

He doesn't walk me to the front door. Instead, we take the side gate to the too-large property I have been given to live in when I refused to live with Cano at his Estate. I appreciate the accommodation, but I told him I would be paying for my stay once I collected the coin from my inheritance. He reluctantly agreed. The walk with Dax was quiet. He was focused on our surroundings, ensuring that we were not being watched or followed. I was only focused on the arm that was wrapped around my waist as we walked together. It was risky for him to be walking with me in such a way. People could see him. Cano could find out, but I allowed it regardless, and what does that say about me? People assumed that Cano and I were together, and I allowed them to think that because of the privacy it gave me, among other

things. However, Cano and I never have discussed being officially a couple. So, technically, there is nothing wrong with what Dax and I have done. It feels different than when I'm with Cano, though. It's a feeling I can't ignore.

When we reach the back door, he reaches for the knob and it opens. "Do you not lock your doors?" He asks with his brows knitted together with concern.

"I do, but I could have forgotten. I'm not sure, to be honest. My mind has been roaming lately," I tell him.

"Stay with me. I'm going to have a look around to make sure it's safe before I leave you alone." He walks into the house without waiting for a response from me.

"You do know I'm not a helpless female who can't protect herself, correct?" I tease him, thinking back on the time he came to my aid with Cano.

"I'm aware." He growls.

We walk the entire house, and as we are returning to the kitchen and the back door, I look at him and say, "I'm sure I just left it unlocked, and I can protect myself." A wry smile playing at my lips. "But Dax..." He turns to look at me. "Thank you for making sure I am safe. I've not had someone look out for me like that in quite a long time. I really do appreciate the gesture."

He isn't far from me when I say this to him. Maybe five or so feet, but he closes the distance in just two strides. He reaches down to my hips and lifts me. My hands instinctively bracing myself on his strong shoulders. He sets me down on the counter pressing his hips in between my legs, he leans into my body eating up any distance between our chests. "I know you can protect yourself, and please keep doing just that." He growls, tilting his head slightly as though he's gauging my reaction to him. "Don't forget to lock your doors." The corner of his mouth tilts up, and the dimple on his right cheek appears. I want to pull him to me and lick it. *Gods, what is this man doing to me?* "You make me want to be a dreamer." He presses his lips to mine in an unforgiving kiss, my lips part and his tongue juts in exploring, flicking and teasing. When he breaks free, he doesn't say anything, neither do I. The look in his eyes says a million words. He gives me a sad, lopsided smile that doesn't reach his eyes, reaches up and brushes his thumb across my lips, then strikes a path across my cheekbone. He turns and stalks out the door without another word. Leaving me in a puddle, still sitting on the kitchen counter breathless and confused.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WE'VE BEEN WALKING FOR nearly a day. We're so close to the outpost that my nerves are starting to build. I want my brother back so badly. I can't be in this world without him. I need his help in finding Mel. While I'm pissed at him for the first time, for going out alone. I also understand why he did it. He was trying to protect me.

He must know that I'm not a child anymore though. He wasn't even there for my ascension. I hope he's proud of the abilities I've gained. We kind of knew I would be a shifter, just like most of the males in our family. I'm also an elemental, which we figured early on as well. I can wield fire just like him and Ma. On top of that, I have unnatural speed, even for a shifter, which is something. I can't wait to see his face when I tell him. We're at least one step closer.

"It's just around this group of trees," I tell Kait and Rae. We are coming up on the outpost we use mostly for hunting, but occasionally it's used for sentries when we need more eyes on the outer border due to increased activity. When we get to the point where we can see the cabin, I notice there is smoke coming from the chimney. My brows knit together in confusion.

Normally, even when we need to use this place for sentry duty, Dax and I are the only ones who use it.

I urge the girls to stay quiet as we near the outpost. Rae has a look of concern on her face, and that's all I need to see to know that there is a vibe happening that is causing that concern. We need to move as silently as possible. "Stay together. Let's move around back and get a view through the window there and see who's using the outpost, just in case." I whisper

Kait nods, then jerks her head to Rae, indicating to follow her. Rae falls in step behind her, and I take up the back. "We all stick together." I reiterate. Rae and Kait both nod as we continue to the back of the cabin. It's as if all of Rae's training has remained untouched by her memory loss. I know she had some before she came to Ravendene, but she has trained extensively throughout the time she has spent with us. We move as a unit to check on things.

There is a sentry in the tree stand in the front. Pointing to the tree canopy, Kait jerks her head to the side to follow her, and we skirt around to avoid his view. She stops right before a window near the back door. Crouching down, I shuffle to get past the girls and the window so I can be her cover as she tries to open it. Before we get the window open, an ear-splitting howl breaks out in the trees in the distance, just as the wind picks up.

The sound spooks us, and we drop to the ground in a crouch and press our backs against the cabin. Rae is the first to speak. "Guys, remember that tingling feeling I get? Well, it's back. Something's up." She's breathing a little rough, and I see a sheen of sweat starting to develop on her forehead.

"We should trust the instinct. Does it tell you to run? Fight? What kind of danger, specifically? I'm not sure how this works." I frantically whisper as my eyes trace the trees at the edge of the property.

Thunder booms in the distance, and the wind picks up further. "Don't answer that. This storm doesn't feel natural. Maybe that's what you're picking up on. There is a cave system just to the south. It's where Ravendene meets the sea. If, for any reason, we must run, that's where we meet. Agreed?" I have to whisper yell because of the wind whipping through where we are.

"Agreed," Rae nods. Kait gives me a dip of her chin as well.

Rae turns to try the window, but it's locked. "Do you see anything or anyone recognizable?" Urgh. Memory is gone. "Sorry, don't answer that either." I pop up so I can see through the window just as two people walk

through the room. Its Cano. Fuck, what is he doing here? The other person is still standing in the shadows and wearing a cloak with the hood drawn up, so I can't make out their features. Cano towers over the other person, but that's not something telling because, at his height, he is taller than most in Ravendene, aside from Dax and myself.

I look over to Rae; she's watching intently, but I don't think she recognizes Cano. "Rae. It's Cano. He can't find us here before we get the other items." Her eyes dart from me to where Cano stands. Her brow furrowed deep as she tries to recognize him. Concern turns to worry on her face as she bites down on her lip and turns back to face me. She shakes her head the tiniest amount, indicating she doesn't recognize him. My lips curve up into a placating smile as I continue. "If he finds us out, it's endgame on this mission. He's going to be pissed, and I wouldn't doubt if he threw us into a holding cell for a while for disobeying." Rae looks back to Cano, and a sparkle of emotion enters her eyes. Maybe she does recognize Cano? There was speculation that they are mates... Perhaps because she is so close to her ascension, the mating bond is becoming stronger... but they don't bare the mark of bonded mates yet, but fuck, if that's the case, he could sense her, and then we will all be screwed.

Before I say anything, Rae leans in close to me. I lean toward her to hear what she is going to say. "Both of them. They are the danger. My body is on fire right now, with a warning blazing through my awareness. The cloaked person is giving me the same feeling I had in the tunnels back at the Demetrey territory." She looks at me then; her eyes are wide, but there is no fear there.

"Rae, are you sure it's a danger you're feeling from both of them?" I ask.

"Positive."

Kait, who's been watching Rae and myself, gets curious enough that she peeks up through the window. She gasps and drops back down with her back against the cabin. "You feel danger coming from Cano?" Kait asks, wide eyes locked on Rae. Rae's head cranes to the right to look at Kait, but before she can say anything, I pull her down to me and slap my hand over her mouth, pointing toward the window. I bring a finger in front of my lips, telling both to be quiet. The cloaked person has walked right in front of the window we are hiding under. If they look outside, they are likely to see us.

Before I get a chance to refuse, Kait is rising slightly and shuffling toward the end of the wall. She jerks her head toward it, indicating we should follow

her. I see the path that she is aiming for, and realize we are close to the outside cellar entrance. It's a good idea, but we will likely need to pick or break the lock. I'm happy that this storm is distracting from any noise we make, even though it's eerie as hell. Especially if it comes to us breaking the lock.

Kait stands fully upright, but as she starts to run to the cellar doors, she's intercepted by a sentry making his rounds. With no weapons, it's inevitable she is going to be captured, but she won't go without a fight. The look on her face says she knows that as well. We make eye contact briefly as she looks back at us. She nods. Then she faces her opponent. She's giving us a chance to get out of here, but once they catch her, they will be searching for us. They know we left together. Cano has to know by now that we are gone.

Rae spins toward me and grabs my hand. I guess she's got an idea, so I follow with no argument. We run about 20 feet, then she drops to her stomach and shimmies under the deck that leads to the side entrance of the house through a mudroom. I see what she's thinking as we both get under cover.

"I can fit. I can get in," she whispers to me.

I shake my head in denial and look around us for any other choice. There isn't one. My gut clenches as I think of how bad of an idea this is, but it's currently the only one we have. I need to trust that Rae can get this done and get the cure back to Dax.

"Okay, listen Rae. You don't have your memory, but you are smart, and I know you can do this." She dips her chin and determination fills her gaze. "I'm going to go help Kait and cause a distraction for you. Get into the storage room, get the dagger, and get out. It's on the main level, just off the kitchen...There's a hallway. It's the first door on the right. It will most likely be locked."

I reach into my pocket and grab the small flick knife I keep there. "Use this to pick the lock and for protection." I hand it over to her. "Get the dagger. You won't be able to confuse it with any other. It has a white silver blade, and the handle is leather-wrapped. There is a moonstone inlaid with fine detail at the base of the hilt. It's very intricate and beautiful. There should be a sheath you can use in the room as well. After you get it, get out right away. Head north and don't stop." Raelle nods again. "You will come to a clearing in the trees where a single willow stands near the edge of a cliff that meets the Creale Sea. The land there was blessed by the gods. Collect

some soil, and then head southeast to Ravendene. It will be a full day and night's travel on foot. I'm sorry we couldn't do this together, but I trust you, like family, to do this for my brother." Her eyes brimming with emotion, she lays her hand atop mine, a wry smile on her face as she gives me her understanding, but I pull her into an awkward hug before I let her go. "Don't stop, Rae. Save Dax." I whisper.

When I let her go, our eyes meet, "I won't let you down, Trent." Steely determination is written across her features.

She will get it done; I know it. I help her remove the vent covering and ease her down into the basement of the cabin. Before she lets go of my hand, she squeezes and whispers to me, "I will save your brother, Trent; then we will find your sister. Stay safe, stay strong."

I brush my thumb over the back of her hand. "There is something else; as you know, the male upstairs we saw was Cano, but I don't know what's going on, Rae. I get the distinct feeling that neither he nor his men can be trusted right now. Trust your intuition. Your ascension is starting, the feeling you get, the tingle of awareness? It's your power speaking to you; I'm almost sure of it. Listen to it, Rae. Dax will be in the infirmary in Ravendene. Act casually if you see anyone when you return since you don't remember who's who, but try not to be seen at all if you can manage."

"I got this." She says, then turns to leave but stops spinning around to face me once more. "Wait! How do I make the elixir?"

"That I'm not exactly sure about. You'll need to get the book. You kept it in your home back at Ravendene."

"I'll figure it out." She nods curtly.

"I know you will. I trust you." I give her a warm smile before we separate—like we said we wouldn't. If there was any other choice I'd choose it, but Kait needs my help.

Silently we go our separate ways, and I shuffle from under the deck. Standing quickly, I break into a sprint for the tree line, and then back toward the area where I last saw Kait. I have to cover my face from being whipped with debris because of the maelstrom that is brewing. The thunder rolls loudly in the distance. It makes me worry for Rae. She will be out in this traveling to get back to Dax if she gets the dagger from the cabin. She will get the dagger if it's there. If it's not... I don't even want to think about what will happen if the dagger isn't there.

I don't have time to think about it right now. I have to trust that she will be



fine. When I reach the corner of the house, Kait is being detained by two Ravendene guards. She's bucking and thrashing, and then she meets her mark, cracking one of them in the nose with her forehead. Blood pisses down his face as he stumbles back. That's my queue. A smile spits across my face as I jump into the fray with a battle cry and make as much noise as I can to give Rae a chance at getting out of here with that dagger to save Dax.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SMALL FRAGMENTS OF LIGHT break through the vents like the one I crawled through, illuminating the dark basement. The air is thick and earthy. The taste of dust that coats my tongue and everything around me clogs my throat making it difficult to swallow. The space was seemingly untouched for many years. The storm outside whistles through the trees so loud that it invades the eerie basement sending a chill down my spine. Sudden shouting cuts through the noise of the storm, causing me to pause. I hear Trent among them, Kait too. Carefully, I quickly maneuver through all the odds and ends that are being stored here, working my way to the narrow staircase.

They creak as I start to climb, causing me to pause multiple times. As I reach the top, I hear men clamoring about on the other side of the door, making me freeze. Multiple sets of boots stomp through the house, causing dust to fall through the boards of the basement ceiling. I squeeze my eyes shut to protect them from debris that floats to me, even at the top of the stairs. Whoever was inside heard the commotion in the yard and went rushing out of the house to help. "Thank you, Trent," I whisper. I'm relieved when I try the handle and it's unlocked. Listening at the door just long enough that I'm sure

it's clear. I slowly turn the knob; there is a slight click that is barely audible as it opens. Keeping the crack small, I turn, squeezing my body through, and I shut it behind me.

Looking down at my boots I say a quick prayer to the gods to keep my footsteps silent enough to not be noticed. I think back to all the information that Trent relayed to me. At least I have my short-term memory. I roll my eyes at the thought as I focus on my surroundings. The basement door brought me to the kitchen. It's an open, rustic space with pots and pans hanging above an island in the middle. I tiptoe toward the hallway but hear heavy booted footsteps coming my way, so I crouch down and slide to the island, using it as cover.

The thud of the boots stops, and I wait a heartbeat before I risk a peek around the island. Whoever was coming down the hall stopped at the door I need to enter. I have a clear view of them where I'm crouched down. He quickly fumbles some keys out of his pocket to unlock it. He rushes inside but doesn't close the door behind him. A smile breaks across my face. "Jackpot," I say under my breath. He's a large male, and I didn't get a look at his face given the cloak he wore, but this is my opportunity. I reach up on my tiptoes, grabbing a heavy pan from one of the hooks. A little more bang than just a measly switchblade, or at the very least, I can use it to shield myself.

Stepping around the counter, I stride purposefully to the door and peek inside. The male is standing with his back to me, unlocking a large cage on the wall with various weapons hanging. My attention is snagged when I see it; the moonstone dagger is hanging on a peg to his right. Just as I'm thinking luck must be on my side, the door clicks shut behind me. Too loud, and the male in front of me whips around, locking me in his gaze. I'm quick, though, and I rush him, craning back the large pan and bringing it down to the side of his head. Right before it makes its mark, I get a tingling sensation through my arms. "Wait! Raelle!" the male says in a rushed whisper as he throws up his hands in surrender. A shield of air pops up between him and myself aiming to block the pan from connecting with his head.

The tingle up my arms feels like the time I found Trent. There is no danger with this male. But I do still feel a sense of urgency. I need to get the dagger and get out of this cabin. Letting the pan fall short of hitting him across the head, I stay at an arm's distance and narrow my eyes on him. I don't know what I should say. I feel like anything I do say could give away my memory loss and open me up to deception.

“Thank the gods. Raelle, is Trent with you? When I heard that you all left, I knew you were off to find the cure for Dax or to find Melani. I’ve been watching Cano; I knew he was heading out to the outpost here and felt like he was up to something. So, I asked to be on his staff so I could help with your recovery. Cano is looking for you.” His gaze sweeps the room, focusing on the door behind me. “He has an entire search party out there as we speak.” I don’t know how much I should reveal to this male, but I decide to trust my gut and tell him what he needs to know if he is truly trying to help the Fornax family.

“I am here for the dagger. If you want to help, please step aside. When I have it, I’ll be leaving this cabin and heading out for the blessed lands.” I tell him.

“Yes, of course. If you will allow it, I can help. There are a lot of men out there searching for you. If they find you, you won’t be able to get any further and especially won’t be able to get near Dax.” His eyes are wide with concern building at his brow. A sadness paints his features, making me believe this man is being genuine. I narrow my eyes at him as I walk around him. I reach up and grab the beautiful blade from the pegs it hangs on.

Trent was right, saying I would know which blade I was looking for. The dagger is exquisitely made. The craftsmanship. I’ve never seen a blade of such beauty. The hilt is bronze and wrapped in fine black leather with a moonstone gem adorning its pommel, and at the cross guard, the embellishment of polished moonstone inlaid glints. As I turn it over, two smaller stones sit on opposite sides of a larger one, shining just as brightly. The blade itself is a polished silver metal that appears almost white in the dim light of the weapons room, with delicate carvings on either side at the base of the wicked dual-edged blade. I find a simple black leather thigh sheath on the countertop under the daggers and strap it to my thigh over my leggings.

Placing the blade in the sheath, I turn to my new companion. “If you want to offer your help, I will accept it. My mission is simple; get the rest of what is needed for the cure and save Dax. I’m smart enough to know that the odds of me pulling this off are slim. I will accept all the help I can get. Don’t make me regret this.” I tell him, firmly pinning him in my gaze.

He gives me a curt nod and proceeds to load up on weapons. I follow suit. If we are going to be out there, at least this time we will be slightly more prepared. I chose a couple of small blades I can tuck into my boots and a bow in addition to the dagger we came here for. My new companion looks at me

when he is fully suited to head out, and we both say “ready.”

I keep my eyes on the male as he takes the lead to the exit. When we reach the back door, he stalls. Narrowing my eyes on him, I slow as I see what has caused his caution. The maelstrom outside has become something sinister. The clouds are whipping around like swirling vortexes, and the sky—red as blood. Lightning breaks out in so many directions that it lights the dark land up below, causing my breath to catch. I grab him by the elbow, pulling him from the stupor he was stuck in. “Let’s go,” I urge.

We step out of the house and get almost to the tree line when something or someone broadsides me. I hit the ground hard, and my head slams against the hard-packed earth with a rattling thud. It stuns me; my heart thundering in my chest, as I reach for a blade. The creature snaps its sharp teeth in my face, and I use my bow to block its advance. The leathery black skin pulled taut around its bat-like mouth; it snarls and spits as I push as hard as I can, but before I’m able to defend myself, my new male companion has his short sword deep in the creature’s huge muscular canine-like body. It shudders, bursts into gold dust, and scatters in the wind.

“Raskin’s!” I pant. I hop to my feet and take a steadying breath. Raskin's feast on fear and flesh, drinking down the fear of their kill as they rip them to pieces. Damn it. I just had the fucking *great* opportunity of being taken down by one. Honestly, I’m lucky I had this male with me; otherwise, my rescue mission would have ended before it even started.

“Run!” His shout was carried away in the wind.

We rip into the night at a furious pace. I’m not concerned with being quiet any longer. The storm is loud enough to cover any sound we make, and luckily, we get far enough away without any more Raskin's or any of Cano’s men finding us. When we have made it a good distance, we slow down for a short while to actively rest. We can’t stop, though. The hum in my chest begins as we trudge through the whipping wind. Tilting my head, I steal a glimpse at the man beside me. Relief washes over his face as he scans the area around us. The tingle at the base of my skull tickles as I look around suspiciously, as I always do when I feel this. There is nothing but some wildlife and the gentleman who quite literally just saved my life not long ago. A large raven squawks as it takes flight in the direction we are heading, disappearing into the shadows. A chill trickles down my spine, and goosebumps break out across my skin.

“Thank you for what you did back there,” I say loudly over the wind.

“There is no need to thank me, Ms. Raelle. I would do anything for the Fornax family, and you are important to them, so you are also important to me.” He replies with warmth in his eyes.

“I think you need to know a piece of vital information. While Trent, Kait, and I were out on our mission, something happened. I’ve lost a good chunk of my memory. I don’t remember anyone from Ravendene.” I leave out the bit about my power humming, telling me that I can trust him, among other things. “I don’t remember your name. I’m sorry. If we know each other...I don’t remember.” I look at him apologetically.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He says this as he looks deep into thought. “But you still plan to help save the Fornax siblings? Dax and Melani?” He asks.

“I do.” It’s an easy answer. I’ve felt strongly about this since I learned of what is going on. I feel my magic pulling me to do this, and according to Trent, I felt strongly about it before too. Which I understand seeing the way I feel about my own sibling.

“My name is Miles Malnik. I am on the Fornax estate staff. Mr. Fornax... Dax’s personal manservant, but I also consider him as close as family. I’ve been a part of the Fornax staff for many years. Before Dax was even born.” The corner of his lips turn up some. I feel a warmth spread in my chest, right alongside a slight hum from what I now know is my magic. My magic is guiding me. We don’t say anything else for a while; just travel silently and as quickly as possible through this storm.

It begins to rain, which is uncomfortable but not unbearable. I raise the hood to my cloak as the wind makes the rain beat down on us from behind.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” I look up at the blood-red skies.

“Never.” He responds, looking around at the sky with concern etched into his features.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HOURS INTO OUR TRAVELS, I'm feeling muscles I didn't know I had ache and burn. The need to rest pounds through my body with every step, but we can't risk it. The only rest we will take is when we are collecting the blessed soil. I made a promise to Trent, and I plan to keep it. Miles hasn't said much the whole time we have been traveling. The rain dies down, but walking in my soggy cloak is just as uncomfortable as the pelting rain.

My mind wanders as we walk, trying to invoke anything I can about my life over the time I've lost. There is nothing. So, instead, I think about what I'm doing now. What I know of the people I'm choosing to trust. Is Dax someone I even like? Are we friends? Does he deserve to be saved? He must be if he chose to go after his young sister, going against Cano's orders, right? I groan and rub at my temple, trying to stifle the headache which is beginning to build.

Miles keeps glancing my way, but he isn't saying anything. I try to ignore it, but after the sixth time, my irritation wins and I snap at him.

"What do you keep looking at me like that for?"

"Sorry, Ms. Raelle. I just—are you ok?"

“I’m fine.” I spit at him, lips pursed. “Please just call me Raelle or Rae. No need to be so formal. You literally just saved my life a few hours ago.” I huff, but then run my hand down my face in irritation. “I’m sorry for being rude. I’m just tired and stressed. I’m trying to figure out what I’m missing from my memories, but I guess it doesn’t matter. Things aren’t what they must have been anyway. Cano, who was supposedly my boyfriend... is sketchy as shit. Dax, who is, from what I’ve been told, an asshole, is who I’m running off to save, and I’m just wondering if I’m doing the right thing.” I take a deep breath and release it loudly.

“Sometimes we do things that don’t necessarily make sense as we are doing them, but we do them anyway because we have a gut instinct that it’s the right thing to do. I suppose that is why I’m here with you now and not at Dax’s bedside. I had a feeling that I could not ignore, even though it did not make sense at the time. Here I am.” A smile lifts from one corner of his mouth.

“And here I am because of it...” I say with my brows stitched together. “Had you not followed your gut instinct, you wouldn’t have been there to help me when the Raskin attacked. I would likely be dead.” I raise my eyebrows as I look at him.

“Perhaps,” is all he says as he just stares ahead.

“Are all butlers as wise as you?” I muse with a grin.

He responds with a grin of his own, “Perhaps.” His smile widens.

As we make our way closer to the sea, the salty air stings my sinuses as the wind tries to rip the cloak from my body, and the rain pelts us relentlessly. The powerful roar of the surf crashing against the cliffs echoes through my ears. A powerful energy bursts through me like a buzz of electricity moving through my veins as the willow comes into view. Thunderclaps with a deafening roar, sending vibrations to run throughout my body, threatening to turn my bones to dust... I stumble, and Miles notices offering me his arm, which I take for support. The wind is stronger, and the unforgiving gusts make me unbalanced as we crest the hill. Miles and I are both holding our cloaks with one hand at our chins to keep the hoods from falling back and losing the minimal protection they provide us. We walk hunched, keeping low with our heads down, as we approach the willow.

The magic coursing through my blood is alive. A frenzy of electric energy makes every hair on my body stand on end and my scalp prickle. The sense that I’m being watched is back, but there is no emotion attached to it that



would cause me to worry. It's giving me a sense of awe. Each footstep is heavy, like I'm walking up a snow-covered mountain in a blizzard, but here there is no snow. My hand falls away from Miles as I make the trek. I take a deep breath, breathing in the scent of the sea ahead of us. Salt, seaweed, and the earthy smell of sand reed blows on the wind. When we reach the cliffside and the willow there, I'm able to see the Creale Sea for the first time. Sadness fills my chest as I think of my brother and our promise to see this ocean together one day. This is not what I imagined when I thought of visiting.

Blood-red skies meet the dark depths of the ocean, and the water is almost black in contrast. Both the sky and the ocean swirl and twist like angry vortexes. The ground we are standing on is vibrating with each clap of thunder. The sound is a constant stream of growls. The lightning is blinding as it strikes, making me reach up to cover my eyes.

The weeping willow and the blessed ground that surrounds it are unaffected by the maelstrom brewing all around it. The branches of the willow are not even blowing in the howling wind; it's eerie to witness. A deep power radiates from the ground and in the air all around me. When I reach the tree, I stop and gather some of the branches, dusting the dirt as they hang lifelessly in the chaos. I sweep the golden leaves aside so I can see the trunk. Just as I do, I hear Miles yell my name, and a rumble vibrates under my boots. I didn't even notice he wasn't right next to me, transfixed on the ancient power radiating toward me.

There is a strike of lightning so bright that it momentarily takes my vision, and thunder rumbles, immediately sending tremors through my limbs. The tiny hairs along my arms stand on end as my heart hammers in my chest. Dizziness settles over my senses, making me think I may have been struck. My vision comes back to me in flashes, and I see the ground opening in fissures. Crevasses so large they threaten to break this piece of land off and send it away into the ocean.

I stumble under the protective canopy of the willow. There is no sound within its branches. There is no light. I feel no wind on my skin. I drop the hood of my cloak, but I close my eyes instead of looking around. Dipping my chin, I take a deep breath through my nose. "A wise butler once told me to trust my gut," I say into the nothingness with a smile.

Dropping to my hands and knees, I dig my hands into the ground. Both fists collect blessed soil. I rise only to my knees, hands full with soil at my sides. I tip my head back and slowly bring my fists up, arms extended. I blow

my breath out. A tugging sensation starts at my chest, like there is a thread pulling at me. Making my back arch, my chest rises toward the sky. My breath catches on a deep inhale—then I'm falling.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“WHERE IS SHE?” I scream into Trent’s blood-stained face; his body hangs limply from the wooden chair in the cabin dining room. Spittle sprays his face as I do. When he was brought to me, I thought it was my lucky day. Then they walk that bitch Kait in. I was ecstatic. That was until I realized this motherfucker had gone and let Raelle go out on her own. She was here not long ago; I know she was. Even though he won't talk. I will find her. When we do, this won't happen again. I will lock the cunt up until she is useful to me. I have so many men out searching for her, it's almost comical. Specifically, because of how many times I've told Dax, that such search parties are not beneficial because of the risk of losing men. I'd sacrifice any man to have Raelle in my grip again.

I'm done playing games with these children. Dax is as good as gone. When I return to Ravendene, he will likely be dead from the curse. Then Ravendene will truly be mine because now I have both remaining Fornax siblings in my clutches, and the bitch Kait, well I have no use for her... I'll just get rid of her after I let the boys have their fun with her.

“Sir, the storm is proving to be an issue. The men don't want to go further than the tree line. They are all worried that it's a warning from the gods.” Flynn tells me.

“I don't give a fuck what they think, Flynn! Let them know the only

warning they should fear is the one I am giving right now! FIND RAELE APUS! NOW!" I bellow.

He swallows any other words he is going to say and scampers away like the rat he is. "I'm surrounded by idiots," I mutter as I pour a measure of bourbon into a glass. "You know, Trent. Your brother won't survive this curse. He's likely dying as we speak. Even if Raelle gets the items needed for the elixir, there is no way she can reach him in time." I laugh. "And considering I have you and your sister as my prisoners..." I rock the glass of bourbon in my hand like the swinging of a pendulum, mimicking the movement with my head. "Time will only tell how long the Fornax line has before it's no longer theirs to claim."

Trent looks up at that. "You touch her, I will kill you myself, you fucking coward." He seethes.

I laugh as I saunter closer to him. Bending at the waist, I tilt my head, eye to eye with him. "Oh Trentikins, and how would you manage to do it? Did you forget the situation you find yourself in?" I taunt him with a smirk playing on my lips. "You, sir, are in no situation to be threatening me. If I were you, I'd only open your mouth when I tell you to, because you may find yourself in a situation much worse than that of the current *arrangements*—or, perhaps we bring your sister up for a chat?" He doesn't say anything, but the look in his narrowed eyes speaks volumes. "That's what I thought."

Kait hasn't said a word. Even when I had her beaten for information, just like Trent, she is a good soldier. It's too bad she will be lost from the regime. I saunter over to the chair she's bound to and roughly brush two fingers over her lips. "Such pretty lips; since they won't speak, perhaps we can make use of them another way?" She jerks away from my touch, and a cruel smile spreads across my lips. Then, she spits a wad of saliva and blood on my face.

"You bitch!" The back of my hand lands firmly across her face, splitting her bottom lip open. Blood drips down her neck and into her lap. "Now look at what you did..." I suck my teeth, my lips pulling into a sneer. "You ruined the one useful thing going for you." She narrows her eyes at me smiling, blood coating her teeth. I glower back at her. The whole back-and-forth with these two is a waste of time. I have what I need. Both Fornax siblings and Dax will be dead anytime now, I'm sure. It's been hours since we found these two. Raelle got away, and if she made it to get the blessed soil, she still wouldn't get to Dax in time, regardless. It's too long of a journey from the cliffside, where the willow is, back to Ravendene. The thought brings a

sinister smile to my face.

“Lock them in the cellar with the girl,” I tell Flynn. He nods, and the guards move in to take them. Before I leave the room, I make eye contact with Trent. I stare at him with malice, the smile creeping slowly to reach my eyes. It’s a silent promise of what’s to come. I will get what’s owed to me. He holds eye contact with me as he and Kait are dragged to their feet and out of the kitchen. Spitting on the ground just before the door closes. I laugh at his dramatics, then slam my hand down on the table. Flynn jumps to attention, stepping forward with his hand on the hilt of his sword at his waist, head held high.

“Sir, what are your next orders?”

“We move. I want a strong team to stay here with the... assets, but the rest of us will head out. Back to Ravendene. I want to see the look on Raelle’s face when she arrives too late, and that bastard Dax is already dead.” I say this as I’m already walking out the back door of the cabin. “Ready the—” my words get stuck in my throat at the sight I see. Blood-red skies. I knew there was a storm, but this... I knew this. I’ve seen it before. The nightmare.

I spin back to Flynn, catching his shirt in my fists. “Why didn’t you tell me the storm was of this caliber? Blood-red skies and so unnatural? I wouldn’t have wasted the time I did on those sorry pieces of shit in there!” I bellow in his face. He squints with every word. I start to think the nightmare was maybe more than it seemed... Perhaps it was a warning from the gods.

“Damnit!” I curse. “Ready the horses, we leave with haste!” Everyone around me scatters into action. We are on the road in a matter of minutes. Concerned, I rack my brain trying to remember the details of the nightmare. I should have known; I should have sensed something was off when I had the dream. The cliff I was standing on in the nightmare. “FUCK!” I yell out in frustration, but my curse is eaten up by thunder as it booms so loudly that it startles the horses. Lightning strikes a tree to my left and a fire erupts from where it was hit. The smoke chokes me, and the scent sticks in my nose.

“LET’S RIDE!” I yell, and we take off like a stampede back to Ravendene.



Hours pass with the skies still red as blood and churning angrily. The wind whips at us relentlessly, but I am determined. I push the group to go as fast as we can back to Ravendene or to catch up to Raelle, whichever comes first. The willow is out of the way, but I'm sure Raelle made it there at least. If she didn't run into any of my scouts or Raskin's that are in these woods, that is. I'll need to cut her off, on her way back to Ravendene.

As much as I liked her warming my bed, what she is doing—will not be easily forgivable. The Apus family has been a thorn in my side for too long, and I'm not going to stand for it anymore. She doesn't remember, but she and I had been acquainted long before she ventured into Ravendene with my guidance. We were just kids. Our parents had a meeting in Loema. My father was close to Dax's, Travis Ravendene, the Lord of our territory. They had planned for my father to act as a diplomat for Ravendene. They planned for Ravendene and Loema to come together to challenge Demetrey for power after the kingdom fell. Dax and Trent were always around; we grew up together, but they never listened to the men in the meetings like I did. I was interested in the politics and the possibility of war. The thirst for power was engraved in me by my father from a young age. He was a smart man; he knew that power is what rules the people. The last words he ever spoke to me were before he left on a mission for the Ravendenes. *"Don't forget, the power of knowledge is far greater than brute strength, but when you have both, you will be unstoppable. Never be afraid to take what you want, Cano."*

I learned later in life that the meeting I had with her was one of the most important they conducted before their deaths. The topic of discussion was the

rightful ruler of the Aldramani Kingdom. When the king and queen perished in the uprising, the queen was pregnant. She gave birth on the night of their deaths. They left their only living heir in the care of one of the queen's trusted handmaidens. That heir lived beyond the war, and I made it my life's duty to find out who they were. My family fell trying to place a crown on the head of an infant who didn't earn anything. An heir to the throne by birth only. An order from Lord Ravendene, and I lost everything, including my best friend. Dax and I have never been the same since.

When the time came to fight, I was not yet old enough to fight alongside my brothers and sisters, mother, and father. I was left in the care of the Fornax-Ravendene caretaker, Miles. Miles sought to train us all in our parent's absence; he even trained some of the other kids who had one or both parents away at war. Kait was one of them. We all excelled in different aspects, Kait and Trent with their smarts for the fight. Maki was always the planner and information seeker, but it didn't help him in combat. I was a master of cunning, getting my opponent to work for me and then hitting them when they least expected it.

Dax was the only one who could rival us all at our best. Though, I didn't know it when we were young, the lessons my father was teaching me would pay off. At the time, I was upset with the coldness with which he taught me, but I was storing the knowledge of my training with each of them for future use. My so-called childhood friends and I aren't training for the possibility of combat anymore. We are at war without armies, even as we speak, and I'm going to destroy them and take what is owed to me, just as I had learned from my father. Dax is the only one who sensed my animosity with the group, for which he shared his concerns with Maki. Being as I couldn't get the Loema Territory leader to budge with his armies. No worries; in the end, I found those who were willing to work for me, and with their aid, I will become the ruler of the *entire* kingdom of Aldramani.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THIS IS IT—WHAT DYING feels like. I was struck by lightning, and the earth opened up to eat me whole. That has to be what happened. I'm falling and falling—floating? I don't feel like I'm falling anymore. I'm floating. I'm too scared to open my eyes. Have I crossed over, beyond the veil? My body feels like it's lying on a cloud. The humming I've felt in my chest flares, and liquid fire burns through my veins. My eyes snap open. I'm not on a cloud, but rather a bed.

When I realize my body is still my own, that I'm not dead and beyond the veil, I sit up and take in my surroundings. Lying next to me is a very still, very handsome, but ill-looking man. The hum in my chest flares again, sending warm vibrations out of the center of my being through every nerve ending of my body. I stand, staring down at him.

"Dax," I whisper on a gasp.

My thoughts are still scrambled from what must have been me portaling somehow from the willow at the cliffs to Dax's bedside in Ravendene. I wonder what could've happened to Miles—I'm not sure, but I can't waste any time thinking about it. I shake my head to clear it. *Focus on what is most*



*important at the moment, Rae.* I need to create the elixir and get Dax to drink it.

My eyes flick across his still form. Is he breathing? Please don't tell me I'm too late. I scramble up, pulling items out of my inner cloak pockets. There is soil all over the bed where I was. So, I scoop some of that up. I find a mortar and pestle in one of the cabinets and start setting things up on the bedside table. My head snaps up when I remember I need to look for the book that has the instructions for the cure. As I pull the small jar of Moonflowers out of my cloak pocket, a sheet of paper falls out with it and drifts to the floor. Unfolding it, I can't believe my eyes. I'm looking at the directions for the elixir right in my hand, almost like I conjured it with just the thought.

Without hesitation, I get started. I sprinkle the blessed soil into the mortar, followed by the Moonflowers, which glow. They have the moon's light entrapped in each petal. As the two ingredients touch, a wave of energy ripples over them. When I begin to muddle the ingredients together, a milky white, opalescent substance comes from the flowers. It looks like what I imagine magical water from the moon would look like. I scan the paper with the directions for the elixir, not lingering on some of the things I don't understand. I bring the mixture to the window along with the dagger.

I slice through the meaty flesh of my palm with the moonstone dagger. I let the blood pool in my hand. I get the hum in my chest again, but instead of liquid fire, it's warm and spreads out through my stomach and arms. My magic vibrates. I turn my head, looking over my shoulder at Dax. His features, even with the shallowness of his cheeks and grayish pallor to his skin from the curse, he is beautiful. He's covered by a white blanket. His broad, muscular chest, covered in tattoos and random scars of all sizes, is on display. His disheveled hair is long on the top, so it falls across his forehead. He has a thin scar that trails from the end of his left eyebrow and stops just below the eye, and I find myself wondering how he came to get it. He looks peaceful, at least.

I turn my hand over and let the blood that's pooled there spill over into the mortar. When the blood hits the other contents, it sizzles and pops like a fried egg in a pan, and sparks splash out of the bowl. Once I mettle it more, there is a magic ripple of white light. As the contents mix, the muddy, blood-colored substance turns to a glowing iridescent white. I smile at the completed elixir and turn toward Dax.

The hum in my chest intensifies, causing my hands to shake. I reach out and take his hand in mine. The contact sends a shock through my fingertips and up my arms. I bring the elixir up to his full lips. They are slightly open already, and I pour the small amount of liquid into his mouth and send a silent prayer to the gods that I'm not too late. I don't even want to think about the possibility that I am. After all we have been through, my memory is gone, Trent, Kait, and Melani. I pinch my eyebrows together just thinking about it. I can't fail them; they have been nothing but kind to me, and the feeling I get from being around these people has to mean something.

After placing the jar on the bedside table, I hold his hand in both of mine as I wait. I keep my eyes trained on him, watching for any sign of movement. Any indication that the elixir is working? There is nothing.

Resting my head on our hands, I close my eyes. The hum in my chest intensifies, igniting a surge of emotions I can't place. Dax lays just as still, his chest rising and falling with slow breaths. There is no hint that the elixir is working or not. A tear escapes my closed eyes and drops to our hands.

I hear Dax take a quick influx of breath; it's so faint I almost miss it. Lifting my head, my lips part in awe. Dax is beginning to glow from within, like—the light of the moon lives just below his skin. I sit up straighter, gripping his hand tighter. I feel an icy warmth starting to tingle its way up my arms from where I hold onto Dax. The glow moves into me and my blood. I feel it moving through my veins, each pump of my heart is like a siphon collecting magical energy. When it reaches my chest, I gasp as the air is knocked out of my lungs. The burning sensation creeps further up my chest and neck, causing me to tilt my head back. My eyes flutter shut as I let the emotion and icy warmth take me over.

“Raelle?” A deep, raspy voice brings me back to the present. Dax's warm, hazel-green eyes are open and fixed on mine. An intense fire of emotion builds as his gaze bores into the very depths of my soul. Relief washes over me, and I drop my head back to our clasped hands, whispering my thanks to the gods.

We don't have time to talk about anything that just happened, about the curse, or—

“Dax.” I smile, relieved that he's staring back at me. I did it. I saved him.

I hear men arriving in the square, shouting and clamoring about. “Fuck. Cano.” I seethe. “Dax, there isn't time to explain everything that is going on right now, but we need to get out of here. Are you ok? Can you walk?”

“Such a dirty mouth. Yes, love. I can walk, and I feel better than ok.” He grins, and it makes my heart flip in my chest, which confuses me as much as it intrigues me.

“Good to hear, love...” I mock him with a rueful smile of my own. Am I flirting with a man I basically just met? What is happening to me right now? I shake my head and stand. I rush to the closet in the corner of the small room. “We need to hurry, Trent and Kait—well, I’m not sure what has happened to Trent and Kait.”

“What do you mean happened to them?” he asks. I startle at the closeness his voice comes from. He has gotten up from the bed and is standing behind me—oh gods, in only... The blush takes over my face so fast that there is nothing I can do; he sees it.

“You should get dressed. Um, quick... here.” I push the clothes I’ve taken from the closet into his bare chest. The muscles there twitch as he looks down and takes the bundle of fabric, covering his nakedness. I catch his smile, showing a gleam of perfect white teeth, before I spin around so fast I’m at risk of whiplash. “We need to get somewhere we can lay low for a short amount of time. Discuss... things.” I sneak a peek to see if he is dressed, just as he’s pulling a tunic down over the taut muscles of his stomach. The blush rushes me again as he catches my gaze. I turn once more. I snatch the dagger from the table with a little more force than necessary and sheath it on my thigh. I take a second to grab anything else I think may be useful, as does Dax.

“I know a way out we can take, but it’s a little risky. Do you trust me?” he asks as he extends his arm, palm up. My gaze flicks around the room, then down to his outstretched hand. I hear shouting getting closer through the open window, and the hum in my chest surges causing the tightness there to ease, like a comfort is enveloping me. Like returning home, I place my hand in his.

“I trust you,” I tell him. My voice comes out as just a whisper.

As our grip on each other closes, there is a clap of energy and a flash of bright white light that comes from them. I look down at our hands, my lips parting in confusion. Dax just raises his eyebrow as it tugs at the scar on the side of his face.

“That’s... peculiar,” he says as his gaze meets mine. “Let’s get out of here. I know where Cano won’t think to look, at least not right away.”

I nod as he pulls me forward toward the open window. We are three floors up, and there is no balcony on the infirmary level. He steps onto the ledge

and pulls me up after him, holding me from behind. My breath catches in my throat, but before I'm able to protest the height or my annoyingly fluttery heart at the proximity of this beautiful man, he jumps.

I squeeze my eyes shut; I can't believe I trusted someone so blindly. *Stupid, stupid, Raelle.* I curse myself. Is this really going to be my last thought as I leave this world and enter the veil of the fallen? Just how stupid I am? I hear something that sounds like the snapping of a belt, and it jolts me from my mind. I open my eyes and immediately regret that decision. My stomach lurches.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“WE ARE FREAKING FLYING!” I scream, closing my eyes tight again. I feel the rumble of his laugh against my back, and it does something to me. Warmth gathers in my core, and my treacherous heart flips again.

“We are *freaking* flying.” He mocks me this time. His warm breath brushes against the space just below my ear, sending shivers down my neck and arms. “Open your eyes, love.”

Slowly, I do as he says. I peek one eye open first, and I look down, scrunching my nose. I should not have looked down. We’ve flown so far up that there are clouds under us. The rumble of his laugh vibrates at my back again as he drops out of the cloud cover. I gasp at the drop, but then a laugh bubbles up my chest. I can’t help the smile that stretches wide across my face. The sun is just beginning to rise, and the sky is glowing a gray-purple that melts into a pink and beautiful bright orange. Emotion so overwhelming takes me by surprise, and I take a deep breath in response. “It’s beautiful.” I manage to whisper. When I look back at Dax, I am overwhelmed by the sight of him. His onyx wings are huge and glow with a blue sheen as he flies. He looks like a God of death. Everything about him screams power. He locks his

eyes with mine as he responds.

“More than beautiful.”

My heart flips again.

Dax flies us away from the Capital of Ravendene toward the mountains. I feel the exhaustion from the last twenty-four hours weighing heavy on my body as my muscles give out and I melt into his embrace. My arms wrap around his neck loosely as he cradles me to his chest. My pulse quickens as I glance up at his strong jaw and full lips. He notices my eyes on him and looks down, snaring me with his penetrating gaze flicking over my face. My core tightens as he wets his lips, and his eyes return to mine. It’s very intimate, yet the way my body reacts is embarrassing. I feel like I have had a constant blush since the curse was broken. I need to keep reminding myself that this is Trent’s brother. Gods, I don’t even remember him. I need to get a grip. Take it easy. He takes a deep breath breaking eye contact. “It won’t take long; we will be there soon.” He assures me, my focus now on the horizon as he glides above the clouds.

The morning sun is warm on my skin for most of the time we fly through the sky. As we have gotten closer to the mountains, the air becomes thinner and causes a chill to run down my arms. I’m thankful for the cloak yet again. My mind races, churning over everything that has happened. It’s overwhelming. My worry over Trent, Kait, and Miles’ safety nags at my mind hoping nothing has happened to them. I hate that I had to leave them, and the feeling in my gut is telling me it’s not likely they got out of there, at least not unscathed. I’m not sure what happened to Miles, either. I heard him yell for me before I fell through the portal, but that was the last I saw or heard of him. I pinch my eyes shut, a headache building behind my eyes. Dax must notice because he looks down at me, concerned.

“Are you ok?” He asks.

“I’m fine. Just tired.” Speaking it out loud makes it feel even more real, and a yawn breaks free.

“Rest your eyes. We will be there just around this peak.” He juts his chin toward a beautiful snow-capped mountain in the distance, covered in beautiful pine trees. It doesn’t even look real; it’s so beautiful, like a painting by one of the gods themselves.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt while we are up here. I’m still awake, just going to close my eyes for a few minutes.” I can’t tell if I’m trying to convince him or myself. I feel the vibration of his laugh; it makes me smile softly.

I wake up in darkness, and it sends me into a frozen panic. My heart is thundering in my chest, and a sheen of sweat starts to build on my brow, but I can't move from fear. I hear movement from within the room, then suddenly a fire comes to life in a huge fireplace in the center of the room.

Dax is at the bedside in a flash of speed, like a wraith. "Are you ok, love?"

"Stop calling me that." I choke out, but even as I sit up, I feel the panic leaving my body. "I—I'm sorry. I didn't know where I was. It freaked me out, I guess." I sit up with my back against the headboard of a beautiful gothic-looking bed, with amazing satin black sheets and a velvet forest green duvet. I pull the duvet up to my chin and bring my knees to my chest. There are heavy curtains drawn along one whole wall to the left of the bed. The windows are covered completely, so I can't tell what time of day it is, but the feel of my eyes tells me I've been sleeping for many hours. "How long have I been sleeping?" I ask.

"You've been asleep for about a day and a half. I suppose you were more than just tired, as you said before, hmm?" He smirks. "I suppose you deserve the rest, though. I didn't get a chance to thank you for what you did for me." He sits on the bed, pulling one leg up under him. It brushes where my feet sit and sends a sharp sort of awareness through my body.

"You don't have to thank me. I did what anyone with a heart and conscience would do. There is a lot we need to talk about." He nods in agreement. "Trent and Kait... and Miles... They were all with me at some point, trying to get you cured. I'm not sure where they are now. I last saw Miles at the Willow, but Trent and Kait. I'm afraid they may have been captured." I say it with traces of bitterness on my tongue.

"Cano." Dax glowers.

"Yes. We went to the cabin outpost looking for the dagger as part of what we needed for the elixir. Cano was there with a whole crew. He was meeting with someone too. Things got a little hairy, and we had to separate. Trent helped me get into the cabin, but went to help Kait and cause a distraction so I could get to the dagger and get back to you." I rub the center of my forehead with my fingertips.

"Is your head hurting?" He asks me quietly.

"It's nothing, just a bit of a headache. I'll be fine." I rub my hand over one eye and down my cheek. "I thought Miles was one of Cano's men. He was going into the weapon room, the same room I was about to break into for the dagger. When he left the door open behind him, I was going to knock him out

—but well I didn't, and long story short... he helped me get to the Willow cliffs. The storm was something out of nightmares. I wouldn't have made it without his help. I was attacked by a Raskin, he saved my life." My brow cinched together. It bothers me that I don't know where he is. I owe him everything. If it weren't for him helping me, I would be dead, as would Dax.

"Miles is a good man. Resourceful. I'm sure he has made it to safety." He assures me. "Trent and Kait, I'm more worried about. Cano has always been a stupid asshole, but this is something else entirely. We will get them back, Raelle. I have contacts in Loema, but it's a good amount of traveling to get there. We need to rest. They will be looking for us relentlessly, but I have protections cast on this manor. No one will be able to get to us. I will sense them far before they get close. We have time to discuss everything, but right now, it's the middle of the night, and you need to heal and rest." He places his hand over my foot, the duvet a thin barrier between our skin, and rubs back and forth.

"I don't want to be alone," I speak the thought aloud, and realization causes the flush that's been living under my skin to deepen.

"You won't be alone. I haven't left your side since you returned to me. I'm sorry I left you to begin with." He reaches up and strokes his hand down the side of my face. He must see the confusion on my face because he goes to drop his hand, but the hum in my chest is reactive to his touch, and the emotion that I'm getting from it is calm. A feeling of home. I take his hand as he drops it from the caress on my cheek, holding it in both of my hands. The way I did when I was waiting for him to wake up from the curse.

"I'm sorry, Dax."

"Don't." He interrupts. "Don't apologize for anything. It's me who should apologize. I should have never left on my own. I should have included Trent, Kait, You—"

"I lost my memories of the time I was in Ravendene." I blurt out. *Smooth Rae*. His eyebrows pinch and his jaw ticks. "I remember bits and pieces from the year before I found myself at Ravendene, but I don't remember any of you or my life there. I only know that I had a sense of trust and that I was supposed to help Trent when I saw him in my path, so that's what I've been doing. I've also felt a tug on my magic or something pulling me to... well, I think it has been pulling me to you."

Dax stares at me for a moment, just taking me in. Then slowly, begins to pull back one of my sleeves. "May I?" he asks, and I nod. "This." He pulls



the fabric back. “I do not doubt that *this* is why you have felt that tug.” Just under the crook of my elbow, I see it. My eyes go wide, and my head snaps up to lock eyes with his.

He reaches up to his left arm, pushing the fabric of his shirt back, just a few inches below the crook of his elbow, displaying a matching mark to mine. Two bands of black, one solid and one faded into a shadow.

“As it appears, we’re mates, love. I believe that the clap of magic was the mating bond being placed on our skin when you broke the curse.” He says this as he strokes the two bands on my arm with his thumb. I hear what he’s saying, and I recall the shock of magic we both felt before I agreed to take his hand, and he jumped from the infirmary window. My brow furrows as confusion and intrigue settle over me.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

I THINK THE SHOCK of it hasn't settled yet after all that has happened. Mates? It has been years since a true bond has occurred, but Raelle and I have the mark of mates as proof on our skin. I felt something was trying to draw us together, but I never thought it could be this. Bonds have been almost forgotten since the kingdom fell. As though the gods themselves were upset about the revelation not allowing them to find one another. This, along with the visions that overwhelmed my thoughts before I woke from the curse, have me confused as hell.

Opening my eyes, I see Raelle looking down at me in that infirmary room. Her pine green eyes were wide with fear... She broke the curse. Remembering how my chest tightened with the shock of finding the mark on my skin... but later finding the mark on Raelle's? I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts as I sit up from the oversized chair in the sitting area. The room is purposefully dark, with only the light from the dwindling fire in the oversized hearth for me to see by. Raelle needs rest, and I need time to think and process before I bring up the vision to her or before we discuss any more about what this means to each of us. I know she must still be in shock from seeing the marks, as am I, but with everything there is for us to discuss... I don't need us both to be so overwhelmed, so some things will have to wait.

I don't blame her if she's upset about being bonded to me. It's not like we had a relationship or even friendship to begin with. The latter is my fault for being so twisted up in my own bitter agony. I truly don't deserve someone like her or a blessing such as a mating bond. Determination settles over my bones as I decide I will do everything I can to be the mate she deserves. My gaze finds her as she tosses in her sleep for at least the twentieth time. She asked me to stay with her, and I agreed. I had no intention of leaving her side.

The need to find my brother, sister, Kait, and even Miles weighs heavily on me, but hell if I will let anything happen to Raelle again. She has been through enough, so for now she will rest, and I will try to come up with a plan. I wish I knew what Cano's endgame was. I know he's a power-hungry fool, so I wouldn't be surprised if he was trying to use Raelle in some way for her power.

As I pace back and forth in front of the large hearth, I wonder if I'm boring a groove in the floors. I place some wood to the fire that has gone dark, and use my fire element to reignite it. Nights in these mountains can get cold. Standing in the master suite of the manor I have not been back to since—well, since my parent's death—brings back so many memories. Good and bad. Being here is causing all the emotions of that night to bubble back to the surface, and with everything else going on right now, I can't be still.

“Dax?” Her voice is rough with sleep, but just a whisper, and it cuts through my thoughts entirely. I move to the bedside and sit next to her with trepidation building in my gut.

“I'm here, Raelle. How are you feeling?”

“I'm okay, I think. Bad dreams, I guess... Have—have you slept at all?” Her eyes are still practically closed as she turns her head, looking at me.

“No,” I respond.

“Oh.” She pulls the blanket up to her chin in a way that I find adorable and innocent, and a wry smile tugs at my lips. I haven't had much of a chance to get to know the real Raelle. But I sense that the rough and tough girl is for her own protection most of the time, as I see this gentle softness lying in front of me.

“Too much on my mind. Nothing to be concerned over, love.”

“The bond?” She asks, her brow pulling down. It makes me worry; that is what haunts her nightmares. Who would want to bear the mark of the bonded with a man such as myself?

“I guess. That and—and other things,” I tell her, and she sucks her lip into her mouth, biting at it with worry.

I know I’m being vague, but how do I explain the feelings I have about being in this house without freaking her out? How do I explain the dreams I had when I was cursed to die? I don’t even know what I was seeing or feeling during that time. The only thing I know that kept me alive as long as it did was watching Raelle try so hard for me and my family. Somehow, I assume, through the bond that was manifesting. I was able to project my shifts and could watch over her through the eyes of a raven, like my namesake and the name of our territory. Shift projection is not common, but not unheard of. When I have the time, I will have to look further into it.

When I decided to ignore Cano’s order to stay put and not go after my sister... I decided then that I was done hiding myself away. I will resume lordship over Ravendene and claim my rightful position. I was never meant to be on the sidelines. I was born to be a leader of our people. He was not, and that much shows through his dictator style of leadership. Our people deserve better, and I am ready to step up as such. I am Dax Fornax-Ravendene, and I am the eldest of my line now that my parents are gone. It was a mistake to abnegate my position. I will make things right.

“Dax?” Raelle whispers again, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Raelle?” I whisper back with a hint of a grin playing on my lips. Am I nervous talking to her? By the gods, a flush is creeping into my cheeks, and I’m thankful for the dark room. I do not blush.

“Are you upset to be bonded to me?” Not a question I was expecting. Or, I guess I was, but not right away. I haven’t had much time to think about it. But there is no question how I feel about this union. I should have known when I saw her the first time in Ravendene. I should have known that something was drawing her to me. I should have never pushed her away.

“No love, I’m not upset about being bonded to you. Honestly, I think quite the opposite. Does it upset you to be bonded to me?” The question comes out before I even process the thought. Of course, she is upset to be bonded to an asshole like me. Our first conversation ended with me telling her that I didn’t care what happened to her, and that I would rather lock her up and use her for her power than let her leave Ravendene. Who would want to be with someone like that? I close my eyes and bring my head down to my hands, elbows resting on my knees. I run my hands through the overgrown locks of thick black hair, waiting for the truth of her feelings to rip my soul out.

She sits up so her back is resting on the large, intricately carved wood headboard. “I don’t know how to feel, to be honest, but I know that upset is not the emotion I’m feeling. Since I don’t have my memories of ever knowing you, there is not much to go on other than the feeling my growing power is telling me, and it has not led me to make a bad decision yet.”

“Growing power? How could it be growing? You are twenty-three, are you not? You would have ascended before you came to Ravendene, and your magic doesn’t grow past ascension unless you obtain a relative’s power due to their death.” My brows dip low as I try to understand.

“I um—haven’t ascended yet... But you are correct about my age. I’m not sure what the reasoning is. I thought maybe there was something wrong with me or it was the turmoil I was in when I turned twenty-one. Maybe the gods sensed I was not ready for such a feat.” She shyly sweeps some of her silver-blond hair out of her eyes and behind her ear. My gaze is snagged by the motion, and as I follow her hand down to her bottom lip, where she worries it between her teeth absently, causing a wanton desire to build in me.

I clear my throat and shift on the bed, facing the fire. “Interesting. So, your power has been growing? Do you think you are close to ascension then?”

“Trent said that’s what he thinks. From what I know of ascension, I think he is right. He said we needed to hurry and get back to Ravendene because if I were to ascend anywhere else, it would be like a beacon to the other territory leader if I ascended on their soil.” Her eyebrows stitched together as she thought about it. Trent was right about that. We could sense her power was strong when she came to Ravendene. We knew she was powerful. So much so that I assumed that she had already ascended all this time. I never would have thought that the power I sensed from her was only at its most base level.

“I assume Trent is right if you think it has been growing.”

“Does that mean if I ascend on Ravendene soil, Cano will know where to find us?” She asks with her eyes fluttering closed. She’s been in and out of sleep since we reached the manor, and I sense that she is drifting off again.

A smile creeps across my face at her. No, it wouldn’t be a beacon to Cano. Cano was never the true leader of Ravendene, and now is as good a time as any to divulge to my beautiful mate what her future could come to if she chooses to live a life with me. I brush my fingers along the side of her face. “Sleep, mate,” I whisper as I watch her sink into the mattress.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RAELLE SMILES SHEEPISHLY AT me, pulling the blanket to her full lips, and I track the movement with my eyes. “Good morning,” My voice is raspy; sleep still thick in my throat, “Did you sleep well?”

“I did. Thank you for staying with me.” She says, bringing the blanket up a small amount higher, covering her mouth entirely. I can see the trepidation in her eyes. I smile softly at her.

We spent hours talking after she woke in the middle of the night. I ended up lying next to her in bed as we talked, and I guess eventually, we had both fallen asleep. I also slept soundly. No dreams or nightmares plagued me with her at my side. I woke up before her this morning. She was curled into me, her face resting on my chest, and our legs were twined together, but I slowly retracted and just lay watching her sleep from a respectful distance. I didn’t want her to feel as though I was rushing her or assuming anything.

She took everything I told her about Cano not being a true leader of Ravendene and how that title belonged to me and my bloodline better than expected. She even seemed to understand and think deeply about what that may eventually mean for her, being that she is my mate. We spoke about our families, all except my parents, which I’m sure she noticed but did not question. She told me all about hers and the questions she had about their

deaths. I was not ready to dive into the cause of my parent's deaths. One day, I will tell her. One day, I will allow myself to open that box I've compartmentalized and deal with the consequences. Today is not that day.

I move to sit up, but to my surprise, Raelle whips her hand out and presses it to the side of my stomach, just at the top of my hip. "Wait... I have a question." She whispers. I lay back where I was and rolled to my side to face her. We are eye to eye, much like we were last night before falling asleep. However, I do note her lingering hand that has moved up to rest on my chest.

"I—I'm not sure how to ask this..." she trails off, a flush rising to the exposed skin of her cheeks. I don't say anything; just wait for her to get the courage to ask whatever it is she wants to ask. "Did we... ever have a relationship? Trent told me that I was with Cano. I think that's what has me so confused about the bond marks."

My mind immediately goes to the night that I left Ravendene. The kiss we shared and the heat of the unspoken goodbye I was giving her because it felt like it would be the last time I would see her. I had an overwhelming sense that I would not be okay with that. Now that makes sense. I'm sure it was the bond that brought those feelings to rise. Then, the night that my sister was taken flashes into my thoughts. The spark I had felt at her touch—I had thought she felt it too, in the hallway before dinner. Her sass in her way of talking to me, her dancing on me, and our teasing each other before Trent interrupted and Mel's scream. The scream I have heard every night since in my nightmares. "We didn't have a relationship, but we have some history in a sense," I tell her with a wistful grin.

The flush deepens in her cheeks. "Can you tell me? Did we have that kind of history?"

A rogue laugh escapes me, and I clear my throat. "We didn't have sex, if that's what you're asking, Raelle." I smile at her. Her cheeks were now the color of a pomegranate. "We have shared two kisses. I would say they were unforgettable, but I see that it was one-sided." I let out a nervous laugh, but what I've said is the truth.

"Oh." She whispers, her brows stitching together. The sadness in her voice cuts me to the bone.

"Raelle—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have joked about that. You losing your memories. That was insensitive of me. I just—I'm trying. I haven't been a good man in quite a long time. Let me start over. About us?" A moment passes, and her face visibly relaxes, but she still worries, biting her bottom lip

before she nods. I continue only after I see her take a deep breath and release it.

“When we met, I felt a hum deep in my chest, and I fought hard to ignore it. I didn’t treat anyone well, and you were no exception. I couldn’t let you be an exception for many reasons. Some you know of, and some you will come to learn when the time is right.” Her lips part as if she is going to say something, but I continue, needing to get this out. “Every day, I either fought to avoid you or fought to treat you the same as I did everyone else... The day that my sister was abducted, before she was taken, I had slipped. The charade I always played fell away for a moment, and we—well, we didn’t do anything then, but we were just Dax and Raelle. The boundaries I think we both had in place fell away.” I smile at the memory, and her eyes drop to my mouth. I bring my hand up and wrap it around hers at my chest.

“There was some dancing and close whispers...flirting, I guess.” I say the last part with a rueful smile on my face. “Then the night fell into chaos, and well, things changed some.” Both of our eyebrows stitched together in frustration. Maybe for different reasons or the same; I’m not sure. “The day I decided to leave Ravendene, I came to the library for a drink and a moment alone to gather my thoughts after meeting with Cano. I was planning to leave that night. You were there, but I didn’t know at first. You had been trying so hard to convince Cano to let a search party out to look for Ella, too. I think now I know that it was the bond that was guiding me then, but we shared a kiss in the library. Trent walked in just after, and you hurried away.”

“One kiss?” is all she asks.

“Two, I followed you out of the library and insisted on walking you home. There was a sort of energy buzzing around us that pushed me to make sure I knew you were safe. To make sure to say goodbye. I needed more of you, leaving without telling you, my brother, or Kait what my plans were. It was probably one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” My voice shrinks to a whisper. “I wish you could remember, Raelle.” My voice is barely audible in the last sentence.

“I wish I could too.” She whispers back. “But Dax?” I take in the heat of her emerald eyes. “I won’t forget again.” She says as she leans in, and her lips take mine.

It’s unexpected and completely welcomed. I feel the energy all over again surrounding us. Her scent envelops me in vanilla and warm spice. I bring the hand I was using to prop my head up to the side of her face, cupping it at her



jaw. Slowly, the kiss deepens as my pulse quickens to a gallop in my chest. I take my other arm, wrapping it around her waist. I pull her flush to me. The kiss is slow and full of longing at first, but it grows into a fierce need as we both devour each other.

I force myself to slow, and as I pull back, there is a zapping sensation on my lips as we finally break away. Our gazes lock, and we don't say anything for a few moments as I idly trace small circles on her lower back. I never want to leave this moment, but we have so much ahead of us, and I know we've put it off long enough.

"Never again, love," I tell her before laying a slow kiss on her lips once more. I brush my thumb along her rosy cheek as she dips her chin, curling into me. "Never again," I whisper into the top of her head. It's a promise that has many meanings, but one I will never break.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I WAKE UP TO pain coursing through my body in pulsing waves. I can feel the thick drip of blood rolling from the wound in my hairline. The air in the dark space we are being kept in is heavy. That, along with the swelling along my ribs, is making breathing difficult. I cough, and the taste of metal coats my tongue. The action causes a moan of pain to leave me unabated. If they have beaten me this thoroughly, they likely don't need to keep me alive for long. Lifting my head takes effort, but I manage to look around the dark room—cave? That can't be right. Last, I remember we were at the cabin outpost.

"Trent?" A small voice whispers. "Are you awake?" A sob breaks through the thick air.

"Melani?" I whisper back. She cries quietly from a distance, too emotional to respond right away. I finally see her as my eyes adjust. She is chained to the cave wall as I am, by her ankle, only able to move a few feet in any direction. "It's okay, Ella. We're going to get out of here... I—I'm going to get you out of here. Do you hear me?" I promise her.

"Trent, you don't understand what Cano has done! What he plans to do. I'm sorry I didn't listen to Dax and go to bed that night. I'm s-so s-sorry."

She stammers, wiping her face of the steady stream of tears. “They brought Kait in last night too. She was awake, but they only left her here for a few hours. Some men returned before either of you woke. They took her again.” She sobs.

There is a heavy groaning sound, like stone-on-stone, coming from farther away. Mel turns toward it with wide eyes and backs toward the cave wall in fear. I look in the direction of the sound. Waiting. Then I see a figure appear in an archway of the cave, and I narrow my eyes at the bastard standing in front of us. The arrogance in his stance as he looks at us is disgusting. I don’t say anything; only stare at him with a promise of vengeance in my eyes.

He doesn’t say anything either as he walks closer. He just smiles broadly. When he gets a few feet from me, he bends down into a crouch, knowingly just out of my reach.

“I wanted the pleasure of seeing your face when you lay eyes on the masterpiece.” He laughs darkly. I spit at his feet, my lip curling back in disgust. He laughs harder in response as he stands, claspng his hands at the base of his spine. “BRING HER IN,” he bellows toward the entrance.

My heart stops as two guards carry a body in, one holding the feet and the other holding the wrists. They drop her to the dirt as Cano stands. The sound of her body hitting the ground echoes through my brain, and I can feel my whole body begin to vibrate from the intensity of my fury. Heat rises to my cheeks as I seethe at Cano.

I watch as Kait lies unmoving on the cold cave floor. Her body is broken, one leg is bent at an unnatural angle, and blood seeps from the multitude of wounds across her entire body. My eyes track over all of the cuts and bruises, and my blood begins to boil as my eyes catch on each one. When my gaze reaches my best friend's face, ice enters my veins; I can feel my face blanch. Her face. The damage there leaves her almost unrecognizable. “Kait.” Her name comes out as a choked whisper, and wet sobs break out from Mel nearby. Kait isn’t moving. They don’t even bother with securing her. I can’t tell if she is even alive. Anger continually wells in my body, a fire deep in my gut. Even with the power-dampening magic wards around us, I feel my magic surge inside me, but it has nowhere to go. It’s locked down in the confines of the caves.

I turn my gaze from Kait, facing Cano, who is still smiling like he just won a carnival game. “You. Motherfucker. I. Will. End. You. For. This.” I growl with each word.

“Oh Trentikins, you keep telling yourself that.” He chides. “I promise you, the only end you will see is that of your sister, this bitch, and your own.” He laughs once. “Have you felt the power transfer from Dax’s death yet? It’s only a matter of time, if not. You know there is no way Raelle made it to him in time.” One corner of his mouth tilts in a half smile.

Dax is still alive, and I have to believe that Raelle made it to him. If Cano isn’t saying that he knows Dax is dead or that he has caught Raelle, there is still a chance they’ve survived. They will come for us; they just need time to recover and plan. Until then, I just hope that we can survive. I will do everything I can to ensure that the females with me receive no more suffering. I will take it all.

“You know, Cano, denial of the truth is a huge mistake. In your case, that could mean many things, couldn’t it? Oh-great-leader of our people.” I mock him. He knows he is not meant to be our leader. I agreed to allow Cano to become the leader when our parents died because I was not ready to do so, and Dax was simply not himself. Both of us were broken by their deaths, but Dax... their deaths broke something vital in him. I knew eventually the time would come when either myself or Dax would take his place, as is our right to do so. Cano had to know it too. This bullshit he is pulling, whatever it is, ensures the fact that a Fornax-Ravendene will take that seat once more because if Dax isn’t able, I sure as hell am ready now.

Cano doesn’t respond, but the look on his face says he knows I’m right, and he knows where my thoughts have drifted. He turns on his heel, and as he walks through the arching entrance, he yells over his shoulder, “Rest up, Trentikins. You’re going to need your strength if you want to live longer than a few days. Before I outright kill you, I think we will have some fun with you, or your girls...”



Hours turn to days, and only guards come into the cave to throw scraps of food and a half-full bucket of water at us. The first few hours after Cano left the cave, there was nothing but Melani's racking cries filling the cavern we were confined to. I tried to talk to her and calm her, but everything I said seemed to make her cry harder. I eventually gave up and just let her get it out. When she finally grew tired, she drifted into a fitful sleep and has been that way since. Three days of little food and water has me feeling weaker than I have ever been. I still try to stay awake and aware as much as I can. I'm worried about Kait; she has barely moved since she was thrown to the ground. The protections on the cave are slowing her healing time, and the lack of food and water is making it that much harder for her to heal. If we don't get out of here soon, she will die.

I was at least relieved to see that she was breathing.

Just as the thought enters my mind, the stone grinds as multiple men fall into the space. The Ravendene crest branded on the black metal chest plate of the armor they don burns into my vision. I grind my teeth, thinking of how my father is likely watching this play out with outrage. Because two men, who are supposed to be loyal to the Ravendene family, grab Mel. Roughly covering her face with a canvas bag, they hoist her away. Kait gets the same treatment immediately after. An additional four men move to surround me. I don't fight their advance though, even as it takes everything in me not to. I know we need to get out of these caves if we have any chance to survive. One of the men takes a pair of iron cuffs off of his belt. "Put your arms behind you and we can do this the easy way. Or don't, and we can do it the hard

way. You choose how much fun I get to have today,” the big, ugly, ogre-looking guard with a snout-like nose and bushy caterpillar eyebrows says to me. I chose the former and he snorts. “No fun.”

They place a canvas bag over my head next. The only thing I see as we begin moving is the change in light and darkness. After walking through the dark tunnels, I sigh with relief as a bright warmth hits me. We’ve exited the caves. I only feel the sun’s warmth for a moment before being shoved into a carriage, and the door slams behind me. I scramble, trying to sit up, but the carriage begins moving before I’m able. I fall forward, cracking my head.

The world goes dark as I lose consciousness once again...



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DAX HESITATES AT THE door, his eyes slowly tracking my movements as I rise from the bed. He's leaving me to my own devices while he goes to gather supplies for our voyage to Loema. He said a family nearby who takes care of the manor grounds would supply the horses we need, and it wouldn't take long for him to retrieve them, clothes, and food. He brushes a soft kiss along my brow before sauntering to exit, but his lingering gaze brings a coy smile to my face.

"I'll be fine, Dax. Go." A grin appears on his face. We will have one more night of rest and will leave in the morning at first light. Butterflies take flight in my chest, and as though he could hear the flutter of my heart, he pins me with a smoldering wink before strolling from the room.

I'm grateful for the time to myself, as I try to process everything I can without his eyes on me. I let out a deep breath. I pick up the dagger and turn it over in my hands. The thrum of the bond to Dax beats like a drum in my chest. Pounding and resonating through me and the keen sense of rightness to it. I know that this is real. This is likely why I was pulled to help Trent after losing my memories. Perhaps this is the greatness my mother told me I was

destined for... It's still bizarre to feel what I do about someone who also feels like a stranger.

We have spent most of our time together in the last couple of days sleeping, or at least I have been sleeping. Losing everything I have and breaking the curse has sapped all of my energy. I'm sure that the magic it took for the bonding mark also has something to do with it. Especially since I'm not ascended. In the hours I've been awake, we have spent our time talking about what has happened since he was cursed. We discuss our plans to save Trent, Mel, and Kait, but we haven't discussed further than that. I know that conversation will come. Discussions about the future. Our future. For now, though, we need to focus on the Cano problem and whatever it is that he and his mysterious companion are planning. I'd also like to figure out why they wanted Dax and his siblings captured or dead.

Before Dax left, he prepared a bath for me to relax, and I plan to do just that. Walking into the en-suite for the first time, my jaw almost dropped at the beauty of it, even in the darkness Dax was keeping the room in. Today, though, he drew the curtains back, and as the sun filters into the room, it's truly exquisite. Every inch of it has a rich, dark feel. The walls are a deep green, almost black, giving the room a depthless feel. The dark colors and rich accents match the theme of the opulent bedroom. The windows are textured stained glass with pointed arches and intricate designs at the top of each. The sun shining through them paints the room in shades of red, orange, purple, blue, and green. My breath catches as I bask in the beauty of it. The floor is a flat black tile with flecks of gold and copper throughout, but the thing that catches my attention the most is the enormous copper claw-foot tub at the center of the back wall, just under the largest of the three windows. Which is currently filled with bubbles scented of vanilla and lavender, nearly flowing from the edge. All around the tub, candles of all sizes burn, casting their flickering light around the room. I think I could stay in that bath forever.

I eagerly strip out of the filthy stolen clothing, discarding them into the basket by the door. I don't want to think about the fact that I have been sleeping in those clothes, dirty as hell, in that beautiful bed. I shake the thought from my head. Standing in front of the double copper sinks along the wall, my gaze catches on my reflection in the ornate gold-framed mirror, which shows that the clothes aren't where the tragedy ends. I look like a hot mess. My hair has come out of the braid that's holding my silvery blonde locks back; loose strands stick to my neck and chest, and random flyways



stick up all around my face. I groan as I plod to the bath.

I step into the hot bath and sink in slowly until I'm fully submerged, letting it wash away not only the dirt and blood but also the cloudiness in my head. Dipping my head under the sudsy water, I wash my hair with the vanilla and mint-scented soap and scrub away all of the muck from my body, soaking my sore muscles. I close my eyes and let the steam, scents, and warmth flood my senses.

"Raelle?" I jump at the voice coming from the doorway. Water sloshes over the edge of the tub and splashes to the floor. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. It's just me." Dax says as he puts both hands up in surrender, stepping into the ensuite. My gaze whips to the water, and thankfully the bubbles have not dissipated entirely, so I am not fully exposed to him, but enough of me is on show that a blush rises into my cheeks.

"What are you doing in here?" I snap at him.

"I knocked," A rueful grin lifts one side of his lips. "When you didn't answer, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I'll wait outside...Unless, you'd prefer I stay?" His grin turns seductive, as his gaze rakes over my body half concealed by the sudsy water.

"Oh, my gods, Dax. Please wait outside. I'll just finish up." I laugh as I throw the bath pillow at him. It hits the door as he closes it with a soft click. I hear him laughing on the other side, and my smile widens. I think I can get used to having Dax around.

I wrap myself in the fluffy white towel Dax left out for me and risk another look in the mirror. My cheeks are rosy from the heat of the bathroom, or possibly the blush from being naked in front of Dax. I've had men before, so it's not that I'm inexperienced; it's just the fact that I was caught off guard. I run a brush through my hair, working out the tangled strands, and pulling it over one shoulder. Before exiting the bathroom, I take a deep breath. With my hand resting on the knob, I collect my confidence. I crack open the door and step out into the much cooler bedroom. The air sends a peppering of goose flesh across my skin.

"Sorry Dax, you caught me off guard. I must have fallen asleep in the bath." I tell him. He's standing at the hearth, a glass of whiskey in hand, his eyes sweeping up to mine and flicking across my features before they fall to the towel I have wrapped around my body.

"Don't be sorry. If you hadn't fallen asleep, I wouldn't have had the chance to see you naked already." He winks at me. I raise an eyebrow at him,

then roll my eyes. Gone is the sweet, sensitive guy, apparently.

“Did you get more clothes, or am I going to be stuck in this for the time being?” I ask, keeping one eyebrow raised, and I pin him with my annoyance.

“I think I rather like this look.” He grins again.

I don't know what has gotten into him. He was so sweet and soft-spoken before he left, and now I get this arrogance that is so thick in the air I can barely breathe through it. I don't know what it says about me, but I like it, and if he wants to play a game, I can play too.

I drop the towel a little, exposing some of the swell of my breasts. “Maybe I nix the towel all together?” I suggest it with a sultry grin of my own. His eyes heat to molten copper for a split second. It was so fast, I almost think I imagined it, but then he closes his eyes and groans as he turns back to the fire and takes a long drink of his whiskey.

I walk up close behind him and snatch the glass away, bringing it to my lips. I pause with the glass there. We make eye contact before I knock the rest of his whiskey back in one drink and place the glass in front of him on the mantle. I wink at him as he did to me. I spin to walk away, but he surprises me. Hooking an arm around my waist, he pulls my back flush against him. The cold bite of his leathers on my skin makes me suck in a breath, and a squeal breaks free from me with the shock. I spin to slap at him, but he anticipates it. Reaching up, he hooks his large hand behind my neck, effectively blocking my slap, and pulls me into his embrace. I bring my face just a breath away from his own as he dips his chin. The move takes my breath away, but I turn my head to look away from him defiantly. Trying hard to keep my lips pressed into a hard line, but he leans in further, brushing his lips and nose along the length of my neck to my ear.

“Careful love. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to seduce me.... Again,” His warm breath sends a chill down my spine as my heart gallops in my chest. “And after the last time, which I know you don't remember, but I do. Keenly.” He presses a kiss to the hollow behind my ear, and my pulse skips. “I promised myself if it were to happen again, it would end in you coming all over my hand.” He whispers, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. When he leans back, I turn my head to look at him, and a smile that brings a dimple to his right cheek breaks across his face. Mirth sparkling in his eyes.

He stands fully and takes a small step back, but he doesn't remove the

hand from the back of my neck or waist. He slowly tracks his eyes down my barely covered body, his eyes heating. He pulls me toward him slowly this time. I drop one hand to his chest in a weak attempt to push him away, but I can feel the heavy pounding of his heart. It matches mine. He leans in slowly, like he is asking for permission. My breathing quickens as I close the distance with my acceptance.

The kiss is slow to start as we explore each other's mouths with our tongues. He nips my lower lip, and I return the nip playfully. We both smile into each other's mouths. His hand roams further down from my waist and over the curve of my ass, stopping just as he reaches the hem of the towel, playfully teasing the edge with his fingertips.

I don't even realize we are moving until the back of my bare legs brush the soft fabric of the bed. I let both arms move up to hang loosely around his neck as both of his hands explore the curves of my body. The only thing holding the towel in place is the pressure with which our bodies are pressed together. He caresses my leg from hip to knee, then up again, each stroke back up urging the fabric to rise higher and higher, and after the third pass, he exposes my ass. I can feel the hardness of him against my stomach as he grabs a handful of my ass and grinds us together. The motion makes a liquid heat pool at my core.

The next pass down my thigh, he grips the back of my knee, hitching it at his hip, effectively spreading me bare to the room. The cool air is harsh against the heat at my center, and I suck in a sharp breath. I brace myself there as he runs his fingertips gently up the underside of my leg. Just before he reaches the wetness between my legs, he breaks the kiss, locking his gaze with mine. I started the game with him, but he is winning. As I stare at him, panting, my need for him is evident. He inches closer to my core and slides his fingers through my arousal. He groans with pleasure at the wetness he finds. Holding my stare, he sinks two fingers into the wet heat. A moan breaks free of my parted lips as I tip my head back. He dips his head forward and scores the tip of his tongue up the length of my neck, stopping with a nip to my earlobe, sending shivers down my spine.

I shamelessly arch my back and rock against his hand as he pumps his fingers in and out of me. The friction causes the pressure that's building to take my breath away. I reach between us to take him into my fist, but he grabs my wrist, stopping me with his free hand. He brings it up above my head and drops us to the bed. My bath towel falls open as we sink into each

other, and he takes advantage of it. Still holding my hands above my head, he curves his fingers to hit that perfect spot while his thumb puts pressure on the bundle of nerves at my apex. Lifting my hips, I rock into his touch, grinding against his hand. I feel the tightening low in my stomach, and suddenly, his mouth closes over the hardened peak of my breast, sucking it between his teeth. The pleasure mixed with the slight pain of his teeth sends me over the edge. I moan his name loudly as I pulse around his fingers, my inner walls gripping them as wave after wave of pleasure makes me shudder and drip for him. He continues to pump them in and out, extending the pleasure and leaving me trembling.

Slowly, he eases his fingers out, sliding them through the wetness and over the pulsing bud once more, sending a tremor through me at his exit. His lips move on mine as he growls, "Good girl."

I lay there trying to catch my breath, my body melting into the bed. He pulls the duvet up to cover both of us, and we lay there silently, just breathing each other in, as he traces small circles low on my stomach. Before I know it, I'm drifting to sleep, the hum in my chest singing me to sleep like a lullaby.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WAKING UP NAKED WITH Dax wrapped around me should have felt weird, but there are no unsettling thoughts or emotions, just warmth. At some point, he lost his leathers, and I lay with his bare chest pressed to my back. Wanting to see his face while he sleeps, I start to turn toward him, but my movement causes him to pull me tighter to his body. Fusing my back to his hard chest. The warmth of his skin on mine is intoxicating and my head spins from the feel of it. Nothing else happened between us last night. Once I fell asleep, I stayed asleep.

Laying there motionless, his hand wanders and finds mine, lacing our fingers together. He stretches and his breath brushes over the nape of my neck as he whispers, his deep voice full of sleep. “And just where do you think you’re going?”

“I wasn’t going anywhere; I was trying to roll over.” A giggle escapes as the scruff on his chin tickles the skin at the base of my neck.

“Well in that case...” He rolls me so quickly that my breath gets caught, and I snort out another laugh. He keeps me flush to him, only in the turn he hitches my leg up and over his hip, while he palms the curve of my ass. The

dimple on his cheek pops to life as he laughs. The deep rumble of it sends a shiver down my spine and to a place that is, very much, exposed right now.

A flush heats my cheeks at the memories of last night surfacing as I find myself in the position he's placed me. Heat pools at my center, and I bite my lip to try to keep myself from squirming. His eyes drop to the motion of my mouth, and he licks his full bottom lip.

"Is it time for us to get going?" My voice doesn't sound like my own. Thick and full of heat.

"It is." That's all he says as he narrows his eyes on me with a devilish grin.

"What?" A smile tugs at my mouth, but I don't allow it, biting my lip again.

He lifts his body, propping onto one elbow, and his eyes darken as he looks down at me. "I don't think I'm ready to give this up yet... I'm a selfish bastard, and I want more." He drags his hand along the curve of my lower back, marking a path up my spine. Slowly, he guides his fingers along my shoulder, across the top of my chest, and settles, wrapping around my neck. He doesn't apply pressure, but the heat of his palm across my throat brings my nipples to hard peaks, and my back arches in response. My leg being hitched up at his hip and the shiver his touch elicits makes me very aware of his growing arousal pressing against the sensitive nerves at my center, with only his pants as a barrier. He notices it at the same time I do, and he grinds the hardness into me.

A breathy moan breaks free from me as I tip my head back, giving him a better grip on my throat. He uses his thumb to angle my chin even more and drops his mouth to mine. He flicks his tongue across my bottom and top lip, kisses the tip of my nose, and smiles.

I close my eyes as I speak. "We should really..." He presses a kiss to my lips, stopping the words before they are spoken.

"I want to worship my *mate*." He presses another kiss to my lips. "After, we can go save the world or do hero shit..." He smiles against my lips.

"But—" my words get caught in my throat as his hips roll into mine, causing my brain to go to mush and my thoughts to completely lose meaning. I instinctively reach up, pushing my fingers into his dark, sleep-tousled hair. He groans his approval as he turns my head and licks the shell of my ear. He removes his hand from my neck, exploring the swells of my breasts lingering there. His mouth slowly travels the same path as he continues to grind his

erection into my center. The friction is causing me to wriggle and moan. He sucks the hardened bud of my breast into his mouth and clamps his front teeth down slightly, the pain and pleasure making me hiss his name. He comes back to my mouth and devours it.

“I like the taste of my name on your lips.” He rasps and continues his exploration, moving on to my other breast. He moves me fully to my back, then presses himself between my legs, his thigh a constant pressure at the apex. He moves further south still. Trailing his tongue down the center of my stomach between kisses. Only a quick flick of a circle around my navel. The sensation makes my hips buck forward with need and before I know it, he is looking up at me, both of my legs over his shoulders. He keeps our gazes locked as he trails his tongue up my seam, gripping my ass in the same motion. He pulls me to him, and he devours me like a starved man.

The heat in his eyes briefly turns molten copper again. Just as it does, he closes them, flicks his tongue, and sucks the bundle of nerves into his mouth. He gently bites down with his teeth and soothes it over with his tongue in the perfect rhythm. The tightening in my core is maddening as he works me over with his mouth. I tug and pull the satin sheets into my fists, pulling him closer with the heels of my feet. He rumbles a laugh, his stubble brushing into my sensitive skin. At the same time, he plunges two fingers deep into my center, curling them and hitting that perfect spot. I come so hard that darkness takes my vision and only stars remain. He continues to pump them in and out while flicking his tongue over the throbbing bud, bringing me over the edge again and again.

He sits up to his knees, lips glistening with my wetness, still holding my legs wide, baring me to him. He looks all of me over, then he reaches down between us and squeezes himself hard through his pants and groans. “You are a breakfast I could eat daily, and I can’t wait to have more of you, love. However, we do need to be leaving now.” A seductive grin spreads across his face, and the dimple on his right cheek makes an appearance. He looks like a dark angel or a demon of pleasure, and it makes my heart flip knowing he's mine.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I'VE BEEN IN AND out of consciousness. My mouth and throat feel full of sand, my voice buried and it's hard to swallow. I try to muster up the strength to look around, but even my eyes feel full of grit. The carriage I'm in is bumping and bouncing on the uneven path it takes. My tongue rolls out over my cracked lips, doing nothing to help the burn. Warm air within the small space doesn't help with my intense thirst either. If I don't get water soon, I'm as good as dead.

A heaviness settles into my chest as I think of Kait and her listless body as they pulled her from the caves before me. Last I saw her, she was on the edge of the veil. I hate to think of the possibility that she could be dead now, and that there was nothing I could do to stop it. I'm alone, and they have me secured to the floor by heavy metal chains, ensuring I cannot escape.

Traveling at quick speed, we hit a bump, and the momentum sends me forward. My face hits the floor hard, causing my head to throb in response. They must have drugged me with something to block me from shifting or from using my magic because I don't sense a protection barrier on the carriage itself as I did in the caves, but I still don't have access to my magic,



and I feel like I'm spinning. The world tilts on its axis.

Muffled yelling reaches my ears from a distance, not uncommon when traveling with the regime, but when we stop suddenly, hope surges to life. This may be my chance. When the voices carry again they are closer. The door at the back is ripped open, the bright light of the sun bursts into the small space, blinding me momentarily, and my hope is snuffed out as quickly as it surfaced.

"Oh good, you're awake. If this is your brother or that bitch Raelle causing a ruckus up ahead in an attempt to rescue your sorry ass, I will kill you now, so help me." Cano spits in my direction, his figure just a shadow looming in the doorway. I don't have the ability to say anything to him. The thickness of my tongue makes it impossible. I watch from where I am chained with hooded eyes. Men run in all directions, weaving in and out of the convoy. Swords are being unsheathed as they run ahead of where I'm being held captive.

I hear the screech and growls at the same time Cano does. "Fuck." He curses. He unsheathes his short sword and climbs into the carriage with me, slowly easing the door shut. Hiding away like the coward he is.

Screams of terror begin closing in on us, along with the snaps and snarls of the Raskins, and from the sounds of it, there are a hell of a lot of them. Too many. Cano realizes it too and curses again. "Motherfucker. Can you move?" He looks at me. I can't. There is no way, with the way that I'm feeling, not to mention the chains... but if I could get him to remove the chains...

"We're both dead if they make it to us." I rasp out. "Unchain me. Let me —"

A sudden crash jostles the carriage we are in and sends me falling into Cano. I manage to get myself up and look over to see that, in the commotion, Cano was knocked out. His limp body lying right next to me. I could kill him here and now. As I think about that option, a loud screech sounds so close that it vibrates the wood floor I'm kneeling on. That's when I decide, self-preservation over revenge, *for now*. I need to get free. I need to see if there is any way I can get to Kait and Mel and get the fuck out of here. This is probably the only time I will ever be happy to see a Raskin.

I lean over as far as I can reach, stretching my arm to the point of pain. My fingers brush the canteen strapped to Cano's hip, and I snag the strap, pulling it in. Then I grab the keys that are attached to his belt. I chug warm water from the canteen, choking as it goes down my raw throat. The ache there is a

little more bearable as the water, even warm, soothes the burn. I fumble through the keys and try to be silent as I attempt each one, not wanting to wake Cano or attract a Raskin before I'm ready to defend myself. After the fourth key, there is a click, and the metal chains fall free from my wrists. "Fuck yes," I whisper. Without hesitation, I scoot to the door; the hinge creaks as I inch it open. I don't hear the screams of the soldiers anymore, but what I do hear is even more disturbing. Ripping and crunching of skin and bone as the Raskin's tear into each man they have slain, devouring their fear first, then their flesh.

Before I climb out, I grab the short sword that Cano had dropped. Scooting to the edge of the carriage, I drop to the dirt below with a soft thud. I sway on my feet a moment before I glance back, just as Cano is waking up. Our gazes lock, and a snarl builds at his lips, but no noise breaks free. He knows that any sound would alert the Raskin's that there is more food to be had here, and they would swarm. I give him a little salute and a mocking grin, then I do something I may regret. I slam the door open wide with a bang. I storm around the carriage and slap the horse's hind quarter as I run past with a laugh. Cano's string of profanities carries to me as the horse takes off in a gallop. Cano may die today, or he may live to see another day. Either way, I will get my revenge.

Raskin's come from every direction, snarling, snapping their razor teeth, and making a horrible rasping sound with every breath. The muscles in my legs burn. The steady ache from my time being held prisoner weakened me beyond anything I've felt before. Though unsteady, I run toward the nearest carriage. Praying to the gods that it holds either my sister or Kait. When I think the coast is clear, I ease the door open. Empty. "Damn it." I curse. Running to the next, I stumble a little, my head still foggy. I lean against the side of the second, trying to catch my breath and steady my balance. The raspy breaths of a Raskin can be heard nearby, too close for comfort. I slowly peek around the back, coming face to face with one of the bat-nosed demon dogs. I jump back and roll under the carriage just as it snaps its razor-sharp teeth at my face. On the other side of the carriage, there is a downed soldier. I take the dagger from his ankle holster; the smaller blade better for close contact. Just as I roll back to where the Raskin was, it lunges with a snarl. I plunge the blade deep into its throat, cutting off the growl before it makes too much noise. Gold dust plumes into the air and blows away on a breeze. I drop my head back in disbelief.

“For fucks sake, that was close.” A male voice says as a shadow of a man towers over me. “I thought you were a goner. I’m glad to see that your training wasn’t for nothing.” He reaches out a gloved hand as he drops the hood of his cloak back with the other.

“Miles?” A laugh escapes me. “Thank the gods.” Relieved, I take his hand, and he helps me to my feet, putting an arm around me for support.

“Let’s get out of here. I have the girls already at the tree line with horses.”

“Thank fuck.” I grumble as we make our way to the treeline.

Words cannot even explain the emotions I feel when I see Kait and Mel up on a horse waiting for me and Miles. My chest is so tight, it’s at risk of cracking open. I honestly didn’t think I would see them again. Especially Kait, with the condition she was in when I last saw her, but there they are sitting atop a hazel mare, scared as hell, eyes wide, but alive. I’ll fucking take it. I will owe Miles until the day I die for this.

Two horses are waiting beside the girls. One black as night, and I recognize him immediately as Dax’s stallion, Alvis. A smile spreads across my face as I brush my hand along his powerful neck. “Hey, boy. It’s been too fucking long. Let’s get the hell out of here, yeah? Let’s find Dax.” Miles nods his head once at me as he takes the reins of the black and white mare just ahead of Alvis. I give him a small pat, then hoist myself into the saddle with much more effort than ever before.

We ride for a while in silence, not wanting to attract the attention of Raskin. After a few miles, Mel breaks the silence.

“Thank you, Miles.” She says this as she wipes tears from her dirt and blood-covered cheeks. Miles tucks his chin in a nod.

“I would do anything for you, sweet Melani. Your mother and father were great friends of mine, and if I had not come to look for you and your brothers, I would not be fulfilling my promise to always serve and protect you and the Ravendene name. Plus, you have always been my favorite.” He winks.

“Regardless of that, I also want to thank you, Miles. Without you, I’m not sure where we would be right now.” I add. He gives a curt nod to me as well. Kait’s not looking at anyone; her head hung and the hood of her cloak obscuring her face. I’m starting to get a little worried. Her physical wounds are healing now that we are within the Ravendene territory, but it’s the ones of her mind and what I can’t see that worries me most. What those men did to her in the caves before they brought her back to us... beaten so badly that she was almost unrecognizable. That kind of wound will take more than magic to

heal.

“Maybe we should stop at the lake up ahead? Water the horses and rest for a short while?” I ask the group. There is a yes and a nod from Mel and Miles, but again, nothing from Kait. “Kait? Are you doing okay?” I ask her.

“I’m well enough,” she says, barely audible. I don’t push her for more, though. We continue the ride, only the sound of the horse’s hooves in the dirt, puffs of their breathing, and the quiet sounds of the forest filling the silence.

As we reach the lake, I dismount first, bringing Alvis over to Miles so he can get them to the water. I then head over to Melani and Kait. I help Mel down and give her a little squeeze, placing a kiss atop her head, then send her over to Miles as well. I reach my hand up to Kait, and she hesitates to take it before she finally extends her arm to take my aid. She goes to turn away, but I catch her by the wrist.

“Please, Kait, will you talk to me?” My voice cracking on a whisper. She doesn’t turn to face me, but she doesn’t pull away either. I hold her hand as I stalk around her, but she refuses to lift her head. She flinches as I reach for the hood, but she allows me to drop it, keeping her face tilted to the ground. I bring my hand up, lifting her chin with two fingers, revealing her face to me.

Her eyes are closed, but I see what she has been trying to hide. A jagged pink and purple-hued raised scar cuts across her face, starting at the middle of her forehead. It slices through her right eye and down the side of her face down her neck, stopping just below her ear. Anger. Anger so rabid it boils within me. I know I can’t hold back my shift for long. A tremble works its way into my hand as I try. I manage to brush my thumb over the sensitive skin on her cheek. Leaning down, I whisper into her ear for only her to hear.

“If he still lives, he will be sorry he ever laid a hand on you. He will know many deaths before we are done with him. If there is anything that I can promise you, it is that. When the time does come for him to breathe his final breath, you will be the one who takes it from him. If that is what you wish.” She opens her eyes to look into mine and tears well there. “You are as beautiful as you are vicious, and what he has done to you changes nothing of that. A warrior wears their scars as a testament to their victories. *You* are a warrior, Kait.” A silent tear falls over the scar as she bites down on her lower lip, which has begun to tremble. I take a few steps back, and my eyes turn a molten copper as my large black and blue-hued feathered wings burst from my back and my face distorts into a sinister shadowed mask. I clap my wings once and burst into flight. I soar across the lake with my hands and arms

engulfed in the fire of my rage.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I'VE SPENT THE GREATER part of the day either running from or fighting off Raskin's, thanks to that asshole Trent. Luckily only a small fraction of them followed the carriage until the horse was eventually taken down. I used the distraction of most of them feeding on the poor bastard to run. When only a few followed, I ended them. I only wish I would have ended Trent when I had the bastard. Now I have to start this fucking thing from square one, and this time without the element of surprise. They can't hide forever. As soon as I get back to Ravendene, I will have a search party going after all of them, but this time I will make Trent watch while I peel all the layers of Kait back. My hands shake as frustration and anger try to overwhelm me. The quick in and out of my breaths makes my head spin, but my steps don't waver. I need to reach whatever village is closest as soon as possible, or else I risk running into another group of Raskin, and this time I'm not sure I would win with this amount of exhaustion weighing on me.

I'm not sure where I landed in the fallout of that cluster fuck of a prisoner transport. I decide to head east in hopes that whatever town or homestead I run into is familiar and has ties to either Ravendene or Demetrey. Both of which I could seek refuge in the name of. Little did Dax and his followers know that I have been working with the Demetrey territory for years, and until now everything was going to plan. The night is closing in, and just as

the last of the day's light settles on the road, I notice a stretch of farmland about a half mile up ahead. Lucky for me they will likely have a horse. Which, I would be taking for the rest of my trip back to Ravendene, though I may be closer to Demetrey, and if that is the case, I will be heading there to explain what happened and my plans to recover our assets.

I rapt my knuckles on the door of the quaint two-story farm home, but no one answers right away. Impatiently, I knock again, a little more forcefully. A female's voice comes from the other side.

"Hold on! Would you? Give me at least a second to get there before you break the damn door down." The door swings open, and a small, raven-haired woman stands in front of me. She couldn't be much younger than myself, and beautiful was an understatement. Her eyes are like warm honey, her skin is a light olive tone, and her hair flows down to her waist in soft waves. I stand there, lips parted, as I take in her beauty. Words are not forming in my brain.

"Umm... MA—PA? There is some cretin with drool on his chin at the door." She yells over her shoulder. My eyebrows pinch as I realize what she's said, and I wipe a hand over my mouth and chin. There was no such thing on my chin. I narrow my eyes at her, and she gives me a wicked little grin. "You wanna tell me why you've shown up at my front door? Looking like death ran over you just before dark? Or you wanna start with who the fuck you are and what the fuck you want?" She puts a hand on her hip and raises her eyebrows. The sass emanating from her brings a smirk to my face.

I clear my throat to speak, but the door opens wider as another female, older, but just as beautiful with the same honey-hued eyes and olive skin, but her raven hair was dusted with gray steps into view.

"Ambriel Amarose, please step aside and let the poor young man in. He's clearly had a rough go recently; by the looks of it, he could use some friendliness." She smiles warmly as the spitfire, Ambriel, rolls her eyes.

"He's clearly in need of something..." She says under her breath. However, I choose to ignore the brash daughter and greet the kind older woman who has invited me in.

"My apologies. You're right. I've found myself in a bit of a situation, and I'm in need of lodging and perhaps a horse to get; well, actually, I'm not sure where I am. The convoy I was with got broken up when we were attacked by Raskin's. I nearly didn't make it myself." I paste a troubled look on my face, and Ambriel narrows her eyes at me. I shift my attention into the house as the older woman puts her hand out to guide me into the kitchen.

“Names Marybeth, but you can call me Beth as everyone else does. Marybeth was my mother, and I’m nothing like the old hag. Thank the gods.” I take her hand, and she folds hers over top of mine, patting it placatingly. “You’ve landed yourself on the outskirts of Ravendene, just a few miles from the Loema borders.” She smiles warmly at me, then concern etches into her brow briefly before she lets out a quick laugh. “You’re just in time for supper. Why don’t you go upstairs and wash up? Ambriel will bring you up a change of clothes. The bathroom is well stocked. Use whatever you need. Just the second door on the left when you go up the stairs here.” She points in the direction of a narrow hallway, and I head in that direction. Being so close to Loema better not cause an issue for me on this side of Ravendene. I guess I got turned around at some point. I thought I was heading in the opposite direction. Fuck.

“I must thank you for your willingness to help a stranger. Your kindness won't go unpaid. My name is Cano, by the way, it's a pleasure to meet you, Beth.” I look at Ambriel and smile. “And you, Ambriel.” As I turn to leave the room, I don't miss how Ambriel rolls her eyes in my direction and quietly mocks my words. Once I start trekking up the stairs, I hear the gagging noise she lets out after her mocking. I have something she can gag on. Sinful images enter my mind with the thought, and I turn my gaze back over my shoulder as I top the stairs. She has her eyes narrowed on me. I wink and continue to the bathroom.

The bathroom is small, but it has what I need, and as I shower, washing the day away with pine-scented soap, my mind wonders. What am I going to do about the fucking Fornax siblings and Raelle? But that spitfire waiting downstairs... It's been too long since I have had a woman. Clearly. Before I know it, I'm fistfucking the length of my erection. Squeezing at the base and running my hand up and over the tip, then back down again. I think of those honey-hued eyes looking up at me, full lips parting for me, and that gagging she so kindly allowed me to hear, aiding my imagination. I imagine slamming my cock into her pretty mouth as I wrap that long black hair around my fist and make her choke all over it as I spill my seed down her feisty little throat. I grunt out my pleasure, muffling the sound on my shoulder as my release comes over me in waves, and the warm water washes away the evidence. A quick but loud knock at the door makes me jolt upright as my eyes snap in the direction of the door.

“Sorry to eh, interrupt...” She snorts. “I brought a towel and a change of



clothes for you. They may be slightly small, but it's what Pa has, so it will have to do for the night. Ma will wash up your dirty clothes tonight." She reaches down, bending at the hip and grabbing the disheveled pile I left on the floor. She keeps her back to me the whole time. I get a perfect view of her delicious backside, as her short tunic dress hides very little. Her skin looks buttery soft, and now I see that she has a littering of tattoos on her thighs and a few on her left arm.

"Thank you, I appre—"

"Don't thank me. I didn't want to do it, but Ma insisted. I'm just glad to know you won't spoil my dinner with the smell that was coming from you." She interjects.

"Noted," I respond blandly, cupping my manhood all the while.

"Enjoy... the rest of your... ehm...shower." She laughs as her eyes jump down to my hands. She winks before she shuts the door with a loud snap.

*Fuck.* I don't think I was loud, but the house is small. The embarrassment of her possibly hearing that I just worked myself over in her shower has heat rising to my cheeks as anger ripples through me. I am going to be the leader of the kingdom soon; she will be on her knees serving me eventually, one way or another. The thought brings a grin to my face as I turn the water off and wrap myself in the towel she brought.

The simple white tunic is snug, and the gray loose pants stop just above my ankles, but they fit well enough. I'm taller than most men, so it was inevitable. I'll be glad to eat and get on with my journey after a night's rest. I head down the narrow hallway and down the stairs that enter the small kitchen. The scent of fresh bread, roasted meat, and vegetables wafts to me as Beth moves around the kitchen, humming and banging cookware around. As I reach the bottom, an older gentleman walks through the back door carrying a large stack of wood. He pays me no mind, as he stalks past me without a word into the dining room, which is connected to the sitting room. Placing the logs in the fireplace, he reaches for kindling to start building the fire.

I approach him and say loudly, "Allow me to help." He sits back on his heels as his chin tilts up. I reach forward, and with a flick of my wrist and two fingers pointing at the logs, they ignite.

"Fire elemental," I tell him, a smirk playing on my lips. "Among other things."

"Henry." He grunts out. "Among other things..." I see where the charming personality his daughter has comes from. "Beth, is that food done

yet? I've worked up an appetite in the fields today and need to replenish if I'm going to be required to have small talk with the kimp." He calls out over his shoulder as he stands and brushes past me. I don't miss the insult. Confirming this is clearly where the daughter gets her indignant behavior.

"Oh, Henry, you big oaf. Stop the nonsense. Mr. Cano is a guest in this house, and the two of you will be on your best behavior from here on out. You understand?" She places a hand on her hip, much like her daughter did earlier, questioning me, looking at Henry, then at Ambriel.

"Scouts honor, Ma." Ambriel covers her heart sarcastically, facing her mother with a grimace. Her father just huffs what I believe is his agreement. This dinner should be fun. Ambriel walks past me and pulls out a chair. "Sit. Allow me to *serve* you." She says, lifting an eyebrow, a smirk rising from the corner of her lips. I accept the seat, giving her a flat smile in return.

Ambriel and Beth serve supper at the table and then sit to eat as well. I thank Beth, and we exchange idle small talk. Ambriel and Henry eat in silence for the most part. Henry grunts or snorts ever so often, and Ambriel only glares at me from where she sits across the table. The conversation eventually dies out, and it's Ambriel who breaks the silence.

"I'm going further into the Ravendene capital for the market. I was supposed to leave in three days, but if you need to leave tomorrow, I can leave early and stay at an inn for a couple of days. We only have one horse, so we can't loan him out to you, but I can give you a ride with the crop."

"I would appreciate that. My travels were halted abruptly due to the attack, and I do need to get back to the capital as soon as possible."

"Of course....General." Henry barks out roughly. His almost black eyes drill into me. I didn't mention what my title was to any of them, only my name being Cano. My eyebrows pinch, and I quirk one up at him.

"Have we met before?"

"I guess you could say that." is his only response before he stabs a small golden potato with his fork, lifting it and pointing it at me as he talks. "I believe it was your parents I knew, boy. However, that was many moons ago and best left in the past. You and Bri will leave tomorrow after breakfast. Get some sleep." He doesn't wait for me to respond. He shoves the potato into his mouth and stands, scraping his chair across the wood floor loudly, and slams it back into the table. He stomps his heavy boots up the stairs without another word.

"Sorry about Henry. He's a grumpy old man, and it gets the best of him

sometimes.” Beth says as she begins to clear the dishes from the table. She reaches for a plate in front of me, and I see ink peeking from her long sleeve. There is a tattoo on the inside of her wrist—the mark that was banned when the kingdom fell. Two wings with a horned moon at the center. This family was a friend to the crown before the kingdom fell. My gaze snaps to Beth, but she just smiles, not noticing where my gaze has snagged. Ambriel, however, is throwing daggers at me with her eyes, and I wonder if she saw my slight reaction to the mark. If she does, she doesn’t say anything but scrunches her nose at me in a sneer, then rolls her eyes and begins helping clear the table.

“Thank you, Beth, for your hospitality. If you don’t mind, I’d like to retire for the night. I had quite the journey, and if we are leaving early tomorrow, I’d like to get all the rest I can.” I tell her with a smile. I’d like to *retire* this bullshit polite act.

“Oh, sweet boy, of course. I will have your clothes all washed up and ready for you in the morning. You can sleep in the first room on the right. I’ve already made up the bed for you.”

“Ma—No.” Ambriel nearly shouts at her mother—a sadness etched into every line of her face.

“Nonsense, Ambriel. I won’t hear another word. The room has not been used in years. There is no reason Cano cannot sleep in it for one night.”

“No. He can sleep in my room. I don’t want anyone in Ric’s space. Please.” She begs.

“Bri, enough.” Her mother snaps, the first harsh tone I’ve heard from her since my arrival.

“I don’t mind where I sleep. If it makes Ambriel happy, I will sleep in her bed.” She didn’t miss the wink I shoot at her behind her mother’s back. “Really, it is no bother. I could sleep on the floor if needed. I’ve slept in less appealing places, believe me.” I smile as Beth turns to me.

“Very well. Ambriel, you will sleep in Ric’s room then. Cano, Bri’s room is the last door on the left. Breakfast will be at first light. This is a farm, and we rise before the sun.” She claps a hand on my shoulder and smiles wide, then walks to her daughter and hugs her tight. Ambriel may put off a spoiled, self-righteous façade, but there is a pain in her eyes when they reach mine over her mother’s shoulder. Something has to do with this Ric person who hasn’t slept in the room they have here for years. I’m glad to be traveling with Ambriel tomorrow because I have questions, and I’m going to get the answers.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MORNING HAS COME TOO soon. After Ma poked her head into Ric's room to wake me, I stretched out in his bed. His space has long lost his scent, but being near his things brings me back to a time when things were better. Ma won't come all the way into the room for more than a few minutes at a time. She says her heart can't take being surrounded by the memory of him. I understand her thoughts on it, but I personally would rather be surrounded and reminded of him than forget. I pad over to the chest of drawers on the far wall. The brisk morning air brings a pepper of gooseflesh to my skin as I pull open the top drawer. Alaric kept some of his trinkets and blades here. I pull out one of the small pairs of onyx knives and placed it on top of the dresser, along with a much larger onyx dagger with a blood-red ruby placed at the hilt. Though he was only my half-brother, we looked a lot alike. Raven-black hair with gold-flecked brown eyes, like Topaz, much like our mother. Pa was just as much his father as he was mine, in all ways but blood.

Ma and Pa never really talked about who Ric's actual father was. He said that he was a previous love who died. Pa stepped in when Ric was just a babe. I was born just two years later. Ric and I were best friends, living as we did. We didn't have much choice. Not really. Rural farming life will do that, but when the kingdom fell, Ma and Pa already had this land and home prepared for us. Ma and Pa didn't talk about times before the kingdom fell much, though I knew they were heavy participants in the war. I didn't ask too many questions, but often found Ma looking through an old chest of memories and crying. When Ric decided to join the regime, something broke

in Pa. His anger is almost always present, and he doesn't talk much. He immerses himself in his work on the farm. So much so that his body is riddled with the aches and pains of a hard life lived. Though I was proud of Alaric for choosing honor by enlisting in the regime, I sometimes wish he would have chosen differently. Chosen family.

We received word that he had been killed in an explosion in the tunnels of Demetrey four years ago. He was only a part of the Ravendene Regime one year before he was killed on duty. There is a quick knock at the door, and it starts to creak open, pulling me from my memories. I know who is there before he gets a chance to open the door a few inches. I run to it and place my hand up to stop it from opening any further.

"Um, no. You are not welcome here. What do you want?" I spit like venom.

"Your mother sent me up to tell you breakfast is ready," Cano says through gritted teeth. The thoughts coming through him are vile and repulsive. It's been so long since I've had a stranger in the house that I can read so vividly. When I'm out in public places, I do everything I can to block out the thoughts and emotions of others because it can be so overwhelming. At home, I normally don't need to because Ma and Pa have such strong mental shields up. They have been practicing them pretty much my whole life, and my mother even longer, because her mother was also a telepathic empath. There aren't many of us anymore, so it's not common for people to need barriers on their minds as they used to. I also have my own elemental gift, which neither of my parents expected because there are no known elementals in our family lines unless Grandma had a secret she never shared, but nonetheless, I have an affinity for air.

Cano tries pushing the door further open, but I use my air magic with just a wave of my hand, and the door slams shut, effectively keeping him out of the room. I hear him laugh on the other side of the door. "Strong, too, huh." He laughs again and walks away. Something about him feels off. Most of his thoughts when he is around me are about how he wants to defile me in one way or another. He has so many thoughts about my ass and mouth that a disgusted shudder rolls through me. He's a good-looking man, but I am much more inclined to be attracted to someone who has a beautiful mind with a hint of humor and a dash of sarcasm, not his shallow and angry one. That ship sank the moment he knocked on our front door, and I got a read on his thoughts and emotions.

What he was thinking when he knocked on our front door is precisely why I decided that this was my calling. The people he wants to hunt down, harm... I am meant to help. I felt it deep in my soul. Raelle, whoever she is. As soon as he thought of her, it was like a thread of awareness was pulled taut. Something I never knew was there before, and now I felt it pulling me to her. I needed to find out what I could from Cano, ditch the prick, and find her. Help her.

I grab the blades from the dresser, strapping the dagger to a holster across my chest under a vest to conceal it, and slide the twin knives into their sheaths, one in each boot. I step back, looking into the long mirror in the corner of the room. I feel a warmth settle in my chest where my brother's weapon lies against my heart. "I feel like I have you with me for protection now, Ric." I look myself in the eyes with a rueful smile, then turn, leaving the room and the memories of a life once lived.



After dressing for the trip to market, I pad down the narrow corridor and stop at the top of the stairs. I pivot to look back down the hall, with doors on each side and a small window at the very end, and sadness rolls over me. Something tells me it is going to either be a long time before I return, or I won't ever return to this place. I take a deep breath, and while I feel the sadness, I meet it with determination, and that feels right. This is the path I was meant for.

I adjust the knife at my boot and check the sheathed dagger at my chest to ensure everything is secured, then I walk down the stairs and sit at the table where Cano is already seated. I send a sarcastic grin in his direction with a

small shake of my head that tells him my dislike for him is still present, and then Ma sets a plate down in front of each of us.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to say a blessing over both of you before you leave,” she tells us. I look up at her brows pinched, and it's times like this when I wish I could penetrate her mental block. I go to the market nearly every month, and alone at that. She never wants to send me away with a blessing... Something is up.

“How very kind of you. I would love to accept such a gift; thank you,” Cano purrs to her. Such a bootlicker. I almost refused, but her thoughts suddenly burst into my head as she dropped her mental shield to speak to me only.

*“Listen carefully, Bri. He is not who he claims. Cano is the son of Soren and Carmine Croix. He pretends he is the leader of Ravendene, but he is not of the Ravendene line. The Ravendene line still lives. I had a vision last night, sweet girl. You will help reunite the kingdom. Seek out the Raven and Moon.”*

Ma placed her hand on Cano’s shoulder, her barrier snapping back into place.

“Gods, please deliver this man where he is destined, allow those who seek the darkness to parish around him, and bless him with what he deserves.” She dips her chin and smiles at him, but I know the words she spoke had a double meaning. She then turns and lays her hands on me. She makes eye contact with me while she says the prayer.

“Gods, guide my daughter by the light of the moon and the warmth of the sun. Let her gain wealth on this journey, then return her home so we can bless the lands once more.” Another double edge to her words.

I do something that I have not done in years. It's easier to pass the barrier in her mind when I'm pushing my own thoughts. I reach out with my power to communicate telepathically, and as my consciousness enters hers through a smoky wall, I speak to only her.

*“I won’t let you down, Ma. I felt the pull the moment I got a read on Cano. I know what must be done. I love you. Tell Pa.”* She pulls me into a tight hug and then pushes me out at arm's length.

“Keep your smart mouth to yourself on your travels. I don't want it to get you into trouble. You’re just like your father.” She laughs with a wide smile, but I see the pain in her eyes saying this goodbye without getting to say the one she wishes.

Cano says his thanks again as we both step out the door. Pa was already in the fields working and didn't see us off. I know the cause is likely not wanting to face the pain of saying goodbye to another child. His heart is still broken from Ric. It makes me sad to think I won't see him again for a long time, or ever. Regardless, I know he will be proud of me wherever destiny takes me. He understands that sometimes we are guided by the gods, and even if we push that call away, it has a way of finding us. I managed to avoid speaking to Cano for most of the time we were loading the carriage. Though, I feel his eyes on me the whole time. I am, however, grateful that the only thoughts I get from him are about the need to return to Ravendene and get word to Demetrey, aside from the few nefarious ones about me. I shut him out for a while, so I don't lose my breakfast.

"The ride to the Ravendene capital is a day's travel. We should arrive just before nightfall," Cano tells me.

"Well aware." I side-eye him as we ride side-by-side on the seat of the carriage. He takes a deep breath, "I will set you up with lodging once we arrive. As payment for your family's hospitality when I found myself in a situation of need," he says flatly. I don't respond.

The bumpy road and squeaking wheel are the only things I focus on for at least an hour. He doesn't say anything, and I have not opened my senses up to read him either. I sneak a glance in his direction. He might as well be asleep with how relaxed he looks. The arrogance radiates off him.

"So, do you think any of the others in your convoy made it to safety after the Raskin attack?" I ask, trying to prod information out of him, whether that be words or thoughts, I didn't care. He sucks on his teeth, as his eyes slowly make their way to meet mine.

"One could only hope." He purses his lips and then continues looking ahead. Digging into his brain it will be then...I open myself up to his thoughts only enough to let him reach me, and not the other way around. There is an anger in him that is almost tangible, rippling in a constant wave, but there is also uncertainty. He's worried about what the leader of Demetrey Territory will think of his shortcomings, seeing that he has lost the precious cargo. Trying to get more, I ask him another question.

"What was the convoy for?" I get an immediate response from his mind.

*"That fucking prick Trent and his whore Kait. Next time I see them, I won't hesitate to burn them to a crisp or cut their fucking heads off"* However, that colorful response is kept in his head as he speaks.



“Classified information, darling.”

“Ambriel, thank you.” I spit at him. Pet names are a hell no, and nicknames are only reserved for family or friends, of which we are neither. “Look, we don't have to talk. I just thought that since we are on the road for the time being, I would ask about your business since I'm sure you don't want to hear about my farming routines.” I roll my eyes and adjust myself on the seat as I look anywhere else but at him.

“You look, I'm not used to anyone asking me questions in regard to my affairs. I run the show, and there are no questions asked for the most part. There is no small talk in my line of work.” He pauses briefly, and I get a glimpse of his thoughts. *“Only Dax ever questioned me, and hopefully he is dead and Raelle captured by now.”* The vision of a raven black as night with molten copper eyes flashes to life in my head, and I swallow hard, choking on the air I inhaled in too quickly. I try to cover it with a cough. He doesn't notice the slight nervous energy developing in my gut at what I heard in his mind that conjured a vision. Dax has to be the raven my mother spoke of.

“I'm sorry,” I say softly. Perhaps I will try another tactic to get the information I seek.

Shock vibrates off of him. Sneaking a glance his way, his brows are furrowed deep in thought, so I listen in again. *“No one is ever actually sorry, but Dax will be for what he did. I will murder every last one of them, and I will take what I'm owed. I will find all of them and destroy them before anyone finds out the truth I hold. Ravendene will become one with Demetrey, and we will take over Loema, Lesa, and the wastelands. The kingdom of Aldramani will once again be whole and under MY rule. King. Elenora Demetrey, my queen, as agreed. We will burn the kingdom to the ground if anyone tries to stop us.”*

A shiver creeps over my skin that I can't stop. I must find Raelle before Cano.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“THE JOURNEY TO LOEMA from the manor is about a two-day ride,” he says as he helps me to the saddle.

The family who takes care of the manor only had one horse to spare for our journey, but I'm thankful. If we had to go by foot, it would likely take double the time to arrive at our destination. The proximity to Dax causes my breath to catch as he settles into the saddle behind me; it's both distracting and calming. As his warm body presses into my back and cups my ass with his lap, my mind races with dirty thoughts. The indecent things we did within the manor were left there as we began our travels, though. Dax, being the soldier he is, is on high alert as we move through the heavily wooded area.

The sun is bright, and flashes of it break through the canopy of pines as we make our trek through the dense forest. The horse has to work hard in some areas where storms have caused trees to fall and large areas of water to collect. The muddy ground is thick with debris. We ride silently for a few hours, but as the trees begin to clear, the sun beats down on us. My skin warms under the cloak the further we escape the canopy cover.

There has been no sign of anyone trailing us, and the only thing I've

noticed around is the rustle of leaves when a rabbit hopped out of the trail we were on. Dax shifts behind me, reaching around, and wraps an arm around my waist. His hand finds its way under the cloak, and he splays it across my stomach. Then he dips his chin, his mouth brushing against my ear.

“We’ll stop just up ahead to let the horse rest and so we can stretch our legs,” he says, laying a kiss on my cheek that flushes on command at his touch. While I don't know how to react to Dax just yet, my body has no such issue. We reach a clearing with a small stream at the edge. Dax dismounts and helps me to my feet.

“Do you think Trent is ok? Would Cano hurt him? Or Kait?” I ask as he ties the horse to a tree near the water.

“I believe he would hurt them, yes, and if he has them captured, I think he has hurt them badly.” Concern etches into his forehead. “We will get them back, love. We will put together a team when we reach Loema. They will aid us in taking back Ravendene as well. It won’t be difficult to take Ravendene back from Cano. I know that as a fact. He has a smaller group of loyal guardsmen, but for the majority, they are loyal to me.” He saunters back to where I stand and lifts his hand, clasp my throat. “I just worry about what he has up his sleeve; he’s been very secretive over the last few years, intentionally leaving me out of missions outside of Ravendene.” He releases the hook of my cloak, brushing it off of my shoulders and folding it over his arm. “I fear that he has tied himself to the evil in Demetrey somehow.”

*Gods.* I feel so bad for leaving Trent and Kait, but I know that they did it so I could get to Dax. Save him from the curse that plagued him. Seeing him before the cure took effect. I knew that if I had not been transported by the magic of the gods, I would not have made it in time. He didn’t have much time left. I wondered how he came to be cursed in the first place. I know he was looking for Mel, but I didn’t know any details about how he was cursed, or if I did, I didn’t remember. His fingertips trail a path across the thin fabric of my tunic, sending a shudder through me.

“I have a question,” My voice comes on a slow exhale.

“You can ask me anything.” He blinks, then scans the forest. His movements languid as his hand falls away from my body and his gaze returns to mine.

“How did you become cursed? Were you just sleeping during all that time? Were you aware of anything?” His shoulders tense for only a moment before they relax again and heat rises up my neck as a blush rushes across my

face.

“That is more than one question.” He laughs. “I’m not sure how I found myself cursed exactly, but I was in a state of sleep, I guess you could say. My body was in a deep sleep and deteriorating rapidly but my awareness was not. I was able to project my shifts into a raven and see you for parts of your journey,” His eyes flick across my face. “ I saw that you were looking for what was needed for the elixir. Parts of the journey you had to take to get it.” His hand brushes mine. “However, that’s not the only time I felt aware. There were times when people were near my physical body, and I could sense or hear them. I think it was Cano who put the curse on me, or he was working with the one who did.” His eyebrows pinch, and he rubs his fingers from the bridge of his straight nose to his hairline. “He visited me a few times—my body, I mean. The things he said.... It makes me believe he planned this.”

“Are you ok?” I ask him.

“I’m ok. Just...There’s more. I was waiting for the right time to talk to you about the rest. I guess now is as good a time as any.” A lopsided smile tugs at his lips before he grabs my hand, slowly pulling me into him. “There were dreams. Vivid dreams. I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and I think it may have been a vision, and I keep thinking it’s about you, Raelle. I’m not sure exactly, but I have a sense that it is.” He presses me into his chest, my hand clasped between our bodies. My eyes track from my hand, and I lift my chin to meet his gaze, my brows stitched together as I think about that information.

“A prophecy?” I know there have been prophecies in the past. My mother, being a seer, has seen something akin to them, but I have never known anyone without the gift of sight to see a prophecy. That doesn't mean it isn't possible.

“I'm not sure.” He shakes his head.

“What—what was it?” I ask, unsure if I'm ready to hear it. His eyebrows raise as he takes a contemplative breath and blows it out. Taking a step back, he begins to pace.

“I don’t think I could ever forget it. Each word seemed to sear into my brain.” His eyes sweep back and forth around us as though he’s making sure we are alone before his eyes lock to mine.

*“Blood red skies meet the dark depths of the sea; a storm will bring together those worthy. The last of the fallen will ascend when the moon meets the sun. An unbreakable bond is sealed when the daughter of the moon bleeds*

*by a blade of silver light. A stone of white weeps red, and what has fallen will rise again.*”

It hits me like a punch in the gut as the words tumble from his lips. I was right; it has to be a prophecy, and some of it has already taken place.

“Dax... this...I don't think this is just about me. It's us, and some of it has already come to pass.” We stare at each other for a moment. I can tell he is deep in thought, as am I. “I don't know what all of it could mean, though. Do you? I don't see how it could be related to us entirely. I know we bonded, but...” I trail off as my eyebrows stitch together, and I rack my brain. He rubs his fingers through the scruff on his chin, thinking about it before he responds.

“I'm not sure, to be honest with you, but it could be...Since you have yet to ascend, it could mean that you will ascend on the solar eclipse that is happening in a fortnight, but I don't know what it means by the last of the fallen?”

“I'm the last of my line, Dax. You could be right.”

“I don't know, but when we get to Loema, there is a seer who we can speak with. Maybe there have been others who have been gifted this prophecy. Perhaps she can give insight into all of it. It can't mean nothing.” I agree with him, but I also worry about bringing someone unknown into this. I feel apprehensive about trusting too many people after knowing I was betrayed by Cano, even though I don't remember what our relationship was like before. Not to mention the mystery that still eats at me about my family's deaths. Not having my memories is making my trust issues grow deeper.

“I think the biggest question I have is; what could it mean about *what has fallen will rise again?*” We are both silent for a few moments as we think that over. Dax ambles over to the horse, and as he unties the reins from the tree, he looks over his shoulder.

“We better get moving.”

As we continue our journey, I continually sneak glimpses of Dax's pensive stare out of the corner of my eye. I can practically see his gears turning over all the information we discussed. I couldn't say anything though; it has been close to the only thing on my mind since we discussed it too. My main question is, why? Why would I be a part of a prophecy? What does it all mean? I wish my mom was still around to talk to. She would have more insight about things like this, and I wouldn't have to seek answers from a stranger. If this is a prophecy truly regarding me and possibly Dax, from what

I can tell, then we will know if I come to ascend during the solar eclipse. A fortnight isn't long.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WE TRAVEL WITHOUT INTERRUPTION, only resting in the darkest hours of the night when the predators are more likely to hunt moving prey. I'm relieved the sun has risen and we are less likely to be attacked by prowling beasts, though the threat is not completely absolved by the light of day. Needless to say, I'm ready to reach Loema. We can devise a plan to get Trent and the others back and attempt to get some answers.

I notice the trees are beginning to thin out again as we crest the hill leading to Loema. With the beautiful colors of the sunset painting the sky hues of orange, pink, and blue, nerves begin taking root in my stomach as we get closer. Meeting more people whom I don't know or don't know if I've met them in the last year. Thinking about our journey brings another question to mind for Dax.

"Why didn't you just fly us into Loema?" I ask as I look over my shoulder at him.

"That was random," Dax chuckles, and the deep roll of it sends my thoughts back to the morning when he laughed into the sensitive flesh between my legs. A blush creeps up my neck, and I clear my throat.

“I was just thinking about our journey from the manor to Loema and how it was good that we didn’t see any of Cano’s men or creatures like Raskin. It made me wonder why we didn’t fly, though. I assume it would be quicker.” I wish I could fly. I also wondered what exactly Dax was—fully shifted. He’d only had wings, black with an opalescent navy sheen, like an oil spill. They were so beautiful the one time I’d seen them, but I was also so distracted by the mere fact that I was flying that I didn’t really get to fully take them in.

“We didn’t fly because that is what Cano would expect. He has other shifters who would be able to catch up to us in the sky. We needed the canopy of the trees to cover us from those who could see us. As for not seeing creatures, that was pure luck.” His smile widens, causing the dimple in his cheek to appear. My stomach flips, and the hum in my chest becomes a throb that sinks to my core.

“Makes sense.” I choke out, and his chuckle rolls through me again. Lifting his hand, he points in the direction we are heading.

“Welcome to Loema.” He brings his hand down and gently rubs the upper part of my arm in a comforting way. We dismount our horse and decide to walk the rest of the distance.

“I know this place. I know I’ve been here; I remember coming here with my mother not long before she died and maybe a couple of times as a small child.” Perhaps I could get answers for more than just the prophecy here. Maybe I could get answers about my family too. There was a woman that my mother would meet here every year, but prior to her death, she’d brought me with her. Loema was as beautiful now as it was all those years ago, and right now, looking at it from a distance with the beautiful early fall sunset colors of orange and pink behind the opulent buildings of the darkest stone, it takes my breath away. I would remember this city on account of its beauty alone.

As we close the distance, I feel a ripple in the air around us, and then we are greeted with enticing scents wafting toward us from the different cottages and buildings. There is no wall that I can see protecting the city, but the ripple I felt was surely a protection barrier, and as we step into the street, we are greeted by a legion of soldiers who block our path before we make it past even one cottage or store.

“HALT. Announce yourself and your business in Loema.” A large soldier with golden-brown skin and black-as-night leather body armor steps up to the front line of the soldiers dressed the same. Each one with deadly-looking curved blades at their hips and shields that looked to be as sharp around the



edges as the blades themselves.

“Stand down.” A male voice calls from behind the line of soldiers. A wide smile spreads across Dax’s face.

“No fucking way.” I hear Dax say as the soldiers split to allow the male through, and Dax laughs, holding his arms wide open. “Cousin.” Dax’s smile is breathtaking as I bask in the glow of it, distracting me. The male surprises me as he makes a quick stride to reach Dax. He has the same wide smile on his face as they embrace each other in a powerful hug, slapping each other on the back and laughing loudly.

“I never thought I’d see the day when you would show your face here in Loema again, cousin. It’s so great to see you! Come! You’re just in time for supper,” he says as he turns to move back the way he came, but his eyes snag on me standing at the horse’s lead, stroking his powerful neck. “My apologies; I see you have not arrived alone. Who is your companion, Dax?”

Before Dax is able to introduce me, I drop the rein and step forward. I nod my head at him. “My name is Raelle. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He inclines his head back toward me.

“The pleasure is all mine, Raelle. Please call me Maki.” He smiles warmly, then extends his hand, sweeping out toward the direction he came from. “Please, both of you, join us for supper. There is much to catch up on. Pascal, please take care that my cousins’ things are taken to a room in the east wing, the nicest room available, and his companion a joining room.”

“That won’t be necessary. One room will suffice.” Dax cuts in. Maki raises an eyebrow at him but agrees. Without further discussion, the guard begins leading the horse to the stables as we make our way to the castle.

“Perhaps we could have a moment to clean up before dinner, Maki?” Dax asks.

“Oh yes, of course. What was I thinking? Your journey must have been long, coming all the way from Ravendene. Please. Let me have one of the handmaids show you to your room.” Just as he says the words, a beautiful woman with dark brown hair and blue eyes comes around the corner with a stack of linens in her arms. She is dressed in beautiful gauzy pants and a cropped shirt combination, showing much of her ivory skin. It seems pretty risqué for a handmaid, but perhaps with the warmth of Loema, even as the sun sets, I could see how this attire makes sense.

“Ah, Naza,” He places a hand on her low back. “Please see to it that Dax and Miss Raelle are shown to the best suite in the east wing and get them

anything they need in the meantime. They are our most valued guests until their departure.” She bends into a half bow at Maki and says nothing but turns to lead us down a long colonnade, the pillars on either side of the stunning dark stone a stark contrast to the beautiful greenery around the building.

Once we get about halfway down the colonnade, we turn to the right and enter the castle through an archway that leads us into an atrium, which must be the heart of the castle. There are many arches, like the one we just entered, surrounding the vast space. I look around in awe at the plants and flowers that grow throughout the space. The walls and pillars sprawl three stories tall, and the top is open to the elements. The sky turns a deeper purple tone as the sun finally sets for the night. I stumble slightly as I take it all in, and I’m caught quickly by strong arms. Dax braces me for a moment, then releases me just as quickly. I give him a shy smile, and he returns it, slipping his rough hand into mine. The warmth of his palm against mine causes the butterflies in my stomach to take flight again.

Naza smiles as she watches the exchange between us. She guides us to a staircase and gestures with one hand for us to head up. She follows behind, linens still in hand. When we reach the top of the stairs, there are only three doors in the anteroom, along with a sitting area and a small selection of books. There are multiple rugs laid out on the brick floors and plants hanging in the corner by the large window at the center. Two doors to the left and one to the right. Naza opens one of the double-arched doors on the left. The bed chamber is exquisite and bright; white gauzy curtains flow into the room on a breeze from the open windows. The bed is made with white linen to match, and beautiful sapphire accents are sprinkled through the large bedroom. The door to the right of the antechamber, another arched doorway, leads to a bathing chamber, and from what I can see, it's just as lavish as everything else I've seen thus far.

Naza walks into the ensuite and places the linens she was carrying in a drawer.

“I’ve placed bathing towels in the drawer for you. While you clean up, I will gather your belongings and bring them to you. Shall I have some clothing sent up for you as well, or do you have dinner attire with your belongings?” She asks, her focus on Dax.

“That is very kind of you. Please, if you would. We did not come prepared for a formal dinner.” Dax tells her politely. The way he has been behaving

doesn't add up to how Trent described him as an asshole.

"Absolutely. Everything will be brought up for you with haste."

When we were alone, I finally let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. I step into the massive ensuite and decided that a bath would be amazing right now. My muscles are sore from the two-day ride, and I couldn't fathom standing for a shower at the moment. I turn the knob for hot water and add some of the mint-scented salts that are in little jars by the edge of the bath. As well as some oils and light one of the candles. Afterward, I look over my shoulder to see where Dax had gotten off to. I find him standing by the large window in the bedroom with a glass of whiskey in hand. As if he senses my gaze on him, he spins as I enter the room.

"I'm running a bath," I tell him.

"I see that." He grins. "Would you like a drink?"

"I think a drink would be nice. I'll have what you're having." I smiled back at him.

"You don't want to just steal mine?" A blush explodes across my skin at the memory of when I did just that and what followed. He chuckles, turning to the bar to get a drink for me.

When he does, I hurry back to the bathtub, strip the dirty clothes from our travels, leaving them in a heap on the floor, and drop into the bathtub, nearly scalding my skin clean off. The heated water hurt, but only at first. As I settle into the bath, the warmth settles over me and soothes the aches and pains from the days prior. The salts created bubbles in the water that covered me up from Dax seeing too much—not that he hadn't seen me bare just a couple of days before, but this was so new to me that I still feel a shyness around him. I let my hair fall free from the braid I kept it in and dip my head back into the water before fully submerging myself under the fragrant bubbles.

When I resurface, Dax sits on the edge of the bath, two whiskeys in his hands. He gives me a coy smile and extends a whiskey out without a word. I give him a flirty smirk and sink a little deeper into the water. He returns to standing, setting his whiskey glass on the counter by the double sinks, and removes his shirt. The corded muscles of his back flex with each movement. My breath catches at the sight of him. In the next motion, his pants fall to the ground around his ankles, a whole lot of beautifully tanned skin on display.

Instant heat rises to my face, and I sink back under the water before he can turn and see it. I hear his rough laugh from under the water. Mortified, I stay under until I can no longer hold my breath, and pins and needles poke at my

lungs with the need to expand. What did he plan to do? Join me in the bath? When I finally resurface, he has stepped into the large walk-in shower, which I have a direct view of from the bathtub, and he's lathering soap all over his very muscular, very large, and... very naked body. *Gods.*

"Love, if you bite that lip any harder, you may just bite it off, and I for one would be very sad to lose that pouty bottom lip of yours because I rather like biting it myself." He smiles, his dimple on show, as he rinses the suds from his body, then gets out of the shower, wrapping a towel around himself. He shakes water from his dark hair, the droplets spraying all around him.

He laughs darkly as he swaggers over to the bath, where I lay frozen.

"May I?" He gestures to the shampoo. I can't manage to make words come out of my mouth, but I nod. He washes my hair for me and applies conditioner. When he's done, I sink back into the water to rinse everything off, and when I resurface, he has a towel outstretched for me. Standing, his eyes flick over my naked body as the bubbles and water roll over my exposed flesh. His gaze is heated as I take the fluffy white cloud of a towel and wrap myself up in it.

"I'd love to have a replay of the last time I had you wrapped in a towel, but I think we should hurry and dress for dinner. My cousin doesn't fare well when he must wait to eat." He brushes his knuckles across my cheek, then leads me to the bedroom and starts to dress.

"Your dress is hanging by the window, love. I will be in the antechamber waiting for you. He places a hand on the back of my neck and pulls me in close, placing a soft kiss on my temple. "In a roundabout way, I believe this is our first date." He strides away and looks over his shoulder with a grin dancing on his lips as he steps through the door, shutting it behind him with a soft click.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

I CATCH AN UPDRAFT as I fly across the water, using it to sail further from the reality I've found myself trapped in. I just need a minute alone to blow off steam. The flames have dissipated, though the anger remains. I land with a soft thump, the ground below my feet a thick mud from where the lake has receded. I let out a huff as my shoulders slump, and I unfurrow, then fold in my wings so they hang at my back.

I know I want my revenge on Cano for what he's done to me, my sister, and Kait more than anything, but I know we also need to find Dax and Rae. It makes me sick not knowing if Rae made it to Dax in time to break the curse or if she did if they were able to get away from Cano and his men before he got back to Ravendene. The more I think about it, the more I know in my heart that Dax is still alive. There has been no power transfer. I would have felt it, especially with a power such as his.

I plop down on a large boulder with a grunt, run my hand through my shoulder-length brown hair, and tie it at the nape of my neck with a leather band. Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, the wet earth and sweet scent of the grass nearby is calming, steadying my racing heart after the anger-

filled flight here. I didn't allow my mind to wander on my way here. Flying is my reprieve. When I'm in a rage, I only push myself to fly hard and fast to take the edge off the anger pulsing through me. Now is the time to think. Plan.

At least we are on Ravendene soil, so I know that Kait is healing at a rapid pace. Her physical pain is long gone, but the emotional pain and the damage to her face will probably follow her for the rest of her life. The thought brings a rise in my anger and heat to my limbs once again. Everything that Cano has done eats at me; anger festers and seeps from my every thought. Cano will pay for what he's done to us, to Kait. I know I need to think of something different at this moment, or else the rampant rage is just going to return tenfold, and all of this calming shit would be for nothing. I mentally tell myself to breathe. In.... out...each breath releasing the tension from my shoulders.

We are going the wrong way. I feel it in my gut. Cano will expect us to return to the capital of Ravendene, and will be waiting for us there. Also, we have to expect that if Rae got to Dax, they would have escaped Cano, running away from Ravendene. *Where would you go, Dax?* I tap my temple, trying to find the answer there. Gods, I hope they are both okay. I stiffen as I hear a rustling in the brush to my right, but I don't turn right away, waiting to see if whatever it is gets closer. I slowly pull the blade that is sheathed at my ankle, and when I feel the presence of someone or something close enough, I lunge to my right for a tackle. In an instant, I'm holding the blade to a silver-gray wolf's neck, about to make the kill.

"Fuck. Don't sneak up on people like that old man." I laugh as I sheath the knife, releasing the wolf. There is a shimmer of magic, and then Miles, in human form, is standing in front of me naked as hell. "Bro, cover your junk at least." I groan, turning away from him.

"Kait is worried about you. I told her I would hunt you down and bring you back. It's time we head out anyway." He ignores my request for junk coverage. Fucking wolves.

"I know, and I'm sorry that I'm worrying her, but I needed a minute to clear my head. My anger was getting the best of me, and I wouldn't be of help to anyone with that kind of fire building in me. You know that. Plus, it's been good for me. I figured out we were heading in the wrong direction. I think we need to go to Loema or the Fornax manor house, at the very least. Dax would have gone to one of those places for refuge after running from

Ravendene. I'm sure of it, and we need to find Dax before we do anything regarding revenge on Cano."

"You're right." He looks at me with a grin on his face, and I roll my eyes at him.

"Of course, I'm right." A grin pulling my lips up at the corner. "Now shift back into your wolf, and let's get back to the girls. I think I've seen enough of your saggy man meat." I shoot a glare in his direction, then extend my wings to propel myself into the air. A chuckle escapes as I look down at him right as he shifts back into his wolf form. He lets a few barks out, and I smile, knowing he's either laughing too or cursing me out. "Last one back to—" Shit. Just ahead of us, I see about five Raskins heading toward where we left Kait and Mel. "Miles! Get to the girls fast! Raskin's!" I don't wait to see if he hears me. I beat my wings as hard as I can, propelling myself forward to intercept as many of them as I can. Just before the first of them reaches Kait, I drop from the sky in front of it, swiping my dagger out and plunging it into the Raskin's chest, gold dust bursting around me in a cloud of rotten stench. Kait, who was resting at the base of a large pine, hops up in an instant, ready for a fight. She spins with a short sword, slicing into the neck of the next Raskin just in time as it blasts into the clearing.

"That's my girl!" I laugh as I sweep my leg out, taking down another Raskin and pushing my dagger right into the son of a bitch's eye.

"Trent!" Kait calls to me just in time. I duck, and Miles comes lunging into the fray; he grabs a Raskin out of mid-air. With his massive canine teeth clamping down, he rips the throat out in the next movement. Gold dust explodes around him as he drops to the ground.

"Fuck yes!" I bellow, but I celebrate a moment too soon. A Raskin I didn't see comes out of nowhere, clamping its razor-sharp teeth down on my left shoulder. I scream in agony, but the Raskin thrashes, pulling me to the ground. Then its jaw goes slack, and it releases my shoulder. Kait stands over me and she screams at Miles to help. She tries to peel the Raskin off of me, but the fucker is big, and she can't quite manage on her own. My head feels foggy, and I look down at my shoulder and the blood pissing out of the gashes there. My brain catches up to real-time; the Raskin isn't dead if its body is still here. Just as the thought enters my mind, it rears up and tries to clamp down on me again. I swing my other arm up just before it does, and sink my dagger deep into his brain from under his chin. Gold dust plumes around us, and Kait falls to her knees at my side, pressing her hands into the

wound. I don't feel it. I don't feel anything. All I see is Kait screaming for help.



“Wake up, kid. Can you hear me, Trent?” Miles says as he slaps me on the cheek repeatedly. A moan escapes me as I try to answer incoherently. “I know it hurts; I’ve been bit by those fuckers too, and it’s no fun thing, but we need to be on the move now. We let you rest as long as we could, but Cano’s men could be the next fun group of assholes we have to deal with, and I don’t think you’ll be up for a fight any time soon.” He grabs my good shoulder and starts pulling me up to sit. “Hey, at least it’s your shoulder and not your legs.” He slaps me a few more times.

“Okay—I’m getting up, st—stop.” I stammer.

Opening my eyes is the hardest thing I’ve ever done, like they are filled with grit. I didn’t know Raskin’s had venom they injected when they bit someone. I feel like I’m the most hungover I’ve ever been. Fucking hell. I roll to my good side, using my elbow to prop myself up. I lose the contents of my stomach. Little that was there. Spitting, I get my eyes to function, and I take in the sight that is me. They’ve created a sling for my left arm to help stabilize it, but it’s not my arm that is bothering me. It’s my head. The ground feels like it’s tipping, and I’m going to start sliding at any moment. It makes my stomach lurch again.

“Here. Drink.” Miles hands me a canteen, and I take it graciously.

“How long was I out?” My voice is gravelly as I choke on the water.

“Only a few hours; unfortunately, that’s all we could allow, son. You’re strong, you can get moving, and the venom will work its way out of you



along the way. I figure we skip the manor and head straight for Loema. From where we are, we should make it there in about two days if we're steady. Wha'd ya think?" I think I would rather go back to fucking sleep.

I shrug out of habit and immediately regret it, as it sends a shooting, then throbbing pain throughout my shoulder, arm, and neck. My eyebrows knit together, and I take a sharp breath in pain and look around for Kait. I don't see her. "Where is Kait? And Mel?"

"She's up ahead, Melani too. I told her I would wake you and we would catch up with her. She's a tough girl. She wrapped you up well and scouted the area for more Raskin. Said she couldn't sit still. I could tell she was eaten up with worry for you. Let's catch up to them and find your brother."

"Wait. Mel. Where was she during the fight? Is she okay?" Panic rears up in me quickly.

"Woah, she's fine. son. Take a breath." He places a hand on my back to steady me. "The girl was up a tree the whole time during the attack. She's safe. She is with Kait now. Come on, up you get." Miles says with a grunt as he helps me to unsteady feet.

Miles goes under one shoulder as I begin to hobble my way down the trail back into the forest, and we catch up with Mel and Kait within the hour. Each step I take is stronger than the last. As soon as Mel sees me, she runs and wraps her frail arms around my waist. I hug her back with one arm bending down, and I kiss the top of her head. I'm so glad to have my baby sister back. It makes my chest tight. She still has said little of the time she was Cano's prisoner, but I don't want to push for too much too soon. Kait looks over the slow-healing wound on my shoulder, the whole time trying to hide her face from view. I wish she wouldn't, but I know she will need to come to terms with the scarring on her own. I know there isn't much anyone else can say or do to help with that, other than getting revenge on Cano, maybe. When she's done fussing over me, we continue our journey.

I don't know about the others, but I heard things when we were being held. Nothing directly out of Cano's mouth, of course. He was careful not to disclose too much in front of me. His men, though, were not as keen to keep their mouths shut. Cano has plans to overthrow the other territory leaders and rebuild the kingdom as the sole ruler. If Dax had known, he would have never relinquished his role as Ravendene's Lord. He will stand up for Ravendene and our people if he's alive. I have to believe that he survived. Cano's words flash into my mind. *Have you felt the power transfer yet?* Had

I? The men in Cano's favor talked frequently of a female whose power was unmatched, and Cano planned on using her to get what he wanted. There was no mention of a name, unfortunately.

After only a few hours of walking, the night begins creeping in on us, and we are forced to hunker down where we are to wait out the darkness. It's not just Raskin and Cano we have to worry about in these woods, and at night, many of the beasts will be on the prowl. It's best to stay quiet and still during the night. We will rise before the sun and be in Loema by dinner time. So, for now, we take turns sleeping and keeping watch.

The girls fall asleep quickly, and Miles wants to take the first watch. He says I need more rest to heal, which I don't disagree with, but I've got so much on my mind that I know I'll have trouble falling asleep.

"Did I ever tell you the story about how I met your Pa?" Miles asks with a wistful smile.

"I don't think you have."

"You and your brother remind me so much of him when he was young. I wasn't much older than you when we met. He was about Dax's age. My family was killed when I was small; never really knew them. I grew up bouncing around from job to job, never really knowing where the next meal would come from. Got myself into trouble more than a few times trying to snag me some too." He laughs a little at the memory. "Your Pa was there one day when I got into a bit of trouble..." His eyebrows stitch together as he releases a deep breath and continues.

"Ya see, had your Pa not stepped in and paid the bill of my thieving, I would've either lost a hand or been a head shorter. I was begging for my life when he walked into the square. He wasn't in power in Ravendene yet; his own father still held that position, but he was well enough known. Something I never understood was why he would care enough to put a stop to what was being done to me regardless of my mistake. He not only paid the bill but brought me home. When at the manor, he fed me, gave me clothes, and spoke with Lord Ravendene, your grandfather. Asking him to give me work. That is when I became his manservant. I repaid my debt to him, but still, he kept me on his staff and gave me a handsome salary. Over the years, we became great friends. I know that's where you and your brother get your compassion for others. Your father was a great man. I know that everything that is going on is hard, but you Ravendene boys will make the right decision."

I take a deep breath, and on the exhale, I give him a small smile in return

as I lean back against a tree. He pats my knee before propping himself against a tree too, for the first watch. I close my eyes, thinking about what he's said. I wonder at times if Pa would be proud of the man I'm becoming, of the man Dax has become. Ma was the strength of the family, always ready for a fight, always one step ahead. Dax is more like her in that way.

A hand brushes hair back from my face, and my eyes flutter open to see Mel's smiling face. "Miles said to wake you. It's time to head out. The sun is about to rise. He also said you would miss breakfast if you slept any longer and you would be an awful turd to be around if you didn't eat breakfast." She giggled; the sound like music to my ears. Such a normal sound, but in our situation? What we've been through? It was a miracle.

"Did he now? An awful turd?" A grin tugs at my lips. I didn't remember falling asleep. I guess I was more tired than I thought.

"Awful turd." She agrees, with her eyebrows raised to her hairline.

"Well, then I guess I better get up and eat then. Wouldn't want you all to be walking about with shit up your noses, would we?" I reach out, tickling her a little, and the jostle of my shoulder makes me wince, but I can tell it's substantially better this morning. Before the sun officially rises, we are already trekking down the path and heading toward Loema once again.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I CATCH MY BOTTOM lip between my teeth as I stare at the door Dax just walked through. His words ringing through my head like a gong. I don't know if it's the bond or just him, but the man knows how to heat a woman, and seeing that he's not even in the room... It's impressive. The dress that was sent up for me is unlike any I've ever worn before. I'm not sure if this is how Maki does dinner every night or if our being here has granted us a special occasion, but this dress... it's sexy, elegant, and a perfect fit. The silky, deep forest green fabric intensifies the color of my eyes and hugs my curves seductively. The skirt spills over my hips in a loose waterfall, with a slit on each side nearly reaching my hips. It has semi-sheer sleeves that cuff at the wrists with black beaded embellishments that match the attached choker at the neck. The back swoops down just above the curve of my ass, and the plunging neckline reaches just a few inches above my navel. Risqué seems to be a theme here in Loema and the shoes are no exception. Sky-high black strappy heels that were clearly not chosen by a woman. These have death by walking written all over them.

I slide open one of the drawers of a beautiful, ornately carved dark wood

vanity in the corner of the room. Finding some makeup pots and brushes, I use a rosy crème blush on my cheeks and lips and apply a black coating to my eyelashes. My hair has begun to dry, and the soft waves cascading over my shoulders brush the tops of my hips. I decide that for a dress of this caliber, I will opt for an elegant, twisted braid, as I have seen my mother wear to fancy dinners and such. I have never attended anything needing such lavish formal wear. Though I've always imagined one day having the opportunity to attend one with my mother... We were never given that chance, though.

I hold the updo in place with a delicate, yet intricate, copper hairpin. A large milky iridescent moonstone sits at the center and reminds me much of the dagger used for making the elixir to save Dax. As I secure it, my power hums, and a heavy feeling sits in my chest as I step back from the large mirror; I don't even recognize myself. My light silvery blonde hair and sun-kissed skin are nothing like the alabaster tone of my mother with her deep chocolate hair and ice blue eyes or the more pink-hued skin of my father, his hair a deep crimson, and only our eyes a similar shade of green. A sadness washes over me, thinking about my parents. I wish they could see me in this gown and meet my mate chosen by the gods.

Leaning forward, I take a deep breath, and my brow furrows as I take in my reflection. I pull some baby hairs free from around my face and at the nape of my neck, twisting them around my finger to help the waves form. Through the sadness that weighs heavily on me, a smile tugs up at the corner of my mouth thinking of Dax. His words replay in my mind, "In a roundabout way this is like our first date." The butterflies, which seem to have moved in and taken up residence, flutter about in my stomach as I take a deep breath and move to open the double doors leading to the antechamber. To Dax.

The door creaks, alerting Dax of my arrival. I see his head tilt as he stands with his back to me. His gaze drawn out the window at the back wall, but as I enter the room, his head slowly turns, his body turning too. He licks his lips as his eyes track up my body. When his gaze reaches mine, his eyes light up from behind. The quick change to molten copper is usually quick, but this time they stay that way just a little longer before he blinks, and what is left is just as hot. A smoldering hazel green, his eyes lock to mine. What I've recognized as my power—the magic coursing through my blood—sizzles at the sight of him standing before me, sending tingles through my limbs. It settles in my core. He watches through hooded eyes as I slowly approach the

center of the room. His eyes track lazily up and down my body.

He wets his lips before he begins to close the distance between us. Dax is dressed in fine black pants and a tunic in the same shade of green as my dress. He's kept his short swords belted to each side of his hips, and I see a knife strapped to his boot. Knowing that I have the dagger used for his cure strapped to my thigh as well, I smile, knowing we are both prepared for a fight if needed. The way things have gone for us recently, I'd rather we be ready. However, these heels could cause some issues. A blush rises in my cheeks as his lips curl into a lopsided smile, his dimple appearing with a flash of white teeth.

When he reaches for my chin, I raise it on instinct, looking up and meeting his eyes. He traps my bottom lip under his thumb.

"I see you're still biting this lip of yours." I hadn't realized I was. A deep chuckle rolls through him as he presses our bodies together and tilts his chin, releasing my lip from his thumb and sucking it into his mouth. He bites down teasingly as a smile spreads across his face, my lip still trapped in his teeth. My breath hitches, and as my own lips curl, the motion forces my lip to be released from his teeth. Stepping back, he offers his arm to me, a grin still fixed in place as my cheeks flame from the moment we just shared.

"Shall we?"

I let Dax lead me from the antechamber back into the opulent corridor, where as far as the eye can see, many arching walkways stem from it. Naza waits for us under one of the arches, bowing halfway as we approach.

"You both clean up well." Her lips press into a smile. "Ms. Raelle, you look stunning. Please allow me to show you both to the dining hall." The flush deepens as I think of my lip trapped in Dax's teeth moments ago. I clear my throat.

"Thank you, Naza." I nod respectfully. She guides us further into the massive castle, the skirt of my dress billowing softly behind me as we walk, exposing my legs almost entirely.

Dax's tongue swipes slowly across his bottom lip, drawing my attention there. When he also winks, I roll my eyes at him, and his smile broadens, causing me to stifle a laugh. He is insufferable. As we enter the dining hall, my eyes go wide from the mere size of the space, but as I continue to take in all there is to see, I know my mouth is hanging wide open. The whole room is lined with tables of Fae, all dressed so exquisitely. The tables are dripping in black, white, and gold fabric, with stunning centerpieces adorned with

candles and amazing exotic filigree. Each one is loaded with fresh fruits, roasted vegetables, and meats. The scents floating through the room make my mouth water. I make a note to pay attention to my power as there are a lot of Fae in this room, and if it surges, I need to be able to decipher why.

At the far end of the room is a table fit for a king, and Maki sits at the center. When he sees us enter, he stands, and the many dinner guests follow suit. I look at Dax, confused, as he chuckles.

“He has a taste for dramatics. He is a lord, not royalty.” He says, under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

“Cousin!” Maki exclaims. “Please welcome Lord Fornax-Ravendene and the lovely Raelle to join us for supper tonight!” A light applause breaks out briefly but stops as Maki speaks out again. “Please! Cousin, come enjoy food and drink. Your return requires a celebration!”

I look up to see Dax’s full grin on display; the hum in my chest pulses as he turns his gaze to me and his smile reaches his eyes. He’s happy to be here. I feel pride radiating from him as he walks at my side, chest high. He bends slightly toward me as we approach the table to be seated in front of Maki.

“Your eyes are the most vivid green I have ever seen. This...” He looks me up and down, then gestures to the room with his head. “It suits you. Almost as much as seeing weapons strapped to your body and you fighting like a wildcat.” He grins as he pulls a chair out for me.

“Perhaps I do have weapons strapped to me and would be ready for a fight if the need arises, regardless of my fancy new dress...” I whisper for only him to hear as a smirk plays at my lips. I take a seat in the chair he’s offered, and as he pushes it in, he bends, brushing a soft kiss on my cheek. “I can’t wait to find said weapons...” he says so quietly, I barely hear each word, and my pulse skitters. He stands, greeting his cousin and taking the seat to my right. He dishes my plate for me with all the food I love, and I make a mental note that he is attentive to details. It tells me, regardless of my relationship with Cano while in Ravendene and our minimal interactions, that he has still paid attention to such little things.

“Thank you, Maki, for treating us with such warm hospitality,” I say. Maki smiles broadly with all his teeth on show, his eyes darting to Dax, who reaches over and lays his hand on my thigh just above where I have the dagger strapped. His eyes sparkle as his fingers brush the edges of the hilt. My magic thrums and a sense of warmth washes over me as proudness pulses from him.

“Yes, cousin. Thank you. However, there is more to our visit than just catching up and celebrating that we would like to discuss. Perhaps somewhere more private.” Dax looks at the large room full of Fae, who can't take their eyes off us. The clatter of dishes and murmuring voices carry from all sides.

“Of course, Dax. Let us eat, then we will retire to my library for a nightcap. We can discuss whatever you would like in private.” Dax nods his agreement. Maki switches his focus back to me once more. “Please, Raelle, tell me how you came to be entwined with this poor soul?” He gestures to Dax teasingly. “No offense, cousin.”

“No offense taken.” Dax squeezes my thigh playfully, and my pulse quickens as I side-eye him.

“Well, let's just say I wandered into his life and then saved it. Basically, I'm his knight in shining armor.” I tease. Dax narrows his eyes on me, his lips curling into a menacing grin. It sends desire coursing through me, and my core heats so inappropriately in the given situation.

“So, you two are an item? The famous Dax Fornax-Ravendene actually settled down?” A sultry female voice breaks through the clatter of dishes and hushed murmurs. The click of high heels is replaced by the scrape of a chair being pulled out. The woman who sits down on Dax's other side is beautiful. Her tight red dress hugs her curvy figure and causes her breasts to almost spill over the fabric at the chest. Her long hair, the color of fine red wine, brushes against her low back in tight-ringed curls. As she sweeps her hair over one shoulder, a seductive grin spreads across her painted red lips, and the overwhelming scent of lilacs wafts to me, clogging my nose.

I narrow my eyes on the hand she lays on Dax's forearm. She leans in close to him, whispering something I cannot hear. My heart ramps up to a furious pace, but that's not all. A tingle starts in my fingers that are sitting in my lap as I turn my head, making eye contact with Dax. His eyes flick down to my hands, and his brow furrows. There are sparks of white, like tiny lightning bolts, fizzing at my fingertips. He sees the panic rising in my face and reaches over, grabbing my hands and holding them in his large palm. The sparks stop, and I take a deep breath, relaxing just a fraction. The hum in my chest sends me feelings of caution. This woman...

“Vi, this is Raelle. My mate.” My head snaps to Dax. We haven't discussed when or if we are going to tell anyone yet about the bond. Dax's voice is filled with authority, and the entire room falls quiet after a series of



quick, surprised gasps coming from various people throughout. After the shock of his not-so-subtle announcement, my gaze fixes on her, studying her expression. The woman in red, her eyes flash with a dangerous glint. The look she pins me with sends a warning to course through me, and the danger in her eyes intensifies as that label is attached. Her nostrils flare as seething hostility radiates off of her. This woman looks like she is about to carve my heart out with her teeth and eat it for dinner. I lift my chin, letting her see she doesn't intimidate me. If anything, she is pissing me off, and I am about to say something about her resting bitch face and her damn hand that is still on my mate's arm. Dax picks up on my emotions and quickly introduces the woman to me as well.

“Raelle, this is Violet Vulpecula...an old friend.” I didn't miss the sparkle in her eye as he said her name, and it made my lip curl back in distaste, but I would not let her see my unease.

I could sense that Dax and this woman had a past. Jealousy is written on her face clearly enough. I clear my throat, speaking loud enough for the room to hear what I have to say. “I don't like to think that Dax has settled down, but perhaps leveled up? The gods themselves have matched us so irrevocably that our bond can be untainted even by a poison disguised in the form of a mere apple.” My smile is coy, but I know she reads my comment for what it is. A warning to back the fuck off. Dax coughs, stifling a laugh, hearing the threat in my words and my tone, and offers me more wine with a hiked brow.

I would tell him that more wine is inadvisable, especially in the current state of my emotions. Given this harlot who has tried to come in and make moves on my mate. I decide against that, and knock the wine back like a shot of whiskey. Dax's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline, and he reaches up and brushes his hand across his mouth, trying to wipe away a grin. I'm glad this is entertaining to him. I narrow my eyes on him as well.

I notice the hum in my chest and the tingle in my limbs, and I look around the room full of people. Worry builds in my heart. My intuition tells me that there is someone here who is causing my power to swell defensively, and it's not just the wench to Dax's right. Someone here wishes me or Dax harm. Dax looks at me with his brow down in concern, but I shake my head and try to brush off the feeling as we eat.

The meal Maki had served for dinner is decadent. The fine cuts of meat and fresh fruits and vegetables pair perfectly with the wine. If only the stench of a surly redhead wasn't tainting the otherwise perfect meal. At least after

the initial outbursts, dinner has been fairly quiet. Only small talk and the occasional sly comment from the red fox on the other side of Dax. I hope that once dinner is over and we retire to the library, I don't have to be in her company any longer. Having spent the rest of dinner quiet, except in my mind, where I have come up with the nickname Violet the Scarlet Harlot, for the whore who insists on touching him with each memory that she brings up of his time here at Loema in the past.

My patience wears thin each time she makes physical contact with him. I don't realize I'm biting my lip until Dax turns my face to his and lowers his mouth to mine, sucking my lip in between his teeth and smiling as it's caught there. When a soft growl escapes me, he kisses me softly and then pulls away like nothing happened. However, the whispers I hear throughout the room and the look of utter shock on the harlot's face tells me that his behavior is not something they have ever witnessed from Dax, and it brings a smug grin to my face.

"Perhaps, it's time to retire—" Maki is cut off as the dining hall doors burst open on a gust of mighty wind. Two guards enter the massive room with their hands held behind their backs. The one I recognized as Pascal steps forward.

"Sorry to interrupt, my lord, but there was a Raskin attack not far from our border. When we went to secure the area, there were people already in a battle with the creatures..." He makes quick eye contact with Dax, then his gaze meets Maki's as he continues. "Sir, Trent Fornax-Ravendene and his party of three others have been taken to the infirmary for evaluation and healing." I feel like the air is punched out of my lungs at the revelation. Dax jumps to his feet, hoisting me up with him. In a blur of movement, we are well out of the dining hall and rushing down corridors, with the Lord of Loema quick on our heels as we make our way to the infirmary.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE DRAMA WITH RAELE and Violet falls to the wayside as the guards interrupt the end of our awkward dinner. As much as I was enjoying that shitshow...when they announced that Trent and three others were brought to the Loema infirmary, nothing else mattered. I grab Raelle's hand, running for the doors, not needing to pull her along because she is keeping up, even though my legs are much longer.

The sound of my cousin's curses echoes through the halls as he runs behind us, questioning what is going on. He barks at his guards to stand down. The way Raelle and I sprinted from the room was not expected and had the guards confused about our sudden outburst, causing them to draw their blades in readiness and on high alert, ready for an attack. However, Maki would have known why we are acting this way if we had a more intimate dinner and were able to discuss such things. I couldn't care less about that right now, though. I focus my attention on what is most important. Trent, and making sure he is well, and finding out who has been brought in with him. Gods, why is this castle so fucking big?

We tear through the corridors hand in hand. Raelle's grip is crushing as we race to reach Trent. Her need to see him okay is as potent as my own. As we round the final corner, we see the doors, and we burst into an antechamber,

which resembles a small library. The double doors open just before we reach them, and a petite blonde vampire walks out, her eyes wide at our unexpected arrival. She gasps loudly and places her hand up, erecting a magical barrier blocking her and the door entirely. Her brows drop as she makes eye contact with me. Anger replaces her initial shock of our bursting through the breezeway, recognizing me as the young shifter who would cause a ruckus in the halls of this castle years before. She lifts her other hand, placing her pointer finger to her lips as she drops the air barrier.

“Shhh. Please be quiet. All of those who were brought in from the Raskin attack are still with us. They’re sleeping. They will not be disturbed tonight.”

“Nonsense. I will speak with my brother. Now.” I demand as I advance on her. Her hand whips up quickly, erecting the shimmering wall of air back into place. Her eyes narrow as she glowers at me. Her barrier will do nothing to stop me if I choose to take it down. One touch of my magic, and it would dissipate, likely ending the life of the Fae who placed it as well. I clench my jaw, and my fingers twitch where Raelle holds it. She tugs at my grip, silently urging me to remain calm. I stop thinking about the dark thoughts of ending the vampire's existence for merely protecting the infirmary and tilt my head in Raelle's direction. Her breathing hitches, one hand clutching mine and the other resting on her chest.

“Are you ok?” I spin her to face me.

“I’m ok, but Dax...” She shakes her head. “She’s telling the truth. I can feel it.” Her eyebrows pinch as she rubs up and down her sternum. She presses her lips into a thin line and makes eye contact with the vampire. “I believe that Trent is going to be okay in her care.” The vampire looks at Raelle, puzzled by her words. Clearly, this is some part of Raelle's gifts developing further, a gift that resembles that of an empath. Which are not common any longer. “Truly, Dax.” She turns her face to me, and her thumb strikes a line across the back of my hand, the simple gesture warming my icy anger, and I nod in agreement.

“Please tell us—do you know who was brought in with Trent Fornax-Ravendene?” She asks the female vampire, her voice firm but kind.

“Mr.Fornax-Ravendene was brought in with two females who have remained unconscious through magical interference due to their injuries and an older gentleman, a wolf shifter if I’m not mistaken, who was awake for a while before we had to place him into a sleep as well. All of them sustained substantial injuries, but none I believe to be life-threatening. The Raskin

numbers were great in this attack, or so I've been told.” She takes a deep breath, clasping her hands behind her back. “Some of our guards were injured as well. All of them have been placed into a deep sleep using magical intervention to quicken their healing. I will be checking on each of them, but...” She bows at Maki entering the room, his breathing coming out in puffs as he tries to catch his breath. Clearly, he’s been lax in his training. I make a mental note to remind him of the importance of keeping up with combat training and physical health, especially being a Lord. “ I assure you, the girl is right. No harm will come to them while in my infirmary,” she states as a matter of fact. Maki places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes firmly.

“Cousin, I think it's time we have that talk now.” His gaze meets the vampire in charge of the infirmary. “I promise you that Trent and whoever else came in with him will be well taken care of and likely healed by morning. Ginny will make sure of it.” He nods in the direction of the vampire. “Follow me; we can head to the library now to discuss whatever it is that is clearly going on—other than this Raskin attack.”

My gaze meets Raelle’s. I battle my own mind over just walking away without being able to lay eyes on my brother or without finding out if it was Ella and Kait who were brought in with him. It has to be them. And the older gentleman? It has to be Miles. Raelle shifts her body to stand in front of me and places her hands on my chest, then runs them across my shoulders, loosening the tension that has built here. They sag under her touch. She continues removing and easing the stress from my body as she brushes her palms across the dips and curves of my biceps, then back up again as she clasps them behind my neck. The room falls away as my focus narrows entirely to her. The vivid green in her eyes captivates me, as does the glow of her sun-kissed skin and the almost magical brightness to her hair as the moonlight seeps in through the window.

She reaches up on her tiptoes and presses her soft lips to mine. A warmth spreads through my body, slowing my racing heart with the simple contact. All of the anger and uncertainty wash away and are replaced by a keen sense of calm. My power vibrates at my fingertips in response. She flattens her feet, and her hands slide down to my chest, lingering there as she keeps her eyes trained on me. I wrap her in my arms, holding her in a tight embrace, and place a kiss on top of her head. I lift my head, my gaze locking with another set of green eyes. Violet stands rigid, watching us. She wrings her hands and

runs her tongue across her sharp canines, tutting as she spins on her heel and storms from the room. I'm not sure what to make of her reaction, but as Raelle looks up at me, I don't care.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

AS WE FOLLOW MAKI to the library, each step I take is heavy. Exhaustion collects in my bones, pulling me down. The dinner, traveling, and days of no sleep since being cured— everything has finally settled on my shoulders. The weight of it all makes my very soul heavy. I spread out into the armchair in front of the fire as Raelle perches on the arm of my chair, bringing her legs over mine. We begin to catch Maki up on all that is happening as of late: the curse, breaking the curse, the bond, the memory loss. Everything. When he looks like he can't possibly process any more information, I run my hand down my face.

“That's not all, though; we think that when I was under the curse, I saw a prophecy. Tomorrow we plan to go to my father's seer in town. Hopefully, we can get some insight.” His eyebrows shoot skyward, and he stands, starting to pace as he thinks over everything we've told him.

“Cano was here not long ago; we had a meeting by his request. He wanted to discuss plans about trying to take over Demetrey. He said he believed that Demetrey could be beaten out of power if we came together as a cohesive unit.” I scoff at that because I had been trying to tell the asshole that for years, and he wouldn't act on it. “ I denied him because we have seen more peace recently in Loema and feel there is no need, but clearly that is not the

case.” He continues to pace the length of the library with his arms clasped behind his back and his eyes scrunched as he focuses on each step.

“Cano is working with someone. I saw him meeting with them at the cabin.” Raelle says, her gaze shifting between me and Maki. “I—I’m not sure who it was he was meeting with, though. Trent didn’t say he recognized them either. Whoever it was kept their hood up, masking their face in the shadows, but my power... it swelled, and they were giving me all the negative feels.” She scrunches her brows together, making a little crease in between them as she thinks back on the memory. “Trent might know more; maybe he found out who was meeting with him when I left the cabin to go to you.” She places her hand on my arm. I fold mine over hers, and with a dip of my chin, I place a kiss on the back of it. She has a point. We need to talk to Trent, and hopefully he has some insight.

“I want to see my brother at first light. Can you make that happen, Maki?”

“Of course I can. Meet me at the infirmary in the morning. We will go see them before breakfast; if they are well enough, they can join us.” He stares pensively into the fire, breaking his concentration as he shifts his gaze back at me. “Dax, this changes things.” He chews the inside of his cheek as his eyes bore into me. “If he is the ‘Lord of Ravendene’ that makes Ravendene an enemy of mine, of Loema... if he works with Demetrey... You mu—” I interrupt before he can finish the thought because it is not an issue.

“I am resuming Lordship over Ravendene effective immediately, regardless of what he has been up to, and if he wishes to fight me for the position, we will do so in the ways of old. We will battle in a duel, my magic against his. The more powerful takes the territory.” Raelle’s head snaps down to meet my gaze, and I smile as her frown deepens.

“Don’t worry dear; Ravendene has not lost a duel in many, many, centuries. I’m confident Dax would be no exception. Especially bonded and the most mature of his line.” Maki chuckles, but the worry doesn’t leave Raelle’s face. She stands, and I follow, wrapping my arms around her. I dip my chin, bringing my mouth to hover over her ear.

“Don’t worry about me, my beautiful mate. I highly doubt it will come to a duel anyway. Cano isn’t stupid. He would know it would mean his death. He will choose his life over anything else. Plus, I told you, I won’t leave you again.” She leans into my embrace, her cheek pressing against mine. She releases a heavy sigh, and I feel some tension leave her body as she does. I slowly inhale her warm vanilla scent, releasing the deep breath that tickles at



the sensitive skin just below her ear. She shudders as goosebumps creep down her arms, and she arches into me. Maki clears his throat, dragging my attention away from Raelle and the press of my thickening cock in my breeches. He offers a glass of whiskey to me and wine to Raelle, then drops into an armchair and tilts his head, staring into the large fire sipping from his chalice.

“If it does come to a duel, I’m taking bets and making some money on this thing. I’m sure Trent would be my first bet.” He laughs as he drinks a hefty measure of his wine. Lifting the golden chalice in the air, he calls out, “Cheers to making enemies bleed!” A grin tugs at my lips, and I lift my whiskey. I drink to that, but Raelle doesn’t drink or smile at the declaration. Her brow furrows further, and sadness brackets her mouth. I rub her arm in comfort and step away toward the fire. With a wave of my hand, I make my fire foxes appear and dance into the room and around Raelle. She takes a ragged breath, and just as I wished, a soft smile graces her beautiful face, washing away the sadness that was once there. Her eyes light up in the glow of the foxes dancing around her.

Maki laughs again, clapping, then stands just as I extinguish the frolicking fire animals. He extends his arm, I grasp his forearm, and he pulls me into a one-armed hug.

“It’s so good to have you back, cousin. Excuse me, but I must retire for the night. The morning will come before we know it. You two must need your rest too.” He backs away from me and opens his arms wide for Raelle. She offers her hand to him, and he chuckles, looking at me as he takes it. The denial of a hug amusing him. He sucks in a sharp breath, his eyes whipping up to meet hers.

“Your power, it—It calls to me and it’s so very strong.” He shifts his gaze to me. “I have never met someone who has a power so potent.” He lingers there for a moment before he snaps back to his senses. He lays a kiss on the back of Raelle’s hand and bows his head to her. “Please excuse my brashness, Miss Raelle. I was just surprised, that is all. I do have a question for you, though, before I retire.” He drops her hand. “Did you ever tell me your last name? With a power that strong, I’d assume we have crossed paths before. Your family must be of high stature.” He turns his head back to me, brows pinched.

“I don’t think I did mention my last name, and I don’t think we have met before... However, I know I have been here before. I recognized the castle,

but I don't believe I ever came within its walls. I came to Loema with my mother once before she passed away. My last name is Apus. Daughter of Lilith and Ezra Apus." Raelle finishes, and my face drops, eyes widening in recognition. I don't think I ever heard her speak her parents' names. Lilith. I turn my gaze to Maki, and I see it on his face too, as his thoughts catch up to mine.

"I see," Maki says, turning toward the door. "Naza," Maki calls out, and the handmaid enters through the double doors of the library on silent feet. I know what he is thinking before he even says it.

"Raelle, if you don't mind, I would like a word alone with my cousin. I will join you as soon as I'm done. It won't take long at all." She nods hesitantly, looking at Maki, then back to me.

"Would you please show Miss Raelle back to her chambers so she can retire for the night?" Maki asks.

"Thank you, Naza. I would appreciate the guidance. I would get lost in this castle without your aid; this place is massive." Naza's lips curve up at the corners as she gestures to the door, dipping her chin. Raelle stops before leaving the library, placing her hand on the door, then cranes her neck, looking over her shoulder. Her eyes seek mine, a silent promise passing through the space between us. I don't like leaving her alone, but this conversation between Maki and I is needed. If what I believe I just put together is true, it changes everything. For her, for me, for all of Aldramani.

The door to the library shuts with a heavy snap, and as it does, I sink into the other armchair, legs wide. I rest my elbows on my knees, running my hand down my face.

"Lilith?" I question. Maki leans forward, matching my level, and tilts his head to look at me.

"If it's true, it can only mean one thing, Dax. Lilith Apus didn't have a daughter of her own blood. You and I both know that." He leans to the side table between us, reaching for the whiskey decanter there, nixing the glass and drinking a measure from the bottle, then hands it to me. I know what it means, but with everything that has happened to Raelle recently and knowing she is about to ascend.... I don't know how I'm going to tell her that there is no way the woman she knows as her mother is not related to her by blood. Also, the family she thinks is her own is not. If what we suspect is true...

"The Prophecy— Maki, the last of the fallen..." My words trail off as I think over the prophecy. It makes more sense now if this is true. And it must

be true, considering all we already know of the prophecy, it makes sense. The talk of the moon, the fallen rising again?

“She is our queen, and she has no idea,” Maki says, eyebrows high, as he falls back in the chair. He shakes his head as he looks at me. “Your mate is to be the Queen, Dax...The Queen of the Kingdom.”

“This information can’t leave this room. I need to find the right time to tell Raelle. I need to make certain that we are not mistaken. We must think about all she has been through recently and how this may affect her. Maki, she has yet to ascend.” I rake my hand through my hair. “If she is the last of her line, the *royal* line. You felt her power already—when she ascends...” I shake my head. She has to have time to prepare herself for that. She thinks she is going to come into the power of the parents she’s known her whole life. They were powerful, no doubt, but nothing will match the royal lineage. “Do you think Cano knows? It doesn’t explain taking Ella or Trent...”

Maki shakes his head and takes a deep breath, blowing out his cheeks. “I’m sorry, cousin. I don’t know the answer to that. Throughout any of our discussions, he never let any plans to take the entire kingdom be privy information. I agree; this cannot leave this room. You can decide when to disclose the revelation we have uncovered to her, but cousin, I suggest it is soon. If Cano is out there plotting a war, it is best for us and the kingdom that she knows and accepts her new reality. Not to mention the fact that she needs to prepare for her ascension.” He ambles over to the library doors, but before he leaves, he pivots, facing me. “Fate has brought you two together, cousin. You are meant to be king.” He dips his chin and leaves me with that.

The gravity of that statement hits me like an anvil. I was just coming to terms with knowing that I had a mate. I barely accepted that I would have to *finally* assume the Lordship of Ravendene. This—this is... I am not worthy of such a thing. No one is going to want to follow me. A king that’s been in the shadows of a monster all the years I have. Only because I was too caught up in my own self-pity to take responsibility. As I walk through the halls I’ve visited every summer of my childhood, I think of how different things could have been for all of us had the kingdom not fallen. The amount of pain we would all be spared.

Before entering the room I’m sharing with Raelle, I stop and stare at the intricately carved wood door. I press my forehead against the cool wood, and I take a deep breath that feels ragged. Blowing it out, I decide I’m not going to dwell in the past. What’s done is done; I cannot change that. I can,

however, decide how I handle this information. Raelle needs to know... and soon. But tonight there will be no talking about it. In the morning, we will speak with Trent and go from there. Perhaps we can even get confirmation from the seer contact I have here too.

The sound of the lock clicking and the door swinging open causes me to snap out of the stirring of my mind.

“What are you doing standing out here for so long? I sensed your arrival. I’ve been waiting for you. I want to know how your discussion with your cousin was.” Her words come out rushed. She was worried.

I don’t want to lie to her. I can’t, but now is not the time for this conversation. I walk into the room and close the door behind me, stalking to where she stands. Wrapping one arm behind her lower back, I pull her flush to my body and tilt my head down, capturing her lips with mine. “Not tonight, love. Tonight, I just want to hold you while we sleep.” I kiss the corner of her mouth. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day as well, and we need not worry about it tonight.” I continue to brush my lips along the skin just below her jaw causing her to writhe in my arms. “ Tonight,” I whisper into her skin, “we are just mates enjoying the presence of one another and the thin slice of peace we can get, knowing at least one, if not all, the people we care about are safe and taken care of.” I tell her as I trail kisses down the length of her neck.

Her lips curl up into a smile, lighting my heart on fire and reminding me of the day we met. I knew then, and I still know now. Raelle is either going to make me or break me.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

TRAVELING THE SHORT DISTANCE to the center of Ravendene with Cano wasn't as bad as I expected. Having someone to have even half a conversation with made the time go by faster. Unfortunately, I was not able to get much information from him. From his mouth or his head. While I noticed Cano is smart, he has a very single-track mind, and his thoughts hardly stray from what his objective is at the time.

As we arrive at the border, the guards stomp up to us. They demand the reasoning behind our coming to Ravendene since the market isn't for two more days, but when their sights catch on Cano, they snap to attention. He hops down, barking orders at them. They clamor about allowing the carriage to pass.

"This is Flynn; he will accompany you to where you will stay for your time here in Ravendene." The guard nods to Cano, then hoists himself into the seat at my side, which Cano just vacated. I wasn't quite ready to leave Cano's side yet. I was hoping for more of an opportunity to read him once we arrived, because perhaps in his comfort of home, his thoughts or those around him could slip me some information I could use to find Raelle.

"Wait." I twist as I lay my hand on the guard's arm. He pulls back on the reins, so the horse stops once again. "Cano," I call out, and his head tilts to the side as his eyes flicker between mine. "Will I see you again? Before I return home?" I asked.

"Already miss me, beautiful?" He smirks and looks at those around us, arrogantly wiggling his eyebrows.

“You wish,” I reply dryly.

“Tomorrow, I will send Flynn here.” He pats a blonde guard who sits next to me on the chest. “To retrieve you for breakfast in the morning. My treat to you, as part of my thank you for your family's aid.”

“Lucky me...” I deadpan and Flynn coughs, which I believe was him stifling a laugh, then he nods to Cano and ticks at the horse to get us moving again.

The inn sits in the heart of the large city. The limestone building rises three stories high and is steepled at its center. It's magnificent. My lips part in awe as we approach. The windows along the top story are arched with a point matching the shape of the building and spire reaching to the sky. I normally stay in the market vendor tents at the edge of town when I come here. The horse slows as we come to the covered port. Upon stopping, the guard, Flynn, drops from the carriage. Mud splatters up, covering his boots, as he lands on the wet earth. Turning, he offers me his gloved hand, which I accept as I follow him to the cobblestone ground at the entrance. I purposefully leap a little further, not to repeat the muddy show of the guard. We are greeted by the host of the inn, who claps at a young boy, and he comes running to grab my belongings. The host is a large woman with fire-red hair and a pudgy and kind face with freckles dotting most of it. She smiles wide at me, and I return the gesture.

“And who do we have the pleasure of housing tonight? I didn't expect another guest to be arriving so late. The name is Annalynn.” She steps forward, grasping my shoulder and pulling me to her. I gasp as she does, and before I know it, she places a kiss on each of my cheeks.

“Um, my name is Ambriel. Thank—thank you for accommodating me at the last minute.” I stutter, my lips forming a thin line as I press them together.

“Nonsense.” She winked. “A little bird arrived this morning, notifying me of your soon-to-be arrival, my dear.” She whispers for only me to hear as she smiles in the guard's direction. Opening myself to her thoughts, I get a distinct dislike for Cano and his men. She longs for a Ravendene to be in power again. A flash of a man with dark as-pitch hair and hazel-green eyes popped into her mind and left just as quickly.

“Chet here will see you to your room.” She gestures to the young boy with similar red hair, but where he is long, she is round, and standing at least a foot taller than the female. “Chet, be sure our guest has everything that she needs.” He nods. “And I will personally dish you up some supper and bring

it to your room in about thirty minutes if it would suit you?”

“That would be very kind of you. Thank you.”

The young boy, Chet, guides me through the tavern, which occupies the bottom level of the building. Mostly male Fae line the bar, and more at the tables throughout. A large fireplace sits in the middle of the space, with a couch and two armchairs placed on each side of it. There are a few women sipping wine and laughing in conversation there. They stare as we pass, and I get a read on some of their thoughts, having forgotten to put a lid on my senses. Most of them only think of the cock they will surely choke on tonight— the lustful thoughts of drunken females. I lower my head and shake it, brushing away the nonsense and shutting down my senses.

We walk through an arched doorway, leading to a large, winding stairway. The boy is quick, but I keep up easily. We don't stop rounding the stairs until we reach the top floor, and we exit another arching doorway into a wide corridor with impressively large arched doors on either side. Chet shuffles four doors down and stops to unlock the one on the left of the hall. I try to hand him a coin as he goes to leave me, but he shakes his head, refusing to take it.

“Momma said your money's no good here. Keep your coin. She will be up with some food soon; until then, she said to tell you to wash up from your travels and make yourself comfortable.” He dips his chin politely, turns on his heel, and quickly moves back the way we came. The room I am given is spacious and bright. Wood furniture with white linen throughout. An oil painting of an unkindness of ravens perched in a leafless tree hangs above the massive four-poster bed and two of the ornately pointed arched windows. There is an attached on-suite with the same fresh feel to it.

I use the time waiting for Annalynn to clean up from traveling, opting to take a quick bath. Once I dress, I begin to try building a fire in the hearth, but there is a tap at the door.

“Ambriel dear, it's Annalynn. I've got your supper.” She calls before I open it. I crack the door, peeking out into the dark hall, and I'm greeted with the same kind smile I received downstairs from her. I open the door wide, and she shuffles in and shuts it behind her with her foot. She places a covered serving dish on the long table on the opposite wall of the bed. A flash of magic comes from her two fingers with a snap, and I feel a barrier of air pop up around us. I have not seen something like this before, but my mother had told me there are those who could do such things, but it's a talent that no one

could teach me on the farm. I find myself wanting to know how she did it. Using my magic like that could be helpful in the days to come. She winks as she notices my attention on the barrier.

“The barrier I’ve cast will allow us to speak freely without ears on the outside hearing what we have to say.” She smiles warmly.

“I know the magic. My mother, she's spoken of it before; I too have an affinity for air, but I had no one to teach me to wield it in all the ways it can be. Since you are acquainted with my mother, I assume you were a friend of the crown before the kingdom fell.” It's not a question. I sense it from her. “Was it my mother who sent word to you?” Again, not a question.

“Yes. And it was. Your mother and I are long-time friends, and when the kingdom fell, it broke my heart that our paths had taken us separate ways, but we have kept in touch over the years. A good lot of us have.” Her brow stitches together as her gaze moves to her fingers, where she picks the skin around her nails.

A lot of friends to the crown? I try to read her thoughts again, but I find myself hitting a wall of pure white magic. She has barriers in place, which make the corner of my mouth twitch. She knows what I can do... she let me get a read on her at the entrance, and must have felt my invasion.

“We meet ever so often; there are more of us than you may realize. More of us who know the truth.” She says cryptically.

“And what is this truth you speak of?”

“The heir to the throne, born on the day of ruin, the daughter of the moon...She lives.” Chills prickle across my scalp as realization settles under my skin.

“Raelle.” My voice comes out as a whisper. The draw I feel toward her makes more sense now. My family has been long-time allies to the crown; my mother was one of Queen Selene’s trusted advisors. Just as the thought crosses my mind, I inhale a sharp breath and reach out, grasping Annalynn by her forearm to steady myself. A vision so strong it rocks the very foundation I stand on, and my hold on Annalynn makes me a conduit, and she is pulled into the vision as well.

*I stand in a crowd at the royal Colosseum, the dilapidated structure once again brought to life for a fight to be seen by all. The winner determines the ruling power of Ravendene. Cano faces a man with raven-black hair and hazel-green eyes in a duel to the death. The crowd is deafening with the roars from the people of Aldramani.*



The vision shimmers, and then we are underground.

*Cano stands on a dais, the dank dungeon of the palace at his back. I look around, realizing this is where the King and Queen used to hold trials on traitors of the crown. The center of the dais holds some sort of altar, with a wicked swirling deep green smoke being manipulated by a hooded figure on the opposite side. As the smoke whirls through the air around the dank space, it slowly gathers in front of Cano. Seeping forward, licking over Cano's fingertips, around his hands, and everywhere it seems to connect with his skin, he shudders. The magic itself seems to shiver and pulse like it is feeding from his soul. The deep green shade turns black as night as it glides over his arms, around his chest, and up his neck, and as it does, he tilts his head back to the heavens. A deep moan resonates from within him, the sound made of pure pleasure. He gasps, his mouth opening on the inhale, as the smoke disappears entirely, entering his very being. A shudder rolls through him, and his eyes clamp shut. When he tilts his head back down and his eyes snap open, they are entirely black before the irises ripple with deep green magic and they return to their usual shade, the deep brown appearing darker than normal.*

*Cano coughs out a laugh, then a wicked grin spreads slowly across his face as he looks down at his hands and arms, almost as if he can see the power coursing in his veins now. The hooded figure laughs a sultry laugh alongside him. I lower my brows as I recognize the dark magic she wields. Dark magic that Cano now wields. He flicks a finger at a nearby cage; the steel evaporates as the dark spell that was placed in him gives him power that he should not possess. His already sinister smile widens even more as he turns to the female hooded figure and says, "Let the duel begin." Her cackle brings chills down my spine.*

*The vision shimmers again, and we stand again in the colosseum, the entire crowd frozen in fear as Cano's unnatural power is unleashed and Dax fights with all his might to overpower the dark spell Cano casts at him. But as they battle it out, the crowd is taking notice of the darkening sky. Fae all around point and stare as the moon overpowers the sun, clouds swirl and twist as a breeze begins to pick up and the total eclipse turns day to night. All is quiet for a moment as Cano and Dax take notice too. A sudden, bright white, blinding bolt of lightning strikes in the center of the colosseum. The resounding sound of the strike echoes as screams erupt around us, and the vision blurs back to reality.*

Annalynn and I stare at each other, a silent moment passing, each of us in shock at what we just witnessed. It can only be described as a vision from the gods. Were they forewarning us of a possible outcome of the future? If it wasn't clear that I needed to get to Raelle before, it most certainly is now. But as my mind flickers over what I just saw, I think, if only I could find out who it was that was aiding Cano with the use of the dark spells... Maybe I could end this before it even got to Raelle.

“Your mother's message said that she had a vision, and you were to help bring the kingdom back together again. You need to help Raelle claim what is rightfully hers. She needs to know the truth, and we cannot let what happened in that vision become reality.” Tears roll down her round, rosy cheeks.

“I will do everything I can to make my mother's vision come to light; however, with visions, many things can change the outcome. What she saw... it's just one of many possibilities, as with what we just saw.” Annalynn dips her chin, her eyebrows lowering. “Tomorrow, Cano is expecting me to have breakfast with him. I will. When our breakfast is finished, I will need a horse and some way to get out of Ravendene undetected by Cano. Can you make that happen for me?” She jerks her head in a curt nod.

“I can. I will have everything prepared for your departure. Gods help you, Ambriel.” She grabs my shoulders in each of her hands and pulls me close, kissing each cheek and then releasing me. “If you need anything at all in the meantime, ring the bell.” She points to a handbell at the bedside table. “It's *spelled*, so only I will hear it.” She takes a deep breath, letting it loose. Her shoulders sag, and she steps out of the room, but before closing the door, she turns around and says something that I have not heard spoken but have seen written in some of my parents' old tomes.

“An unkindness gathers in the light of the moon.” Her brow dips, the seriousness of the situation settling over me, and she shuts the door, leaving me alone with my thoughts. A prickling sensation breaks out over my skin, sending chills all over my body.

I will eat the food Annalynn brought up, then I will do my best to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a long day of trying to get information and then traveling to Loema. I will need my rest. I hope sleep comes for me after such a revelation.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I WAKE IN THE dark, only the white glow of the moon filtering through the open window to see by. The warm press of Dax's bare chest on my back moves rhythmically, and with each breath he exhales, the hair behind my ear flutters. The tickle makes me smile, and I nestle into his embrace further. His slow breathing lets me know that he's still asleep. Taking a deep breath, I enjoy just being held by him and thinking about all that has happened, changing my life so incredibly.

Last night, when Dax arrived back to the room, he didn't want to talk about whatever it was he and Maki spoke about because he didn't bring it up once. I didn't press him for information, but my imagination is beginning to run wild with ideas on why he would not discuss whatever it was they did in front of me. I watched from the plush bed as he removed his weapons and boots, waiting for him to join me. He sank into the mattress and curled his body around mine, gently tracing patterns on my skin with his fingertips until I fell asleep. He was sweet and respectful, and there was no arrogance to him like there had been the day prior.

I know it could be him worrying about his brother and sister, but my gut is

telling me it's more than that. Whatever is bothering him is something more. Having him hold me last night, feeling his body warm against mine... I don't think I have slept so soundly—in, well—in a very long while.

Dax's chest rises on a deep inhale as he wakes up, and I roll in his arms to face him. Having been awake with my thoughts for what feels like hours already, I was eager to start the day. The comfortable bed keeps me cocooned in his embrace, and I bury my nose into the crook of his neck, inhaling the cedar and smoky whiskey that is Dax. My eyes flutter open, and a lazy smile spreads across my face when I find him looking down at me. His eyes are heavy with sleep, and he dips his chin, pressing a slow kiss to my lips.

“Good morning, beautiful mate,” His voice is gravelly and rough, making my toes curl.

“Morning. Do you want to talk about what's been worrying you since you and Maki spoke last night?” Something akin to regret flashes across his face, but he fixes a grin in place, making me unsure if I even saw what I thought I saw there.

There is a light tap on the bed chamber door, and Naza's voice comes from the other side, interrupting our almost-conversation.

“Coffee and pastries were brought up and are waiting in the antechamber when you are ready. Maki will meet you at the infirmary shortly. I've also left some clean clothing if you need it.” Dax moves to grab his discarded clothing from the chair nearby, covering his wide tattooed chest and everything else that was on display. Blush warms my cheeks as I watch.

By the time Dax opens the door, Naza is gone, with only a tray left on a small table by the sitting area. He brings the plate of goodies into the bed chamber. I dress in the clean training gear that Naza provided, strapping my dagger to my thigh. Dax comes to stand before me; he kneels, his eyes smoldering as he looks up at me. His hands wrap around my ankle, bringing it to rest on his knee, and I brace myself on his shoulders. He straps a small blade into my boot, then does the same with the other foot.

“I'd like to speak with my cousin for a moment before we all head to the infirmary. Do you mind waiting for me to return? It will only be a moment.” Again? My brows furrow as he rises to his feet cupping my jaw with his hand, the rough skin of his palm scrapes across my cheek and I lean into the roughness that is Dax.

“I don't mind. I will continue to prepare for the day.” He leaves me with a press of his lips on my cheek, but as he walks away I can't help but feel that

he is keeping something from me. Hurt begins to build in my chest, making it hard to breathe. Trust seems hard for me after learning about Cano betraying me. Betraying all of us. Not to mention the mystery that has always surrounded my family's death.

I step in front of a long dressing mirror in the corner of the room. The black training breeches are rough on my skin and tighter than I normally would like, but at least they are clean, so I'm grateful for what I've been given. The boots, however, are a huge upgrade from the death stilts that Maki had me wear to dinner. I tuck the gray sleeveless tunic into my waistband and fix a pleat in my hair, bringing it over my shoulder. With Loema being closer to the Creale Sea, it is warm in the day, even on a fall morning. My sun-kissed skin already glows from the warmth, a rose tint painting my cheeks. Dax walks in as I leave the on-suite. His lips twitch into a lopsided smile, displaying that adorable dimple of his.

“Stunning as always,” he says as he reaches for me and lowers his lips to mine. Kissing Dax has become something so natural that I don't even have a second thought about it anymore. It's happened so fast that it's still bizarre when I think about it.

“What's on your mind?” He notices my withdrawal as I recall him not wanting to talk to Maki in my presence.

“It's—I just, I'm worried about Trent and the others. I'm worried about the future. The unknown. I know it's silly to worry about things I can't change, but I do. I worry, Dax. I've lost so much, I don't want that for you, any of you. Also... I'm still wondering what you and Maki discussed. I can sense emotions, Dax, whether I try or not sometimes, and the emotions I felt from you last night... They—they have me worried.” I throw it all out there. His eyebrows raise as he brushes his thumb across my jaw and to my lip, which I now have trapped in my teeth. He pulls it free. A coy smile raises the corners of his mouth.

He presses his hand to my lower back, bringing our bodies even closer together, and traps my pouting lip under his thumb as his palm cups the side of my face. I try to turn my head, but he fixes it in place with his large hand, forcing my gaze to be on him.

“Biting that lip again,” His smirk turns smoldering, but it vanishes just as quickly as it appeared, his brow pinching and his jaw ticks. Then he does something I didn't expect. He slides down my body, dropping to his knees. He presses his head into the plane just below my breasts.

“Don’t worry about me, Love.” He speaks into my body, so his voice is muffled, and his head tilts up, finding my eyes. His eyes are wide and showing a vulnerability I can't ignore, turning a molten copper, lit from behind, his power shining through. “You are kind and caring, so you will likely worry about many things that you cannot control, but one thing you need not worry about is me. I will always be there to support you from this day forward. I promise that to you.” I open my mouth to interrupt. He rubs his hands up and down the backs of my thighs. “Wait. Let me finish.” He's silent for a long moment, making sure I'm not going to refuse or thinking about what he's going to say next. I'm not sure. “Only death can take me from you, and even then, I will wait until we are joined again. Our bond will ensure that. I will be yours, in life and in death, if you choose it.” His declaration sends the hum in my chest haywire, and the energy buzzing through my entire being makes my pulse quicken. My magic is begging to be released. I know that we need to complete the mating bond. The ritual practiced between mates completes the bond evermore, but with all that has been going on, I have not thought about it. Clearly, Dax had.

I feel a blush rise to my cheeks, but I refuse to be embarrassed by these emotions. I ease to my knees; both of us now facing each other.

“Thank you,” I say as I place each of my hands on either side of his face. The roughness of the hair growing there scratches and pokes at my fingers. He brings his hands to cover mine.

“Thank you for allowing me time to choose it. Thank you for understanding. I’m sure things would be different had my memories been intact.” I kiss his lips lightly. “Thank you for giving me that promise, Dax, but no matter the promise, I will always worry about those I care about. I will protect what I choose is mine, just as you will. And you are mine, Dax. I chose it.” My eyes well with unshed tears. I feel our bond in the depths of my soul. “There is no explaining how right it feels when I am with you. I have no doubt that you are the man meant for me in this life and beyond. I choose it, Dax. I choose this. You.” I press my forehead to his, and my breath catches as my magic pulses and Dax’s magic pulses in response.

When I open my eyes, I see that Dax’s wings have appeared at his back, and there is a light blue-black glowing magic surrounding his hands that has shifted to my hips. A similar moonlight iridescent white glow surrounds my own hands, which are just below his ears now.

Clasping our hands together between our bodies, our magic flickers before

a clap of purple zaps us both. We each suck in a sharp breath, then the magic is no more. “What was that?” I pant.

“I'm honestly not sure...are you ok?” He asked, brushing his hand down my arm.

“I think so. Are you?”

“Seems that way.” He clasps his hand at my elbow as he stands, helping me to my feet too. He brushes his fingers along my cheekbone before tucking a stray hair behind my ear and leaning in slowly, and he presses his lips to mine. His lips linger on a pause, as if asking permission for more. I answer by parting my lips, inviting him in. He strokes his tongue across my bottom lip, exploring and achingly slow. It's both meaningful and deliberate, but then it turns into a blaze of passion that I feel deep in my chest. My pulse quickens as warmth spreads over me. A need that neither of us knew we had alive under our skin as our hearts opened to one another.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

A KNOCK AT THE door causes us to reluctantly pull apart. Our chests rise and fall rapidly as we breathe the same air. Dax's lips curl up on one side before he moves to answer the door. His muscles flex as I place my hand on his arm, stopping him.

"Whatever today brings, just know that we are in this together, okay?"

"Okay," he replies, leaning in and kissing my forehead. Naza stands at the door when Dax opens it.

"I hope your morning has been good and you slept well." She smiles, her gaze flicking down to Dax's swollen lips and then to mine, causing me to blush once again. "Maki has sent me to retrieve you. It seems that Mr. Fornax-Ravendene has caused quite a fuss in the infirmary since waking moments ago. He only calmed when he was told you both would be coming to see him momentarily."

"Leave it to Trent." Dax chuckles. I'm just glad that he is awake and remembers both Dax and myself. I know the feeling of waking up not knowing where you are, and it is not fun. Especially when you don't remember anyone who has been in your life for a year. Naza leads us to the



infirmary, and I hear Trent's laugh even before the doors open, and it brings a smile to my face. Dax reaches over for my hand, lacing his fingers with mine. The bond mark on both of our arms is visible, so there will be no avoiding the conversation until later. I lift my chin and take a deep breath as we walk into the infirmary hand in hand.

I see Trent's smiling face before I see anyone else. His huge personality takes up most of the space in the room, and just how big he is compared to others. He nearly has the same bulk as Dax. As I let my gaze wander the room, I realized that I'm truly happy. These Fae have accepted me and all of my flaws and have helped me through some of my toughest times. My eyes flick between the faces now trained on Dax and me. Maki stands near Trent, a smile just as wide displayed on his face, then Miles, sitting up on a cot at the far end of beds, a smug grin on his face as he sees me, then Dax... He looks at our hands and the bond marks on our forearms.

“What the actual fuck... I knew something was up with you two!” Trent stomps and claps his hands one loud time. It makes a giggle bubble up from my chest.

Dax lets go of my hand and closes in on his brother, bringing him into a tight embrace. My shoulders sag with relief seeing Trent standing and whole. I turn to walk over to Miles, but my attention is snagged on the two cots before him. The still-sleeping females that were brought in. I recognize Kait, but her face... oh, Kait. My brows stitch together as I gape at her butchered and broken face.

“It was Cano or his men. I'm not sure which; she won't talk about it... my guess is on Cano, though. He was bragging about his artwork at one point, and I'm thinking this is what he was talking about.” Trent says this through clenched teeth as he walks to stand by her side. He wipes his thumb across one of the purplish-pink scars there. Sadness clouds his eyes as he looks down on her still form. She wasn't like this when I left them at the cabin. If only I could have helped them escape with me.

Dax comes up behind me, placing a hand on the small of my back. The buzz in my chest warms at the contact. It calms my racing heart as I watch Trent's heartbreak while looking at Kait.

“Ella?” Dax whispers, looking to the other cot. “Is she ok?”

“She hasn't said much, brother, but she seems to be ok for the most part. Considering what they did to Kait and me in the short time we were there, I'm honestly surprised; she's more whole than I would have imagined. At

least before the Raskin attacks.”

“Trent, I'm so sorry.” I start to tell him. He struts up to me, bringing me into a tight bear hug.

“Shhh,” he says, his mouth pressed to the top of my head. “You have no reason to be sorry, Rae. Look at that man right there.” He leans back and points to Dax. “My brother is alive because of you. You did that. You brought him back from the brink of death. If it weren't for all that has happened recently, we never would have learned who Cano *really* was. What he was capable of. We never would have found Ella.” His throat bobs as he swallows audibly, then blinks away the sadness I could see building in his eyes. He smiles over my shoulder where Dax is, and I don't even have to turn to know that Dax has a smile just as wide on his face. I feel the emotions vibrating off of them. It's overwhelming, but so happy I don't even try to shut it down.

Trent releases me, and I continue toward Miles. His smile is warm, and his emotions bounce to me with relief.

“You scared me back at that willow. I didn't know what happened to you, but I see now.” He gestures to my arm and then nods in the direction of Dax. “Divine intervention. The gods brought together what was meant to be for those who were worthy.” He smiles knowingly as recognition dawns on my face. “I had a feeling about you. Something pulled me to that cabin to help you all. If it weren't for that pull, I would have been sitting at Dax's side the whole time.”

“We all would have been dead had it not been for you, Miles. You are the true hero here. All of this... All of us... we owe you our lives.” I tell him, tears welling in my eyes.

“Nonsense. You would have managed.” He chews his bottom lip as the corners tilt up a fraction. He opens his arms, and I just about jump into them. His hug reminds me so much of my father that tears spill over and run salty wet trails down my cheeks. The emotions in the room overwhelm me, and my lip trembles as the tears flow freely from my eyes. Wiping the evidence from my cheeks, I build a wall blocking out everyone's emotions, and when I'm alone with only what I'm feeling, I know that I succeeded. However, when I feel a surge of pride, I know that Dax has poked through that wall. Our bond is stronger than any shield could be.

Our gazes meet from across the room, and we both light up, the corners of our mouths tilting up, for in that moment we are whole. While Kait and Mel

sleep, we are all safe; we're together. That in itself is reason enough for happiness. My heart swells as I think about all I have gained. Though I may have lost memories and my family died, I've found family in these Fae that surround me, and I will be forever grateful for them and continue to build relationships with them. We will plot to take Cano down after we bask in the glow of our joy, even if only for a moment.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

WAKING UP STRAPPED TO a bed, disoriented, was fucked up. The rush of panic I felt was all-consuming. The last thing I remembered was almost being to Loema before a Raskin attack. We were so outnumbered, it's a miracle that we all made it out alive. Some soldiers that came to our aid didn't. My first thoughts upon waking up went to Ella, Kait, and Miles. I didn't know if they were okay. I didn't know anything other than it appeared that I was captive again. Thank the gods, that's not the case, and we are all together, including Dax and Rae.

I knew I had witnessed something brewing between Rae and Dax a couple of times back in Ravendene before shit hit the fan. I didn't get to even question it, though, with Mel being kidnapped, Dax being cursed, and us leaving on our unsanctioned mission. Even Rae losing her memories... all the fucking things. I take a deep breath and release it in a huff before shoving more roasted chicken into my mouth. Being put into a magical coma to heal rapidly was freaking awesome when you think about the brains behind it, but damn did it leave a guy starving. Since waking up, I swear I've eaten enough to feed a small village. Lucky for me, Maki has plenty of food, and his cooks

are amazing. I lick my fingers as I finish the dish.

Rae and Dax are together, like irrevocably together. The first true bond that I have heard of since the kingdom fell. I guess there could be others, but it's kind of a big deal. That kind of news would spread quickly if there were. After our brief reunion in the infirmary, Dax said that he and Rae were going to go out to speak with a seer, but as soon as they were finished, they would come to see how we were all doing and hopefully get to talk to Kait and Ella. The vampire in charge here runs a tight ship and has been pushing herbs and elixirs at me every half hour for the last three hours. I'm ready to get the hell out of here.

There is a moan to my left, and I hop out of my cot to go to Kait as she wakes. Her eyes flutter open slowly, becoming more aware of herself and her surroundings.

“Hey there, beautiful. Careful sitting up; the magic they had us under is a doozy to come out of. I felt like I was going to vomit for at least an hour.” I give her a coy smile and reach up, taking her hand in mine.

“W—where are we?” Her voice is heavy. A wince forms on her face as she attempts to sit up. Taking her hand, I gently guide her up, and offer her a drink of water. I vividly recall the mouth of sand feeling I had when I woke up.

“We’re in Loema. We’re all okay.” I bent over her and placed a kiss on her forehead, and her eyes crinkled at the corners. “Are you still hurting? I can get the healer.” I say as a frown tugs at my brow.

“No. Thank you, Trent; it's not something that a healer can help. Your lips touched some of the scarring on my face. I can't bear for you or anyone else to see it, let alone touch it... I'm sure it will be like you said; I will get over it with time.” A moment of silence passes, her face falling blank as she thinks. “And revenge.”

“You are beautiful regardless of the scarring is what I said, but revenge could help get your mind over it...” A smirk spreads across my face, and she rolls her eyes. A good sign.

“Dax? Is he?”

“Alive and well. Rae did it. There is more, but that is not my information to share. They will be back soon and can fill you in.” She narrows her eyes at me, my smile making her suspicious, but I just shake my head with a twitch of my brow. “I’m not spilling anything.” When she rolls her eyes again, my smile widens. I know she feels better if she has an attitude.

The doors clang open, and Maki stalks into the room, arms wide, zeroing in on Kait. “Kait Divins! You’re awake. Thank the gods!” He laughs, stepping right between Kait and me, and I can’t help but laugh too as I step back, giving him room to greet her. He dives right in, hugging her tight, and she smiles wide in response, curling her arms around him in return. It reminds me of the years I spent growing up with them and any time we were away from each other for an extended period of time. Giving them a moment to themselves, I step over to the next cot to check on Ella.

She hasn’t woken since we arrived; the healer said she was unconscious when we were all found. A head wound seems to be the reason. They placed her under a magically induced coma anyway to speed up the healing process. A process this healer here said she’d come up with on her own. As impressive as it is, I still worry about my baby sister. I sit in the chair at her bedside and take her small, delicate hand in mine, resting my forehead on our joined hands. I close my eyes and send a plea to the gods to watch over her. To let her return to us whole and unbothered by this head injury and any other physical or mental injuries she could have sustained since the time she was taken from us in Ravendene. I don’t even want to think about the atrocities that could have happened to her.

My eyes are still closed as I let memories of my younger years flood my senses. When times seemed simpler even though they weren’t. Our parents tried to protect us the best they could from the stresses they were under, but sometimes we overheard things that weren’t meant for our ears.

*“He needs to be secluded, Travis! You know it as well as I do! He should be separated from the others and taught at a higher level. He is strong—unbelievably so. A power so raw at such a young age? I have never, in all my years, felt something like that. He has the potential to be a weapon of war! He could claim the kingdom if taught right!”* Soren Croix bellowed.

*“That weapon of war you speak of is my son, Soren. You need to watch your tongue.”* Dad seethed. *“I consider you my friend, but I am your Lord first and foremost. I know that Dax is powerful. I too have felt it, and while you think that he is sent from the gods to be a weapon of war, his mother and I believe his path to be different. He will continue to train with the others, and he will continue to take the additional studies I have laid out for him. There will be no more discussions about him being a weapon for us to use to take the kingdom. If anything, one day he will be the one to restore the kingdom, and my hope for him is that it will be peaceful.”* My father spoke

*calmly but assertively to Cano's father. We were playing hide and seek, and I hid in his library. When they came in arguing, I froze in fear of being discovered. My father's library was one place he forbade us to play in.*

*“You are making a mistake, Travis. Power rules in Aldramani. The next to rule will take the throne by force; it will not happen with peaceful negotiations. You have to know I am right.” Soren clenched his teeth, his jaw ticking.*

*“Perhaps you are, but my son, he will know how to live righteously with the power he has been gifted by the gods. He is meant for greatness, which I have no doubt about. I feel it in my bones, but not the way you deem necessary. You may raise your son the way you see fit, Soren, but do not tell me how to raise any of my children.” Dad’s eyes darken as he steps into Soren's space. Chest to chest, he looks down at him. “The next time you think to tell me your opinion on how I should raise one of them, I will cut your tongue from your mouth and shove it down your throat so you can choke on the words you speak. This conversation is finished. Leave me.” I have never heard my father speak so cruelly before; my heart is racing and my eyes are wide in fear. I bite down on my lip to stifle a sob. I didn’t like hearing people argue. I was a sensitive ten-year-old.*

*My father saunters to the large, arched double doors, pointing Cano’s father out of the room. Before he shut the door, I heard Cano’s father, his voice a low growl.*

*“I will never speak on it again after I say what I must. Dax will come into great power, and if you don’t teach him to wield it the way that he should know how—it will be your fault when it becomes too late. Mark my words.” My father slams the door in his face. Grunting as he turns to the desk and sits in his old leather wingback chair.*

*“My boys are destined for greatness, but they will be on the right side, not the side of corruption and dissolution of our great kingdom. The crown may have fallen, but it will rise again.” He takes a photo out of the top drawer of his desk, looks at it for a moment, then puts it back and locks the drawer. He looks around as he stands, then leaves the library the same way Soren left.*

*A hand rests on my shoulder, pulling me from my dream. I’m not sure how long I was asleep. I lift my head and see Maki standing to my right, a somber look on his face.*

*“I don’t like seeing you all in these conditions, cousin. Nonetheless, I am glad you’re here and safe.” He clears his throat. “I spoke with the healer; she*

said you and Miles are cleared to leave the infirmary. Miles refuses, saying he will stay here as long as Melani is still unconscious. You are free to move about the castle; I was hoping that you would like to join me for lunch?”

I run a hand down my face and look around the room. Mel is still asleep, and Miles and Kait are speaking to each other in hushed voices. There is no reason I couldn't leave for a bit. My legs could use a stretch. Plus, I feel like I could eat a whole damn feast to myself, and I know how good the cooks are here in Loema. Maki doesn't mess around; only the finest. My mouth waters just thinking about it.

“I think lunch sounds fucking amazing, but I'd like a shower first if it's not too much to ask, cousin,” I ask him as I stand and sling my arm over his shoulders as we walk to the door.

“I think a shower for you would do us all well, Trent. You smell something fierce.” He laughs a deep-bellied laugh, pulling me in to join him. Before I leave the room, I make eye contact with Kait and Miles, nodding to them and sending Kait a wink. She rolls her eyes but smiles back.

“Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone,” I call to her.

“They are both safe; I will ensure it,” Miles promises. And at those parting words, the door closes, and Maki shows me to a room where I can shower and get rid of my stink.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THANKFUL DOESN'T COME CLOSE to how I feel about my siblings being safe here in Loema with us. The need for Ella to wake up and be okay eats at me, though, and Kait too. The healer in charge assures me that she believes they would both make full recoveries, but Ella, being so young and not yet ascended, may take more time to recover. Raelle and I left the others this morning to head into town. We plan to meet the seer contact I have; hopefully, we can get some answers.

“Raelle, this woman we are going to see...” Her head whips in my direction, with her eyes narrowed, she purses her lips.

“This better not be another female of your past that *clearly* still has an attraction to you, Dax, or so help me.” Before she can continue on that path, a deep laugh rips from me. I wrap my arm around her stiff shoulders and twist her body flush with mine. I pull us into a darkened alley between two of the limestone buildings.

“This...” She sucks in a sharp breath, and when I kiss her nose, it scrunches up into a sneer. “She is no female of my past in the sense you are thinking.” A chuckle rolls from my lips. “There will be no need for claws.” I go to kiss her nose again, but she swats me away, and I flinch out of her reach, which brings a laugh out again. It feels good to allow myself to laugh.

“Seriously, Dax, I won’t have the patience for another Vi...” She draws out the nickname like it's making her sick. “Especially if she tries to gain your interest while I am just feet away from you. I'm not a jealous person, but I am not a spineless person either, and I won't let some *bitch* whom I've just met try to make a claim on what is mine.” I growl as I take her lips passionately, the fierceness of her words overwhelming me.

Hearing her claim me as her own makes blood rush to areas it should certainly not be rushing to in this dark alley. I move my lips to her throat and towards the sensitive skin below her ear. Trailing kisses everywhere I can on her soft skin. The moan that escapes her makes my dick twitch and grind against her. She reaches up and places both hands around my neck, and I hoist her up, pressing her back against the wall as she wraps her legs around my waist. The only thing separating our bodies is the leather of my breeches and the thin fabric of her leggings.

“This is so inappropriate, Dax.” She pants into my ear, her lips skimming the shell of it, sending shivers down my arms and a pulse to my cock. She feels the swell and grinds her body with a quiet whimper. I lift my gaze to hers, noticing her biting that damn lip. Just as I go to steal it from her teeth with my own, I hear someone clear their throat.

I whip around to face whoever has snuck up on us, dropping Raelle to her feet and shielding her behind me in the process. Her breath catches at the sudden change of position.

“Don’t stop on my account.” A raspy voice croaks from a cloak in front of me. She lifts her hand to the cloak hood, dropping it, revealing weathered chocolatey brown skin, white hair, and her eyes a warm golden brown. She titters as her eyebrow quirks up and a smile breaks across her face, revealing her sharp canines, and I laugh too. Raelle looks confused, which just makes me laugh even more.

“Sariah. This is Raelle.” I sidestep, so Raelle is no longer shielded behind my body. “Raelle, this is Sariah, the seer we were on our way to visit.”

“Your mate... Interesting,” Sariah says with a knowing smile.

“Sariah, as cozy as this alley is, do you have somewhere more private where we can discuss some things with you?” I ask. She smiles, shifting her gaze between Raelle and me.

“Yes. Let us. Just this way. The ally has seen enough action today. Eh, Dax?” She winks and saunters deeper into the alleyway.

Shaking my head, I reach out to Raelle, and she places her hand in mine.

She leans in close to me and whispers, “She's making my power go kind of zappy. I don't know how to fully explain the feeling. It's not bad... I can tell that much.” I contemplate what that could mean as we continue to follow Sariah.

“Your power stems from your ancestors. Perhaps they are excited about the path you're on? Or maybe they recognize Sariah or her power as it recognizes my own?”

“I guess it could be that,” she said, but her eyebrows stitched together like she was still deep in thought about it.

We step out of the darkened alley and are greeted with a beautiful garden courtyard between the tall buildings, with bright light filtering through in patches. The greenery climbs the tall walls in areas, and so many different colored flowers and shades of green foliage surround us. The red brick ground is a stark yet stunning contrast. Raelle's eyes sparkle as she takes in the beautiful space. At the center, there is a large fountain bubbling with water, and at its top, two birds carved from stone. As we get closer, Raelle drops my hand and picks up her pace. I reach for her to stay with me, but as I do, Sariah places her hand on mine to stop me. She shakes her head and then points ahead to Raelle.

“She is being drawn to the magic there. Let us wait and see how they interact,” she whispers for only me to hear. Her eyes narrow on Raelle, and her lips curve up slowly at the corners. I have no choice but to watch in awe as Raelle reaches the fountain and extends her hand out to touch the carved birds. Ravens. One black as night, the other white as snow. Her hand brushes the black raven, and she smiles, the look of pure happiness brightens her face. She then turns her gaze to the white raven, and curiosity paints her features as she brushes her fingertips along the bird's wing. I see a visible shudder run through her; a glimmer of power ripples across the water of the fountain. I hear Raelle take a sudden breath. Her gaze is stolen by whatever she sees there in the water.

“Go to her now,” Sariah whispers again, and I don't hesitate. I close the distance between Raelle and myself. I come up close behind her and wrap my arms around her waist from behind. As I do, I'm sucked into a vision she's having.

*We are flying; below us, chaos is breaking out everywhere. Confused and terrified, Fae run from where they were gathered at the royal Colosseum. Thunder rolls and lightning lights the sky in flashes of purple and white.*

*Screams of terror carry to us on the wind, deep green and black smoke begins to engulf one corner of the arena. A sudden shock illuminates where I hold Raelle in my arms... our attention is snagged by an intense fire that is unleashed and aimed toward the black and green smoke. That's when I realized that I was not even holding Raelle. I am seeing all of this through her eyes. She—is flying... The shock of light is coming from her. Her hands, her body, illuminated in an ethereal bright white light... she's not flying, but rather ascending, floating. Her body bows at the back as she is lifted to the heavens above us. Below, I hear my own voice screaming her name.*

The vision blurs, and I am brought back to the present, where I am holding Raelle in the courtyard. Raelle begins to slump in my arms, and I am forced to hold her up. Panicked, I immediately look back to Sariah.

“What's happening?” I ask as my heart lurches in my chest. I lift Raelle into my arms, cradling her so her head rests on my chest.

“She is ok. The power of the vision just took a lot of energy from her. She could still be within its grasp. Bring her to my study. This way.” She guides me to a short staircase, which leads to a door painted forest green with an ornate golden handle and knocker. She swipes her hand down the center of the door, and there is a ripple of magic undoing whatever protective spell was on it before the door clicks open and she walks inside.

Once inside, I look around the area. I have not been here in many years now. Not since I was seeking answers of my own after my parents were killed. I didn't get the answers I was looking for then; Sariah just kept telling me I was asking the wrong questions and looking for the wrong answers. Ever the cryptic, which I was hoping wasn't the case today with Raelle. Though, I thought Raelle would have had more opportunity to speak with her...

“You've come here for answers once again. Have you changed the questions you ask?” She asks me this as she places a pillow at the end of a couch and gestures for me to lay Raelle down. I place her on the couch and lift her legs as I sit too, with her legs resting over my lap. I keep one arm across her thighs, where I trace small circles into the skin that is exposed above her waistband.

“My questions remain the same, but they are not the answers I seek today. I brought Raelle here to seek her truth.”

“But you know her truth already, do you not?” She asks with her pierced eyebrow raised.

“I suspect there are things that she doesn’t know, even from before she lost the memories of her time in Ravendene.” My gaze drifts to Raelle, then down to my hand that rests on her knee. My voice drops to a whisper as I watch and paint delicate lines and circles onto her skin. “I believe Raelle to be the daughter of the fallen Queen Selene and King Algerone Aberra of Aldramani. The heir to the kingdom. Our Queen.” I close my eyes and then open them before finishing, “I believe I saw a prophecy while I was cursed, and I think it was about Raelle.”

“Perhaps,” Sariah says cryptically. She sits silent for a moment, as though she is thinking about what she is going to say or *not* say next, and I narrow my eyes at her. She smiles but continues speaking, making my shoulders relax from the tension that was building with her silence. “I believe I have also seen the prophecy you speak of, and you are right to conclude it is about Raelle. Although you don’t see all that it is, and it is not something I can give you the answer to, Dax. Raelle and you are destined; the bond marked on your skin says as much, but how that ends up is up to the two of you. What paths you take... Raelle, her destination, how she gets there, and what that looks like at the end.” Her eyes darken as she thinks about whatever she knows, but isn’t saying. “There are many outcomes to how that unfolds.” She smiles again, but this time it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You have not told her what you suspect.” She asks, but it’s not a question.

“I haven’t. I’m afraid it will hurt her, and I’m afraid of what it means for me.” I admit, guilt thickening in my throat.

“Being afraid is understandable, Dax, but secrets can fester and poison what is good and growing. Do not dwell in the shadows when you have the light among you.” She reaches down to the wrinkle that has formed on Raelle’s forehead between her eyebrows, smoothing it and swiping it away with her thumb. “She will sleep for a while. Take her somewhere to rest. When she wakes, tell her what you know—if you care for her like I believe you do. Otherwise, I see that your paths are already changing.”



I chose to fly Raelle to a place I have not visited since I was much younger, just a boy. Trent and I would come here often to escape the confines of the castle when our parents were in meetings or out on missions. Sometimes Maki, Kait, and even Cano would join us, but it was more so Trent and my spot. Trent and I found the cove off of the Blackwater Lake while flying one day and decided on a swim, the memory of that day surfacing as the cove comes into view as the clouds break from below us.

I cross the sky towards one of the grassy areas that have a tree covering. Landing with a light thud, I move to lay Raelle down. As her body touches the grass there her eyes flutter open briefly.

“Don’t leave me, please. I need you here.” Her eyes roll back into her head as they flutter shut again. My heart sinks into my chest; her plea makes me ache.

“I won't leave Raelle. I'll be here until you wake. Rest, Love.” I brush her hair back from her face. I sit with my body leaning against the tree, the rough bark pulling at the fabric of my tunic. Raelle sleeps with her body between my legs, her head resting on my chest and stomach. As she gets comfortable, she reaches around my waist, hugging my body to hers. I run my fingers along her jaw and through her hair as I think about what exactly I'm going to say to her when she wakes. I have to tell her.

The truth can be hard to tell someone who's only known lies their entire life, but there is too much at stake not to reveal it to her. Who she is, who she is meant to be. Who she's not. I close my eyes, tipping my head to the heavens, the sound of leaves rustling in a light breeze calming me. I cannot

be selfish about this. Though the feelings of unfairness linger in my heart, it is unfair for her that she has never known her true heritage. Her parents and brother were not who she thought them to be all her life. Not getting the time to bask in the feelings of just being mates. Bonding emotionally, physically, and in all the ways bonded mates should. Our bonding feels rushed, but the potency of it is no less than what I would imagine a bond should be regardless.

I feel like I only closed my eyes for a moment, but when I open them again, I see that the sun is setting on the water of the cove. The orange and pink reflecting on the black surface, and the first stars already twinkling to life. My gaze drifts down to Raelle, and I see that she is awake in my arms, twisted so she is watching the sunset there also. Her eyes turned to mine, as though she felt my gaze on her. “Hi.” She smiles shyly.

“Hi.” I smile in return, my eyes hooded. She blinks slowly, taking a deep breath and releasing it.

“It’s peaceful here. I felt it the moment you brought me here. My nightmares turned into dreams of the future.” As she says the words, she shifts, sitting up and spinning around to face me. She straddles my lap and places her hands on my shoulders, then brushes them up to either side of my neck, eliciting shivers to roll down my spine. “Our future.” She leans in and kisses me softly, our lips lingering in a slow dance. I pull back, looking into her deep emerald eyes.

“I don’t deserve you,” I whisper, lowering my head. She pushes me to look back into her eyes.

“You do.”

“How are you feeling?” I ask, needing to change the subject as guilt tightens my chest.

“I’m—okay. I’m confused a little, but I have a feeling of calm washed over me. Almost a sense of rightness, if that makes sense.” A blush creeps into her cheeks, and I give her a lopsided smile.

“This place.” I look back out to the water as the sun dips below its surface. “It will do that to you,” I tell her, leaning in and kissing the tip of her nose. “There is something important I need to talk to you about, and I must admit I’m worried about having the discussion. For multiple reasons. However, I know that it must be done.” I rub my hand up and down her spine, and she leans into me pressing our foreheads together.

“Dax, we are bonded. There are going to be many discussions we are

going to have in our lifetime, but nothing will change that fact.” I can think of a couple that could change that, but I say nothing as I listen to her. “I’m starting to understand why you were chosen to be my mate. You are strong.” She rubs her hands down the muscles of my arms. “You are smart.” She kisses my forehead, then presses hers against it again. “You are passionate.” Her hand presses between us and rests upon my heart, and it thunders under her touch. Her words made my head swim. I place one hand between us and lay it over hers; the hastened beats match my own. The need I feel for her is nearly overwhelming, but I need to get this out.

“Raelle, I believe your parents are not who you think.” The words spill out of me, my brows pinched and nerves bubbling. I rub my thumb over the skin on the back of her hand, where I hold it to my heart. She doesn’t say anything. Just stares into my eyes, and the green penetrating brightness dims as she processes what I just said. “After you passed out, I spoke with Sariah. She confirmed my assumption,” I said quietly.

“What are you saying?” She trembles as she pushes back to get a better view of me.

“The parents you grew up with, the family you grieve. They are not of your blood, Raelle. They may be parents and a brother to you, but not in the way you’ve been taught to believe. Your blood is not that of the Apus line.” She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

“I know.” Her response is not what I expected, and my brows shoot up at her words. She smiles as she takes my face in. The warmth in her eyes forces a smile to my face as well, and as I do, she pushes her fingertips into my hairline at the nape of my neck. “I believe I’m going to have wings when I ascend, Dax; I saw it.” An elated glow paints her face as she looks deep into my soul. “We will fly together one day.” She says this as she closes the distance between our lips once more.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE VISION I WAS pulled into at the fountain was something surreal. I could sense Dax's presence there for a moment, but when the vision rippled and changed, I knew he was no longer with me. No longer able to witness what I was seeing. I was flying with my own wings. Large wings sat at my back, just like Dax's, but they were not black like his. My wings were a beautiful, stark white with an iridescent sheen that made the feathers look as though they were glowing in the light of the eclipse. I spread them wide, catching an updraft, drifting with the wind. A freedom so sure took over my entire being. It was as if I had never lived before and was finally alive. I knew at that moment that I was a shifter, just like Dax. A gene that neither of my parents nor my brother carried. That fact should have been apparent, but I didn't put it together until Dax spoke the words. There is no way I could be an Apus if the vision were to come true.

Oddly enough, I wasn't mad about the fact. Confused yes, but regardless of who my biological parents were... the parents who raised me showed me love. They taught me to be compassionate and fierce, and my brother taught me wit and grit. I will always love them for what they each had given me, but

I did want to know why they never told me. I wouldn't love them any less.

My bond with Dax is something I can't explain completely, but there is a pull to him in every single way I could ever imagine. In the short time we have been bonded, the energy that surrounds me, the feelings that pulse through me...Every fiber. I never thought it would be possible for me to feel this way. Especially with what I've been dealing with as of late. However, in times like this, when I'm in Dax's arms with nothing but the night surrounding us, when the calm outweighs the chaos, I can truly just be...I lay in his arms, my head pressed to his chest, and I listen to the steady beat of his heart. I am growing to love a man I barely know, and while that scared me, it also enthralled me.

"What are you thinking?" He rasps, and the deepness of his voice vibrates through me.

"I want to know why my parents never told me they were not my biological parents. I want to know what family I come from." I sit up, still straddling his lap. "I want to know what powers I am to expect when I ascend. It makes me question so many things."

"Raelle, when I—When you said your mother's name, Lilith. I knew, as you said it, that she could not have been your mother. My family knew Lilith. She only had one pregnancy. After the kingdom fell, she and her husband and son disappeared. Only to resurface the year before you showed up at Ravendene. I've not heard their names since. Not until you mentioned them to Maki. When we talked in the library last night, that is what we discussed. We have an idea of who you may descend from..." He brings his hand up to my chin, and his thumb pulls my bottom lip from being trapped under my teeth, and a coy smile surfaces on my face. "I need to concentrate on this conversation." He smirks, and his dimple appears on his cheek, sending a jolt of heat to my core.

"Sorry." I was not sorry. I smile, biting my lip again. His nostrils flare as he closes his eyes and smiles wider.

"You are my Queen," he murmurs. I press my lips together, but can't stop the giggle from escaping.

"That is not a pet name I think I could get behind..." I raise an eyebrow at him teasingly, and he laughs.

"No, Raelle, you are the last living Heir. The Queen of Aldramani. The last of the fallen." The words he speaks echo through my head. Words from the prophecy. My face falls as I realize that he's being serious.

“You think my parents are the late King and Queen of the kingdom? They died...” I trail off.

“They died the day you were born, Raelle.” He finishes my thought. “The same day the kingdom fell. You are the last of the Aberra line, not Apus.” I shake my head in denial of what he's saying. “That means you are a shifter as your father before you. Algerone Aberra was a Raven shifter as I am, Trent, Maki. You seem to have some of the gifts of either sight or empath too, possibly both. Your mother, Queen Selene, was a great seer.”

“I know the history, Dax.” I cut him off quietly. He stops talking and lifts my chin with his forefinger. His eyes flicker between mine, searching. “Sorry,” I whisper.

“No, you're not.” His lips quirk up to one side. “But that's what I love about you. Your inability to be sorry about something you are not sorry for. Your stubbornness and strength of your own mind.” He kisses my lips, then pulls away, looking into my eyes. “Among other things.” He winks. “It's your choice who knows about this. Maki has sworn his silence until I was to speak with you and know your thoughts on how to proceed.”

“How to proceed?” I ask as a frown pulls down my brow.

“Yes, you are the last living heir, and you are about to ascend Raelle. Once ascended, you would typically take the throne, as the King and Queen no longer sit upon it.” I'm shaking my head before I even realize I'm objecting to what he is saying.

“How? How do you know it's true?” I ask him.

“Many years ago, Lilith, the woman you know as your mother...”

“She is my mother, Dax. Blood or not,” I interrupt, my brows pulled down at his way of addressing the woman whom I've known as such my entire life. The woman I love and miss more than anything. I close my eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to keep the tears from falling.

“I know.” He squeezes at my hips gently. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean that she wasn't your mother—your mother came to Loema to seek aid in protecting you. I was obviously very young then, but I remember hearing my parents talk of a baby born to the king and queen on the day of their deaths. The day the kingdom fell. I never heard anything else about it, obviously, the secret was kept quiet, but when you were twenty years old, your parents, Lilith, and her husband—your parents—noticed that your gifts were emerging and came to ask for guidance, help really... Being the eldest in the Ravendene line, I was expected to learn the ways of my father, so I was privy

to such meetings, as was Maki. There was no mention of your name. Only that you were studying and that you had begun tactical training. Your parents were supposed to bring you to Loema the following year after their trip to Castenelle, where they were to secure some sort of package that the King and Queen left for you.”

“Then they died,” I say absently as I look to the stars that shine brightly above us now. The darkness of night now blankets us where we lie near the water's edge.

“I assume they didn't want to tell you until the time was right. It was for your safety; you have to understand that. I'm sorry, Raelle.” And I know he is. I can feel it in the hum in my chest, the emotions bleeding into me. His sorrow, his pain for my own, his trepidation.

“This is so weird.” I laugh, and his eyebrows skyrocket.

“I could probably think of different words to use... but yeah... it's weird.” He chuckles, pulling me closer.

“When I saw you down in that arena...” My words trail off as I think about the vision. A slow exhale leaves me as a shudder works down my spine. “Fighting with your fire and that sinister smoke trying to consume and overpower you? I felt a fit of anger so white-hot it was all-consuming. The thought that something may happen to you... and you leave me in this world alone was agony, Dax. I could not bear it. Even with just getting to know you... again...” I smile at him. “I know in my heart that I would choose you; even if my memories are intact, I feel it in my bones. Nothing would change this feeling.” His eyes shift to the molten copper that is lit from behind, and I realize that this is something that happens only when he feels intense emotions. Like an uncontrollable reflex of his shifter nature.

“After everything you've learned today, you're concerned about me?” His brows draw together, and he slowly trails his hand up my spine beneath the thin training tunic, sending shivers all over my body.

“It seems since I woke up without memories and ran into Trent, my concerns have been of only you.” I give him a coy smile. Reaching up, I brush my hand against the stubble on his jaw. I'm concerned about other things, obviously, but I can only process one thing at a time right now. And right now, it's that of our bond—the one thing that has happened that I feel a complete rightness about. “I want to have a bonding ceremony. I want to finish the bond with our blood and our bodies.” As I finish the sentence, I can feel the hard press of his solid length between my legs. I grind down on it,

and he grunts under the pressure. A twitch pulls up the corner of his mouth.

“I want you to be sure. I—You need to be...” His breathy words are cut off by my lips. The kiss is unhurried, deep, and passion-filled as I work my fingers into his hair.

“There is nothing. I’m. More. Sure of.” The space between words is intercepted by the joining of our lips. He deepens the kiss, the passion of it causing liquid heat to pool at my core. Through this kiss, I can feel his acceptance of what I said I wanted, but I need to hear him speak it. “I want to be sure that is what you want too, before we do this.”

He lays kisses along the length of my neck and stops at my collarbone. I feel him laugh, the deep rumble of it vibrating all the way down to where his cock presses against my center. “I was ready to take you the moment I saw you. The moment you walked through the door of the Inquisition center, the very day you fell into our lives. I fought the pull I felt for you every day since, Raelle, but I refuse to lose another day.” He kisses my shoulder once more before continuing, “When you woke me from that curse and took my hand, allowing me to pull you from that window... I was owned by you. I will not refuse the pull I feel to you. Not anymore. Since I’ve accepted that, I’ve realized the shadows I’ve hidden in all this time were cast away. You brought a light into my world when you came for me as I lay on my deathbed. You are the flame that drew me home and burned away the darkness that I was shrouded in.” A tear rolls down my cheek, and he kisses it away before I even register that I'm crying.

I don't understand how Dax thinks himself unworthy.

“I have a request,” I say as I pull back so I can see his full face.

“Anything.”

“I want the announcement of my lineage to come during the ceremony, and I want it to take place tomorrow at sunset.” His eyes shift between mine. He must find what he's looking for because he reaches up, cupping my jaw and pulling my face to his, and he kisses me once again. His lips curling into a smile.

“Yes, my Queen.” He says into my lips, then bites down hard on my bottom lip, causing a gasp to come from me. “Let's get back to the castle before they send scouts looking for us.” He says before he parts my lips with his tongue in a passionate kiss, making me ache for him. He scoops me up in his arms as he stands. His wings glimmer into existence, and he bends at the knees, propelling us up into the night sky. I laugh at the way my stomach

drops from the sudden movement. “I love the sound of your laugh.”

“I can’t wait until I can fly too,” I admit with a smile branded on my face.

“I will miss holding you when I fly.”

“Perhaps we can take turns,” I jibe.

“That’s cute.” He rolls his eyes, and I laugh harder.

His wings beat at a furious speed as he flies us toward the castle, the stars blurring at the speed, but I only watch Dax. The beauty of his features, his strong jaw dusted with stubble, the set of his perfectly shaped dark brows, full lips, and the way his hair seems to always fall into his hazel-green eyes. He is perfect, and I can’t believe he is mine.



## CHAPTER FORTY

ARRIVING BACK IN RAVENDENE is chaotic. The regime is a fucking mess, with most of the higher-ranking generals killed or not yet returned from the last mission we went on. The failed fucking mission. A growl builds in my throat and escapes as I ponder all the trouble this has caused me. Those Raskin's fucked everything up, and Trent and the others getting away really took a shit on my plans. Flynn tells me that there has been unrest amongst the townsfolk and the regime due to loyalties to the Fornax-Ravendene siblings, who are now missing.

Fucking perfect.

I've already sent a messenger to Demetrey to notify Eleonora. I need to know if she has any ideas about how to get this shit back in our favor. She has only been sending a "trusted advisor" in her place for at least a year or more now, and it's getting tiring, especially since I have not even seen the witch's face. She's always cloaked and has a masking spell in place, so all I see are shadows within the cloak. I fucking hate it.

I spent the majority of the night elbows deep in the shit that is my life and trying to get this place back under control. By the early morning hours, as the sun is just cresting the horizon, I manage to lay in bed. I sink into the mattress, my body spent and my mind utterly exhausted. With a long exhale, I close my eyes and fall asleep without any trouble for once, and no dreams

haunt me. Though I knew I was not going to get much sleep, I was looking forward to having breakfast with Ambriel. That sassy beauty has gotten under my skin in ways no one ever has. Her constant questions and incessant snark refreshing in a way I didn't know I would like.

Sleeping like a rock for a few hours did little to expel the exhaustion. I woke up to get ready for my breakfast with Ambriel an hour ago. As I step out of the shower, there is a knock at the door. I groan. What now? Can no one else handle whatever it is they've come to bother me with? I wrap myself in a towel and saunter to the door, opening it wide. I expect Flynn, but when I see the feisty, raven-haired Ambriel standing next to a red-faced Flynn, I just about choke on the air I'm breathing. Ambriel stands in front of him, hand on her hip and a look of defiance on her face.

"I'm sorry, sir, she blasted past me and I—I ... She, well... She insisted that she come directly to you instead of waiting in the dining room." I quirk an eyebrow up at her.

"Is that so? Well, dear? Would you like to come in while I finish getting dressed? You're welcome to help." My lips twitch up at the corners when I notice her gaze dart to my towel.

"Pass." She rolls her eyes. "But I would like you to know that I'm here, and I won't be waiting forever for you to get all pretty, so.... If you aren't down timely, I will just take my food to go."

A grin lifts my lips fully, and I tilt my head to one side, taking my time to look at her head to toe. Thinking about all the naughty things I would love to do with that tight little body and that dirty mouth. She bites her lip, and the sight of it has me getting hard standing here in my fucking towel. Hell.

"Best get ready then, shouldn't I?" I wink and close the door. As it clicks shut, I hear her barely stifled laugh through the thick wood. I cross the room to the closet and take myself in at the full-length mirror. You can clearly see the hard length of me pressing against the towel wrapped around my waist. "Get your shit together, Cano. Getting a fucking chub just at the thought of a mouth around your cock. What the fuck?" I chastise myself.

I dress in my usual casual attire: dark brown breeches, white linen tunic, my dagger sheathed at my chest, and a short sword at my hip and boots. I scoop some wax from a small jar and run it through my dark hair, slicking the longer hair at the top back so it stays out of my face. Before heading downstairs, though, I stop at the small table by the entrance and pick up a small box, a gift I had brought up from my personal treasury, an additional



thank you to Ambriel for her companionship on our trip back to Ravendene. I shake my head, stuffing the box into my pocket.

When I arrive at the dining room, the table is empty, but I hear a tisk-tisk from one of the chairs in the sitting area in front of the large fireplace. Ambriel's legs dangle over the side arm of the chair as she sits sideways. Legs crossed at the knee, the one on top bouncing...

"You almost didn't have a breakfast date." She kicks her bare foot, pointing at the other chair with her toes. "Sit." She commands it, and the corner of my mouth ticks up at her tone.

"Shall we have breakfast brought in?" I ask her as I comply with her demand and sit in the chair. I can see her face now, and she is smiling with smug satisfaction. I raise my eyebrows at her, and she just shrugs her shoulders.

"Sure. I could eat."

I turn to find the housemaids standing at the door, waiting for my instruction. "Please bring in breakfast for us. We will eat on the balcony; it's a nice morning." She nods and leaves the room with haste. My gaze sweeps back to Ambriel; her eyes are closed and her foot still bouncing. While she can't see me, I take all of her in. She is wearing black leggings that leave little to the imagination. Her socks and boots lay discarded at the foot of the chair, and a matching black tunic with a silver chain belt just below her full breasts. The tunic is simple, with silver stitching along the collar that splits at the center, revealing just enough cleavage to draw my eye. Her hair is down, the soft curls spilling over the arm of the chair. She really is beautiful, and without a stitch of makeup on her face, she doesn't even have to try.

I reach out to score a line up the center of her arched foot with my finger, but just before I do, she swings them, kicking my hand and placing her delicate feet on the ground. She furrows her brow and looks as though she is going to say something, but before she does, the maid knocks at the door, announcing breakfast.

"Enter." I call out, and several people rush in with plates, bowls, and bottles. They begin to set up the table on the balcony.

Ambriel slips her socks on and then slides her small feet into the boots, and as I offer a hand to her to join me, she stands, brushing past my hand and basically dancing out the doors. Her hair blows in a breeze as she walks outside. Spinning around after she sees the breakfast set up, her eyes are wide, and a bright white smile on her face.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked. So, I had them bring it all.” I say as I join her on the balcony.

“I mean... eggs and bacon would have been sufficient... but...” Her eyebrows pull together as she thinks of what she wants to say. “Thank you.” Her usual golden skin turns pink at the center of her cheeks, and she averts her eyes. I give her a silent nod, pulling out a chair for her, which she actually takes, surprising the hell out of me. She pulls a napkin into her lap. Surprise must be written on my face because she looks at me with one eyebrow hitched.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t think you’d take the seat.”

“Why wouldn’t I take the seat?” she snaps.

I laugh. “Never mind.” She rolls her eyes. There she is.

Breakfast is uneventful, with small talk and occasional snark from Ambriel. Just as we are finishing our plates, there is a knock at the door. Flynn walks in hands behind his back like a well-trained soldier.

“Sir, excuse my interruption, but I thought you would like to know your next...uh, the meeting has been canceled. A letter carrier arrived in their place and sent this for you. He brings a piece of parchment from behind his back. I notice Ambriel shifts in her seat a little at Flynn’s arrival, but she doesn’t lift her gaze to the soldier.

“Well, Flynn? Give me the fucking letter; don’t just stand there.” I bark at him. He stumbles closer, handing me the letter, which I snatch from his grasp. “Leave us.” I say, and he does so without another word. “I’m sorry, Ambriel, duties always.” I raise the envelope and give it a little shake.

“You can read it... I was going to have some of these sweet treats anyway.” She loads a small plate with different pastries and sugary, buttery, finger foods.

“Very well, excuse me.”

I open and unfold the crisp parchment, and as I begin to read, my face falls. The happiness I found for a moment with Ambriel is gone as I read the letter.

*Cano.*

*I have gathered information that you would be interested to know. My contact is currently in Loema on a mission for me and won't be able to meet with you. However, a very interesting group of people stumbled through the front doors there. First, the cursed and his bitch. Bonded, by the way. Information you failed to mention. The very next day, the other two siblings with their guard dog and carved up beauty. All of which are being treated and will walk away good as new. You need to gather the regime and ride to Loema immediately, send word for a surrender... whatever you see fit to get close, but you will deliver what was discussed.*

*Yours Truly.*

“Fuck.” I spit, slamming the letter face down on the table, making glass and silver jump at the impact. Ambriel lets out a little shriek too, covering her mouth with her hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Sometimes my anger can get the best of me.” I take a deep breath, grinding my teeth as I continue. “I will be leaving Ravendene immediately. The Regime is with me; there will be no market this week. No one will be approved to leave Ravendene nor enter while I am gone.”

“What does that mean for me? I’m stuck here?” She asks, her brow furrowed. Her face begins to turn red with rage, and I quirk a brow up at her. “I’m not fucking staying here. I came for the market. If there is not going to

be one, I will leave.” I don’t want her to do it; I want to keep her to enjoy, but as the thought enters my head, she shakes hers. “You can’t keep me here, Cano. Please.” The break in her voice tears at me, and I nod, agreeing with her.

“You may leave. Now, if you choose. If you are not gone within the next half hour, the guards will not let you pass. That is all the time I will allow for the barriers to be open.” She stands quickly, tossing her napkin onto the plate of sweets. “Ambriel, I am genuinely sorry for this interruption, and I hope to one day meet you again. Though you are brash... You are refreshing, and I did enjoy having you around.” She turns to leave without another word but stops short of walking through the doors.

Ambriel looks over her shoulder, our eyes meeting, and sadness washes into her eyes as a wrinkle forms between them. She walks straight over to me, pressing her body into mine. The embrace, a foreign feeling to me; I don't know what to do.

“Don’t be such an ass all the time,” she tells me with a coy smile as she reaches up on her tiptoes and brushes a kiss on my cheek, then spins, leaving the balcony and the room entirely. I stand there frozen as my head spins from all of the thoughts that are whirling within it.

“Fuck.” I curse, gritting my teeth and bringing a hand up, rubbing at my face with irritation. Can nothing in my life ever go right?



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THE DAYS AND NIGHTS are starting to blend; it seems like I have no sense of time since my memories left me. Every day I'm playing catch-up, trying to build new relationships with people who already know me. It's an odd feeling, but none of them have made it weird. In a way, this is making me get to know myself again too. My wants, my needs, and what is in my best interest. I still want to know what happened to my parents. Well, the parents I knew as my own. They were going to tell me. I know they would have. They were going to Castenelle to get something for me—something left for me by my biological parents. That is what got them killed. It had to be. I am curious to know what it is that was so important. I will find out, but in the meantime, the Fae here are my focus. While I may have no family left, I have them, and I could not ask for more. Each and every one of them has been so welcoming and understanding.

I also need to learn what it means to become a Queen, and I only hope that the people of Aldramani understand that I did not know I was the heir. If I had known... My eyebrows drop as I think about it. All the Fae who are suffering... If I had just known... How could my parents allow the people of

Aldramani to suffer like this? The Fae under Demetrey's control... Heat rises in my cheeks.

"Are you ready to go see them?" Dax asks me as he walks up behind me, moving my hair to one shoulder and placing a kiss on the side of my neck.

"Yes," I respond as I take a deep breath, clearing the negative thoughts from my head. His lips linger, causing my pulse to quicken as they skim the soft skin behind my ear.

"Sounds like it." He laughs as he wraps my body in his arms, nuzzling his nose into my hair and causing a giggle to escape me at the tickle. "Let's go." He spins me around in his arms, kissing the line that has formed between my eyes and threading his fingers through mine. "Stop worrying. We will worry later. Now, we will bring good news to our family and friends."

My lips curve into a slow smile. "You're right." I push up on my tip toes and plant a quick kiss on his lips.

The halls of the castle in Loema are quiet; none of the other patrons are awake at such an early hour, but we have much to discuss with the others and a ceremony to set into motion. So, we decided to get an early start. As we round the corner to the infirmary, we hear Trent laughing loudly, followed by a feminine laugh I didn't recognize. My gaze drifts to Dax, and I see a grin forming on his lips.

As we walk through the doors, though, I'm greeted by the smell of her too-sweet lilac perfume. The stench of it almost makes me gag as the door closes us in the room with it. My magic pulses at my fingertips once again in her presence. I can't say that it's only a coincidence because the feeling I get from it tells me to be cautious. There is something about her that makes my skin crawl, and it's not just her incessant flirting with Dax, although I'm sure that's a major part of it.

The sound of our approach causes Trent to spin around to face us and reveal two very awake, smiling female faces. Kait's scarring looks a little better, somewhat less pink, but still, I can see the pain she carries in her eyes, and as our gazes meet, she presses her lips into a hard line, nodding to me. She knows I sense it. The other female I have yet to meet, well, since I forgot her... as weird as that sounds.

Before I even think of moving, the young girl, whom I know is Ella, hops down from the cot she sat on and runs toward us. She launches herself into Dax's arms, and as they envelop each other in the purest love, Ella sobs into the curve of Dax's neck. Trembling, as tears of relief flood her eyes and stain

Dax's tunic.

"It's okay, Ella. I'm here. We're all here, and it's going to be okay." His voice muffles into her shoulder as he rubs up and down on her back soothingly. Trent comes up behind Ella and wraps both Dax and Ella in his arms as well. All three siblings bask in the glow of their reunion, and it brings tears to my eyes to witness.

I shift my gaze around the room, my eyes darting from one face to the next, starting to feel a little awkward. I stand alone, almost pushed into the corner when Miles comes to my side, bumping my shoulder with his. "You did this, you know," he says to me, nodding towards the reunion. I know I played a role, but I didn't act alone.

"We all did." I bump my shoulder against his this time, and he smiles, then reaches up and brushes the tear that has escaped away.

I hear a gasp come from Ella, bringing my attention back to the Fornax-Ravendene siblings' reunion. Ella stands at Trent's side, staring at Dax and me with her hands covering her open mouth and her eyes wide in shock. Trent laughs raucously. I notice Kait joining the group, and she lets out a laugh of her own, her smile pulling at the scarred skin on the side of her face. They are all looking at me now.

"What?" I ask, making eye contact with Dax first, then shifting my gaze to each person in the room. Including the scarlet harlot. I don't get a verbal response to my question. Instead, Ella launches herself at me, squealing in my ear. I laugh too, catching her in my arms and bumping my back against the wall from the momentum. My eyes reach Dax's over her shoulder, and his smile is so wide and genuinely happy that it makes the hum in my chest swell, and his eyes heat to the golden embers of his raven.

"Well, as fun as this is, I just wanted to tell you all goodbye as I leave Loema today." The harlot speaks, quickly sapping all of the joy I am feeling.

"Oh no, I'm devastated." I deadpan, the words coming out a little louder than I anticipated. Kait openly laughs, Trent barely stifles his, and Dax just moves to my side placing a hand on my lower back as I place Ella back on her feet.

"Well, that was rude. If I didn't know any better, Dax..." She places her hand on his arm. "I think your cute little girlfriend doesn't like me much." She nearly spits the words out. Dax doesn't respond, but I don't give him the opportunity.

"As we were at dinner before, and I was trying to be polite...I did not

speak freely. However, in the here and now, I will. You are correct in your thoughts.” My power surges, tiny sparks of white coming from my fingertip’s subtlety. The others don’t notice, but I can sense Dax's tense beside me. Easing out of his embrace, I move toward Violet. Stopping only a foot or so away from her, I lower my voice, leaning my head to the side, and I size her up with my eyes. We are nearly the same height and probably would be the same had she not been wearing ridiculous heels.

“This cute little *mate*...” I put emphasis on the word. “Will fucking rip your godsdamned hand off if it comes in contact with what is mine one more time.” I pause, staring her in the eyes, giving her an opportunity to respond. When she doesn't, I lower my voice a notch. “How’s that for rude?” I say blatantly and turn my back to her to add insult to injury.

Facing Dax, I smile wickedly, reach up, and push my hands into his hair. I lay claim for all to see. My heart hammers in my chest as my lips crash to his, and he pulls me into his embrace. When the kiss comes to a slow stop, he keeps me in his arms, but I turn to face the group.

“Dax and I are holding a mating ceremony this evening; we would like all of you to be there.” I turn to face the harlot. “Except you, I guess. Since you are leaving. Too bad, really.” I say, sarcasm dripping from every word. The look on her face is something primal. Her nostrils flare, and she freezes where she stands. I don't miss the balling of her fists, the red-painted tips digging into her palms, or the ticking in her jaw. Without another word, she finds her feet and storms out of the room, but not before knocking me in the shoulder as she goes. I laugh, pulling a growl of annoyance from her on the other side of the door as she flees the embarrassment. The click of her heels speeding up and then disappearing.

As I turn my gaze back to the room, Trent pummels me, and Dax steps away laughing. Trent hoists me up, his arms around my thighs, and spins me around before setting me down again and placing a kiss on my cheek. I laugh, hugging him in return.

“Welcome to the family, sis.” He says as he pulls me back at an arm’s length, his smile wide and warm.

Family.

When Trent releases me, Kait comes closer, squeezing my hand and leaning in close. “That was epic, and this asshole...” She waves her hand up and down, gesturing to all of Dax. “Deserves a woman who will fight for him like that, whether he will admit it or not.” She smiles at him, and he nods to



her, meeting her smile with one of his own.

Trent rubs his hands together. “Let’s plan a mating ceremony!” Laughter breaks out throughout the room as we all make our way out to Maki’s library.



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THE DAY FLIES BY, and all the details of the ceremony are taken care of by Kait, Trent, and Maki for the most part. Dax, at one point, had enough of the constant questions of colors, foods, and flowers. He stormed out of the library and took flight right from the balcony. I knew he was just overwhelmed. Before he left, he told me he had something he needed to do before the ceremony.

I love seeing him fly; it makes me giddy thinking about the vision of my own wings. Trent told me it was good for him to be flying. He had not shifted much since his parent's death and refused to really use his magic because he was hiding his true power. He said he still doesn't understand how he managed for so long. He said if the truth of his power was known, the people of Ravendene would not have openly followed Cano. They believed Dax's power to be snuffed out when his parents had died somehow. Trent doesn't think that is the case, though; he believes the people only followed what Dax wanted. The Fae of Ravendene knew it was not Dax's magic that was broken, but that it was his heart. No one questioned his decision.

While he was gone, Kait put me into a black dressing robe and styled my

hair in loose curls that dusts the base of my spine. She places an intricate but delicate white gold crown on my nearly white hair. It sits loosely atop my head, with the center stone just above my hairline at the center of my forehead. A beautiful emerald with black and white diamonds on either side. The green stones matching my eyes.

“You know, I never thought this day would come for him.” Kait's words bring me out of my own thoughts. A chuckle makes her shoulders jump as she shakes her head. She places a box on the counter in front of me. “Trent spoke with Maki; they went into the Loema treasury looking for this. Dax... didn't want any reminders of his parents after they died. This.” She pulls a necklace from the box, a delicate chain, and at the center, a black diamond pendant set into an eight-pointed star. “Was their mothers. Trent said that she wore it nearly every day. It was a gift given to her for her own bonding ceremony.” Her lips curl into a soft smile as she holds the necklace out for me to see in the palm of her hand. “Dax placed most of their parents' belongings in Maki's care.”

My eyes meet hers as I brush my fingers over the beautiful piece of jewelry, emotion clouding my vision as my gaze drifts back up to Kait. “Thank you. I hope to honor her by wearing this. I wish both of our parents were here to bless this bond. I didn't realize that Dax's parents were bonded too. My parents weren't bonded by the gods, so they never had a bonding ceremony, but they were bonded in other ways, and their love was something I aspire to one day have,” I tell her. She lifts the necklace over my head, clasping it around my neck, and I rest my hand over the pendant. Memories begin flooding me of my own parents, and a tear carves a path down my cheek.

Dax and I have yet to tell anyone, including our friends and his family, the other part of what this ceremony will bring, and the thought of all of it is almost overwhelming. There is a knock at the door, and when I turn to face it, Trent walks in with a stunning white gown with silver and bronze embellishments sewn into the bodice and trailing down the flowy skirt. His wide smile shows the dimple that matches his brothers. “Dax just returned and is dressing in my room; he asked that I bring this to you.”

I knew what I was getting into when I told Dax that this is what I wanted, but seeing the dress and wearing a literal crown on my head causes my palms to sweat, and my head spins with the thoughts and emotions about what going forward with this means. What Dax and I are doing is more than just

bonding, more than just a marriage. We are binding our souls to one another. We are claiming a kingdom. He will be my mate, my husband, my king. I close my eyes and take a deep, steadying breath as Trent approaches, hanging the dress from the canopy of the large bed at the center of the room. Kait excuses herself so Trent and I can have a moment alone before I dress for the ceremony.

“Are you okay?” He asks as I release a shaky breath.

“I will be.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He sits on the edge of the bed and pats the seat next to him. It makes me think of my brother and how this would probably be a conversation I would be having with him if he were still alive. I sigh as the thought brings on a whole different set of emotions.

“I don’t know if there is really anything to talk about other than; I’m just nervous. Life has been.... a lot lately.” I laugh at the simple way I describe everything that has happened recently and fold my hands in my lap. Trent reaches over, putting an arm around me. I settle into his embrace, and we’re both silent as I allow the comforting warmth to come from him and ease my anxiety of what is to come.

“You know, for what it’s worth, I think that you are gaining an epic, amazingly handsome brother-in-law out of this.” He looks at me from the corner of his eye, a sly grin creeping across his face. I poke him in the side, and he coughs out a laugh.

“There she is.”

“Thank you.” I whisper, “For everything... I know that this is the right thing for me, for Dax. I can feel it.” I close my eyes as I think back on my mother and what she might have said to me at this moment. She always told me, whenever I doubted myself, to trust my instincts. My instincts have been leading me to Dax. I know that from the depths of my soul. I figure she knew what she was talking about when she said I was destined for greatness... to be the next Queen of Aldramani seemed like a great feat. One I’m not sure I’m ready for. My brows stitch together as I think about that. I hope that I’m not a great failure.

The thought makes me wonder. What would my biological mother, the Queen, have said to me? If we had been given the opportunity to have a relationship.

“I just wish I had more time to explore my new relationship with Dax, among other things.”

Trent doesn't know yet what else I am nervous about. He doesn't know that his brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law are going to claim my birthright at the ceremony.

"All jokes aside, I know you don't remember, but you are already one of my best friends, and I feel lucky; soon I'll get to call one of my best friends my *sister*. I see the mark, Rae. You and Dax are destined for each other. Each of you are destined for greatness." His confession chokes me, and tears well in my eyes as he speaks the same words my mother has said to me so many times. "Just please, no details on your sex life with my brother. I might actually puke."

Now I *actually* choke on a laugh just as my tears spill over.

"Get out of here so I can get dressed in this epically beautiful gown," I tell him as I stand, smacking him on the shoulder, then pull him up with me and push him toward the door. He's laughing too as he makes his way to leave.

"Trent?" He stops in the arching doorway and looks back at me.

"Yes, sister?"

"Will you walk with me into the ceremony?"

"It would be my honor, Raelle. Thank you. I'll be right outside, waiting." With a smile, he closes the door, and the soft click has a finality to it. The next time the door opens, I will be walking into my future.



## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

THE LOEMA CASTLE TURNS out to be the perfect location to hold our bonding ceremony and the celebration set to happen after. Maki has not held back in typical Maki fashion. He's always been the one to love extravagant parties and expensive living. Opting for the finer things day to day, and when there is a special occasion, he turns it into something people will talk about for years to come. This will certainly be no exception.

The bonding ceremony itself will take place outside. Raelle requested that we be able to see the last of the sunset, just as darkness blankets us. Showing respect to both the sun and the moon, the power and beauty of both, and the open sky. I went to the ballroom first, wanting to see for myself all the lavish decorations that Maki set up to party with all of those invited. Which is the entirety of Loema, and anywhere else he could get word of the great celebration planned for tonight.

We decided we were going to keep the people in suspense about the reason for the gathering, hoping to not tip off Cano to our whereabouts until we're ready. Regardless, we have extra precautions in order with the Loema soldiers just in case. Maki assures me that people will gather. Not knowing the reason for something so extravagant will spread word fast, if not just for the thrill of the unknown. After tonight, we need to be ready to push into

Ravendene to take my homeland back from the stain that is Cano. I've already begun the process by getting word out to my people in Ravendene. Those I know who are loyal to me and to the Ravendene line. They all should be on their way to us in Loema, arriving just before dusk.

By the time the celebration is underway, the bonding ceremony will be complete, and Raelle and I will be fully bonded by blood and body. Our souls are bound in life and death. I can only hope that I'm doing the right thing and that I'm worthy of such an honor, worthy of her. I didn't accept my fate when my parents died when I was expected to take over as the lord of Ravendene, but I will not make the same mistake twice. The gods have made it clear that Raelle is my destiny, and I won't fail her like I have failed so many times before.

Last night, Raelle and I walked the grounds of the castle. As tradition, we must decide together where the perfect spot for where the ceremony will occur. Both souls must feel a draw to the location where it takes place, and as it seems, Raelle and I have a keen love for the sky. We want to have the open air surrounding us and be as close to the clouds as we can get while still being grounded with the soil of the land of our kingdom. We chose a hillside that butts up to a lavender field, making for a dream-worthy spot we will store in our memories forever.

Maki greets me in the ballroom, and we walk together to the hillside, where we will wait for the few guests we have requested to be present for this. Giving my parents' possessions to Maki for safekeeping was clearly divine intervention. Otherwise, I would not have access to heirlooms such as my mother's dress and their rings. Not all bonding ceremonies include rings, because a bonding is not a marriage. However, the decision to ask her to be my wife as well was an easy one. Every day since I woke to find she was my mate, I knew where my gut and heart were leading me. I asked Raelle if she would also take me as her husband by including the rings. My heart nearly stopped beating for the seconds it took for her to give me her answer.

Miles is the first to arrive; his eyes sparkle as he ambles up the hill to where I stand, and the look of admiration brightens across his face, making me love him even more. He's been more or less like a father figure to me all my life. When my father was otherwise occupied, he was there. He was my teacher, my confidant, and someone I could always count on to be there for me. I am beyond happy that he is going to be here for me today as well.

"In case I haven't told you in a while, I'm proud of you." He claps me on

the shoulder, pulling me close for a hug I didn't know I needed. I clasp him back with both arms, emotion tightening in my chest. "You are becoming the man I knew you would eventually become. Admittedly, taking much longer than I anticipated, but nonetheless." He smiles teasingly.

"Thank you, Miles. It means the world to me that you are here." He inclines his head, then moves to sit in the one row of chairs we have set before a dais I stand at. Kait and Ella arrive hand in hand. Kait smiles down at Ella, whispering something into her ear. Ella lets go of her hand and races to me. She jumps into my arms, and I spin her around once before setting her back on her feet.

"I'm so excited! I've never seen a bonding ceremony. Raelle is going to look so pretty. I love you." I laugh at how bubbly and happy she is. It's been such a difference since she arrived in Loema. It brings me relief to know that she is coping well, considering all the hell she's lived through. It's a wonder she doesn't have considerable issues. I tell her to run along and join Miles while I speak to Kait for a moment.

"Hey, Asshole." Kait punches me in the chest, playfully forcing a chuckle out of me. I pull her into a hug.

"Kait." I smile, brushing my hand up to the scars that now paint her face. I stop before I make contact, as I notice her flinching away. Every time I see them, I want to rip Cano's face off for what he's done to my best friend. The family of my choosing.

"Raelle better know what she's getting into, huh? Sorry asshole like you. She must be a strong bitch." Kait has always been crass; it's something I love about her. I've seen much less of it since she's returned with her face torn up. "Though, I guess we all know now that she is. The way she tore Vi a new one this morning?" Her eyes spark with amusement as she recalls the memory, and I cover my smile with my hand.

"She's definitely got a fighting side to her. It seems I like to surround myself with strong women." I squeeze her, placing a kiss on the top of her head. She squeezes me back, then moves to rejoin Ella and Miles in the chairs.

Maki clears his throat, bringing my attention to him. "Your mate has arrived, Dax, and she is stunning. Join me on the dais." I step forward, knowing that I can't look at Raelle until Maki tells me to turn. The anticipation of seeing her building in my chest and my heart races so fast that it feels like it may take flight.



Maki nods to me, my indication that I can turn to see my mate. As I do, her beauty steals the breath from my lungs. My throat bobs with the emotion I swallow, and a beaming smile slowly forms at my mouth, matching Raelle's. She is always beautiful, but tonight... The dress, the glow of the sunset reflecting in her eyes, the bronze and silver in the dress playing with the light, her radiant smile. She's utterly glowing—an angel among men. My Queen.

Trent walks with her down the aisle, made up of pink peonies spread in the grass on either side. Raelle's choice, as she said, reminds her of her mother, also symbolizing unity, strength, and passion. My magic pulses, always seeking hers as she reaches me. Tonight it is a frantic buzzing under my skin, anticipating what is to come. I take her hand in mine, guiding her up the couple steps to the dais. We kneel facing each other at Maki's feet, and we hold our hands together between us.

“Thank you for being here to witness the bonding ceremony of Dax Fornax-Ravendene and Raelle Aberra-Apus.” There is a beat of silence before I hear a collective gasp echo out behind me as Maki speaks Raelle's birth surname. A smirk plays at his lips as he looks past Raelle and me toward our guests. I can't see their faces, but I imagine that they are all shocked by the realization of what that name means. I see it written on Maki's features as his eyes widen as he reads the words from the parchment. “Their union blessed by the gods, the mark of bonding rings placed upon their arms signifying strength and the unbreakable bond forged by their magic and the gods. Today, we strengthen that even deeper.”

I rub my thumb back and forth across the backs of Raelle's hands, and she smiles, biting that damn bottom lip of hers. I narrow my eyes, shifting my gaze from her eyes to her lips and back again. Her smile widens, forcing her teeth to release her lip. I squeeze her hands gently telling her what she is doing to me. Pink spreads into her cheeks as she looks at me through her lashes.

“Dax and Raelle have chosen to bring themselves together in marriage as well, so we will be including rings in the ceremony.” I reach into the pocket of my breeches and hand them to him. He places the rings into the center of the three stone bowls lined on a carved wooden altar.

“Please stand and join me at the altar.” Maki motions for us to stand on either side of the small altar; the only other thing on the surface is a blade that lies in front of the center bowl.

“Raelle, use the blade to bring forth the blood in Dax’s right palm.” Raelle pauses, then leans forward to Maki.

“Can we use a different blade?” My brows stitch together as I look at Maki, who also looks unsure. “I’d like to use a blade that is special to both Dax and me. Forged by his hand and wielded by mine for protection and for saving his life.” Surprising me, she reaches into the slit of her dress, extends her leg, and kneels down. She unsheathes the moonstone dagger, meeting my eyes. “*Meraki*,” she says, naming the blade. The metal shines brilliantly in the low light of dusk, the name is powerful. I beam my approval at her.

“Of course.” Maki reaches down and takes the small blade from the altar, placing it in his belt. I bring my right hand forward, and she holds it steady with her left as she makes a cut across the center of my palm with the moonstone dagger. My magic swells as the blood pools in my hand. A deep blue-black glow illuminates my hand, where the blood pools before it settles.

“Raelle, spill Dax’s blood into the bowl which he stands before.” As my blood hits the bowl, there is a sizzle, and a blue-black flame ignites in the bowl. The flame ripples steadily.

“Dax, please take the blade now to Raelle’s right palm, call her blood forth, and spill it into the bowl before her.”

I do as instructed and feel Raelle’s magic pulse; though she has not yet ascended, her magic still responds powerfully. A pure white glow illuminates her hand, where her blood is pooled. As her blood pours into the stone bowl, it mimics the same reaction as my blood did, but the flame that ignites with her blood looks like the glow of the moon, dark in the center and pure white flickering around the edges.

“Your blood and magic in these bowls are an offering, each of you contributing what is needed to bless the union. As we combine them into one over the rings, it signifies the joining of the lives you will live and the marriage you will nourish. Each of you, take the bowl of your essence and join them in the center.”

Raelle and I pick the bowls up with both hands and carefully pour the flaming blood into the center bowl with the rings. The clap of magic that occurs is powerful. My chest rises on a deep inhale, as the feel of it washing over me is heady. The flame in the center bowl sputters and then erupts into a powerful purple flame that slowly shrinks to the same size as the others. Raelle smiles, her face illuminated by the purple flame, making her eyes appear the brightest green I’ve seen, and my heart thunders in my chest as I

gaze deeply into the depths of them.

“Please place the rings on the third finger of the left hand of your mate.” We do as he says. First Raelle places the ring on my finger, then I, hers. There is a crackle once more, and the rings glow like embers, circling the bands and sealing them to us, only to be removed upon our deaths. “Your souls are bonded by the gods, and you accept this fate by joining your blood and bringing a new bond of marriage,” Maki announces.

“You may rise, Bonded Mates, husband and wife, and Queen and King of Aldramani.”

I don't hesitate to stand and pull Raelle up with me. I cup her face with my bloody hand and press her mouth to mine. The kiss, one of passion, my need for her skin touching mine growing by the second. Her tongue slides into my mouth, and I ravage hers, nipping playfully and then kissing her softly again. Our bodies need to claim each other after the joining of our essence. There is a keen buzz all over my skin, and everything around me falls from my thoughts.

Trent clears his throat. “Hey guys.” He waves mockingly as my gaze meets his. “Still here... and Dax... Ella.” A chuckle rolls through him as he lifts a brow at me.

“Take your mate and finish this,” Maki whispers before he smiles wide and invites the others to join him in the ballroom. Where the celebration will begin. This is also where we will announce our mating ceremony and marriage complete, and Raelle will claim her birthright. Officially claiming the kingdom as ours. We will be King and Queen to the people of Aldramani.

Our family, those by blood and choice, leave Raelle and me as my wings snap out. I scoop Raelle up, and she lets out an excited squeal. “I hope you're ready for the bonding of our bodies now...” I say into her ear before sheathing the moonstone dagger at her thigh and pressing my mouth to hers. I bite down on her bottom lip and smooth over the hurt with my tongue. She hisses and writhes in my arms, telling me just how okay she is with the pain. I launch into the air, making a lap around the castle with the moon and stars lighting the sky. I take my mate, my wife, my Queen to our room the way of the Raven, through the sky.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

AFTER THE BONDING CEREMONY and Maki announcing our titles, Bonded, husband and wife, King and Queen, my skin is vibrating. The hum in my chest is on fire, and the power of it erupts all over my body. The need I feel for Dax's body after the kiss we shared, marking the conclusion of the ceremony, is unreal.

Dax guides us to the balcony of our rooms. I feel his power reach out, igniting every candle he has placed around the space as well as the large hearth. The glow of the room illuminates his face, and his magic surfaces, lighting his eyes from behind into the molten copper I've come to recognize as his Raven.

"I'm going to worship all of you now, My Queen." The flames of the hearth dance in his eyes as he carries me before it, laying me down on the plush throws and pillows that have been laid out. His hands tremble as he guides them over the front of my dress. He brushes his fingertips along the neckline and brings the thin strap down, guiding it over my shoulder. I tilt my head, arching my back, pressing my body forward into his as he hovers over me. I need more. I need him. He continues his tortuously slow exploration of

my body, easing my dress from me inch by inch.

I twist my hands into his shirt, urging it from his body and revealing the carved muscles of his chest and shoulders to me just as he slides the dress from my body. I lay before him in nothing but a thin white lace slip and the dagger sheathed at my thigh. With my knees raised, he guides his hand from my knee to my hip, brushing over the dagger, then scoring a line up the soft dip of my stomach and cups my full breast in his large palm. He teases the hardened bud of my breast between his finger and thumb, pinching hard, causing me to suck in a sharp breath as I arch for him again, and he brings his mouth down on the same peak, sucking hard, and then soothes the slight pain with his tongue, eliciting a moan from my lips.

“I want more, Dax.” My voice comes out breathy.

“More?” He moves to the other breast, twirling his tongue around the sensitive flesh, sucking, and tormenting me with each pass. I squirm under him. “This?” He bites down on the bud, causing an ache to build in my core.

“More.” I groan out the word, withering, reaching for the buttons on his breeches. He bends down, bringing his face lower on my body and moving his hips out of my reach. I sigh when I can't take him into my grip, and he chuckles as he brushes my knees with his hands, pulling them apart, spreading me wide for the breadth of his shoulders. He sits up between my legs, his hard length pressing through his breeches, eager to be free. I reach for him again, but he takes my hand, joining it to my other hand above my head. He holds them there for a moment, his heavy body pressing mine to the bed of blankets and furs. Only the fabric of his breeches between us. My breasts brush his chest as he steals my breath away with a kiss so passion-filled that my hips lift as I seek friction to soothe the ache that builds.

“So demanding.” He whispers at my ear before he trails his tongue down my body, flicking over the rosy bud once again, and lower still. He scores a warm line through my wetness, and he groans as he tastes me. Rolling his mouth from my opening to the bundle of nerves that is pulsing with the need for more. His movements are slow and tortuous, but so, so good. Bringing his name to my lips with a low growl. My voice so laced with pleasure that I hardly recognize it. Running my fingers into his hair, I pull him into me as I shamelessly ride his face, and he devours me. He brings his fingers to my opening, and just as he has the pressure building beautifully with his tongue on my clit, he plunges two fingers deep into my center, curling and pumping them just right. I fall apart, breathing hard and grinding myself on his hand

and his face. His name rips from my lungs.

Before the high of the moment fades, he lifts his head from between my legs, his full lips wet with my arousal and glistening in the light of the fire. His gaze flicks over my body as he pulls himself free of his breeches, a bead of moisture gathering at the tip. He squeezes at the base and moves closer. This is the moment we join our bodies, completing the ceremony and binding our souls together in life and in death. The hum in my chest and the pulsing at the apex of my thighs make my head swim. I unsheathe the dagger at my thigh, placing it in my hand above my head. Dax reaches up with both of our palms on the sharp edges of the blade.

“You are mine, and I yours, evermore.” He says the words needed for the bond, and I repeat them.

“You are mine, and I yours, evermore.” He rips the blade free of our hands, and at the same time, he sinks his hard length deep into my throbbing center. The burn of the cut and of the sudden fullness is both pain and pleasure.

Magic claps as he begins moving, rolling his hips into mine. My inner walls gripping him tightly as he pushes me toward oblivion. The purple glow of our combined magic fills the room, the immense feeling of him being inside me and his magic driving deep into me as well. Our blood coming together allows the essence of our magic to flow freely between our bodies. We become bonded in every way as he thrusts deep, hitting the sweet spot that has me screaming my release to the gods, and he follows me, growling my name and spilling himself deep. He thrusts a few more times, and my throbbing center grips him tight, extending both of our pleasure as his movements become slower and he kisses me deeply between ragged breaths.

As he pulls out of me and lays down on the blankets to my side, he props on one elbow. His hooded gaze slowly tracks up my body until his eyes lock with mine. Both of us are slick with sweat, blood, and the evidence of our ruin. He runs his fingertips across the wet skin between my breasts.

“You’ve made me the luckiest bastard this world has ever known, and I will do my damn best to deserve everything you’ve given me. I am your blade to wield, your soul to command. You, my Mate,” He leans down kissing me gently. “My wife,” He deepens the kiss then whispers into my lips, “my Queen.”

I reach up, brushing my fingers across half of his face. “My husband, my dark King. You are deserving of everything and more, don’t you see that?”

Your heart, the darkness that is there, isn't there from an evil need. It's there because of the passion you feel for those you love; the darkness is the retribution you seek on those who have harmed you and those you love. I see who you are, Dax. We are one in the same. Two souls destined to be brought together. We are destined for greatness."



Dax and I dress after bathing and more exploration of each other's bodies. My celebration dress is much less formal but no less beautiful. The curve-hugging thin silk dress spills at my feet, where I wear matching silk slippers instead of the death-defying heels Maki had put me in on the first night here for that colossal failure of a dinner. I thank the gods for small blessings. Dax is in the same fine breeches and buttoned shirt, but he has added a pair of protective leathers to his ensemble.

"I have something for you." He comes out of the closet carrying a large flat box that he sits on the bed. "I know I haven't talked much about my mother and father, even before you had lost your memories. This was a gift from your biological mother, the Queen, to my mother." His eyebrows pull down as a frown pulls on them. "See, my mother, Trinity Fornax, she was a war maiden before she met my father. The late Queen's war maiden. She was very close to her; actually, my mother and father met because my father had come to the palace as the new leader of Ravendene when he came of age. He was on business and stayed in court for an extended period of time. My parents were bonded at a gala the Queen was hosting for the summer solstice. That year was special because the meteor shower Leonids fell on the same night. It was quite the show, especially for all those in attendance, getting to

see a bonding take place right then and there.”

He shifts on the bed, and I see a sadness in his eyes and the lines that bracket his mouth, making me reach for his hand. He blows out his cheeks and continues his story, taking strength from the simple touch. “My mother was wearing this the night of Leonids summer solstice celebration. I think this would look beautiful on you, and would show strength to the people. It would give you something they would recognize from the kingdom before it fell. I wish I had more. Something of your mothers. Either mother.”

He lifts the lid and pulls out an amazingly beautiful bronze and silver scalemail chest and shoulder armor. The metal shone and reflected the flames of the fire still burning all around us. My brows hitch, and I look at Dax, eyes wide as tears rush in filling them with emotion.

“Thank you, Dax.” The tear spills over the edge of my lashes, and he wipes it away with his thumb. “Let's go claim the throne, my warrior Queen. Cano, Demetrey, or whoever stands in the way will rue the day they do because in doing so they will bring on the wrath of the raven and the moon.” I dip my chin as he places the armor over my head and clasps the chains at my sides and neck. The scalemail covers my breasts to my navel, both shoulders and back, and has a beautiful design upon the chest. The protection is like a breathtaking piece of jewelry.

“Let's go claim our throne.” I reach up on the tips of my toes and kiss him just as the floor we stand on begins to shake. He pulls me to his chest and our gazes lock. Then there is an ear-splitting screech at the same moment a crash sounds on the rooftop above us. “Fuck, what the—” Dax's words are cut off when a fiery billow escapes from beyond the window, and the flames lick at the edges of the balcony entrance with a roar that sends shivers down my spine. My feet are heavy as my mind spins with the realization of what I'm seeing. This cannot possibly be happening. Dragons don't inhabit these lands. They have not ventured into our kingdom in *centuries*.

“*Fuck*. A Dragon?” Dax says, pushing my dagger into its sheath at my thigh, and urges me to run from the room just as the stone roof begins to crumble and debris cascade into the space where we were just standing. I bring my arm up to shield my face and eyes as we race to the ballroom, where there are hundreds of people waiting to celebrate. All of which are now in danger.





## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

MELANI, KAIT, AND I are out in the gardens after the ceremony, walking the grounds. Hearing Mel laugh brings a lightness to my soul. She runs around the beautiful flowers, picking an array of different blooms to add to a bouquet she says she's going to give her new sister.

"I've always wanted a sister." She preens as she arranges the flowers just right, and a lopsided smile pulls at my lips.

"Two brutes for brothers not good enough for you?"

"You and Dax will always be good enough." A giggle breaks free from her as she plucks a yellow primrose from the raised bed. "But you guys don't understand girl stuff."

"They don't understand girls in general most of the time." Kait laughs, her smile tugging at the scar on her face as she looks at me. When she notices my attention on her, she turns her head so I can't see the scars, but keeps her eyes trained on me.

"Well, you're not wrong about that." I scrunch my nose up and poke my tongue out at her playfully. One corner of her mouth quirks up. It's all I need to see to give Kait reprieve from my eyes, and I turn my attention to Mel.

“But Ella, you mean the world to Dax and me. I'm glad that you will have Raelle for girl things, and I'm happy Dax has found the person who can pull him out of all the grumpy-ass moods he's always in.” A grin pulls my mouth up at the corners listening as she and Kait both bust into a fit of laughter.

The joy of this moment is snuffed out as we hear the loud screech in the distance. My head whips up to the sky above the castle. Fire blooms over the far spire, and the stone crumbles under the giant claws. An enormous dragon scales black as night and wings, causing an uptick in a forced wind as it lands heavily. Screams break out immediately after as a multitude of shifters also fly into the courtyard, attacking innocent Fae who are here for the celebration. Soldiers attacking common Fae.

“Motherfucker.” I curse as my shift comes over me in a burst of rippling magic. I unfurrow my wings, and I spread them wide as my gaze slingshots to where Kait and Mel stand huddled together, Mel's eyes round in shock. I storm over to my younger sister and drop to one knee. I don't have time to think about how the fuck there are dragons in our realm or how. I just know that I need my little sister to get to safety, and I need to go help the people of Loema.

“Listen, Melani, I need you to go to the treasury. It's where Maki will be. Miles was with him, the last I saw. Get to Miles, ok?” She shakes her head frantically as she looks over my head at the dragon wreaking havoc; her lip begins trembling, and her eyes swell with moisture. I brace her face between my large hands, bringing her eyes to meet mine. My brows pinching together at the thought of leaving her, but I have to go help the people inside the castle. This must be Cano's doing, and the hell if I'm going to run from a fight with the bastard. How? That's another question I can't even ask right now, but one thing is certain, *I'm going to kill that prick.*

Kait removes her clothing quickly; the beautiful pale pink dress she wore for the ceremony drops pooling at her ankles, and she kicks off the heels as her body begins to vibrate. I know she's trying to hold back her shift. It's been so long since she was last able to shift. I know her wolf form is ready to take over. The panic-stricken look on her face is mirrored in the beats of my heart as it races, feeling as though it's going to jump from my chest. Mel looks between me and Kait as she places her small hands on the backs of mine. Tears fill her eyes and threaten to spill over as her gaze burrows into mine.

“I love you, Trent. Dax too. Please,” I don't let her finish the sentence.

“I love you too, sweet girl. Don't worry about me and Dax. You just get to

Miles. I need you to be safe in the treasury with Maki. Understand?” Her head bobs as the tears fall from her eyes. I give her a tight-lipped smile and press a kiss to her forehead. “Go,” I command. She lunges for me, wrapping her hands around my neck and squeezing tight before she turns and takes off, running in the opposite direction of the castle and the chaos that awaits us. There is another entrance to the treasury that only a trusted circle knows about. It's a safety measure for reasons such as these. When she makes it there, the magic protections on the space will keep her safe.

Kait and I make eye contact, her eyes burning with fire as determination for revenge savages her. She grits her teeth in an attempt to hold back the shift. I close in on her in two strides. Placing my hand on the scarred side of her face, I drop my chin, so our eyes level and our foreheads press together.

“You are a warrior, Kait Divins. Don't let your emotions get in the way of what needs to be done. Do you hear me?” She jerks her chin in a tight nod. Steel settled over her features. “Let's go fuck up some assholes then.” A wicked grin breaks across my face, thinking of nothing else but finding Cano and making him pay. I have no doubt in my mind that he is behind this attack, and regardless of how much of a coward he is, he wouldn't want to miss the show. Kait's shift erupts from her, fur replacing skin as the magic ripples, and she lands on four paws. Her deep blue eyes narrow on me as she growls her agreement, turning to the fight ahead of us. I watch as her cream wolf form takes off at a rapid pace.

Before I take flight, I risk a look over my shoulder in the direction that Melani ran off to. She is long gone. I run my hand over my face as I turn back toward the castle and take a deep breath. My worry settles into my stomach, but I push it away as I launch myself into the sky. I easily catch up to Kait just before she reaches the courtyard.

“Stay safe, beautiful,” I yell down to her as she launches herself into the air, crashing into another wolf that was about to attack unarmed guests. Her teeth sink deep into the shifter's throat. She rips her head back, blood bursting from the Fae, before magic ripples and the female wolf shifts back into her Fae form, dropping dead at Kait's large paws. Her pale fur is stained crimson as blood runs down her chest from her dripping jowls. She barks up at me, and I know she's telling me to get on with it. I laugh as I continue further into the fight.

I recognize the guards attacking Loema, and the realization makes my rage boil to the surface. Fire ignites along my arms as I bring my feet to the

ground and pummel one of the traitorous bastards in Cano's regime. My fire element engulfs his body in flames as I punch his sorry face in. With one hit, he is down, burning to a crisp.

Bodies are running in every direction, and the guards of Loema and Ravendene, once allies, are battling relentlessly. Blood and magic spin around me like a torrent of endless fire. I don't waste any more time as I run to the center of battle with a cry of fury. Unsheathing my broadsword from my belt, I swing the heavy metal in a wide arc. I take two Ravendene guards' heads clean off. They roll in opposite directions before their bodies fall to the ground. I pivot as a soldier aims to plunge his dagger into my chest, narrowly avoiding the blow. I bring the hilt of my sword up into his nose hard. Bone crunches under the force, and blood pisses down his face.

"Take that motherfucker!" I grind out as I take a step back and sink my sword into his belly. His eyes whip up, meeting mine wide with shock as his life is ripped away. I pull the blade free, kicking him to the ground. I don't spare an extra second before I take off again, cutting down Fae after Fae on my mission to find Cano. Eventually, as I make my way out of the castle and into the surrounding city, I see someone who would know where to find the bastard I'm searching for. Flynn stands in the shadows of a building just before the tree line, a clean sword in hand.

Sheathing my large blade, I pull the dagger from my belt, and I storm the fucker. He begins to back up when he sees me approaching. *Coward.*

"Trent, wait... It's not what you think, I'm loyal to you. To your brother. The Ravendene line. I swear it!" He rushes out, closing his eyes and putting his hands up in defense in front of his scrunched-up face.

"Tell me where he is," I growl, placing my blade under his chin. His eyes open, and looks up to meet mine.

"He's in the trees just east, but Trent, he's got help. You need Dax. He is the only one who can face them and win. Please trust me." He begs. A snarl builds in my throat, and I push him back against the wall. He sucks in a sharp breath as I hold him there with my dagger to his throat, his eyes round with fear. I could easily cut his throat for being stuck up Cano's ass all these years, but if he's telling the truth? Fuck. I pull my blade away from his neck and take a step back.

"I will end your sorry ass if I find out that you aren't telling me the truth."

"It's the truth. I swear it." He wipes sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Then go. Fight for Ravendene against those who attack Loema.” I order. He nods once, then takes off into the battle. I don’t have time to look for Dax. I’m going to find Cano and end the fucker who has caused all our lives to be upturned. Then I’ll drench myself in the blood of whoever stands in my way.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

I GOT TO THE castle of Loema just moments before I heard the echoing screech. My head whips up as an enormous beast flies over my head. My eyes go round at the sight in front of me. I've heard stories, but that's all they were. Tales of a time when Dragons lived in Aldramani and the Fae who could command them, but to see them with my own eyes? Claws so sharp they could cut a man in half and wings that cut the clouds like blades. All blood leaves my body at the sight of them. Then I see Cano and his men stomping forward in formation, ready to attack the Loema castle. I knew Cano's plans to attack the castle, but I had no clue the length that he had gone. I had no idea that he would have this sort of power.

I was too late. It's not enough time to warn anyone. I race through the chaos of bodies running in every direction. Screams erupt around me, and my heart thunders in its cage. A sea of guards flood into the cavernous space of the ballroom I'm aiming to reach. All are armed and ready to unleash their magic or shift as needed for them to protect their territory and its leader.

The leader of Loema is nowhere to be found... There shouldn't be this amount of chaos. He had to have had wards in place; he would have been notified of my entrance, and warning bells should have been going off at the vast number of Cano's group. Not to mention the dragons.. Some of his regime is shifted, and I'm guessing they likely have the Lord of Loema in their captivity already. With the protective wards up, the shifters would not be able to do so otherwise without the mark or special permissions from the Lord himself.

I need to find Raelle. I duck into a shadowy alcove and try to focus my mind on seeking Raelle out. I have a pull to her, so I should be able to single her mind out.

*Visions of flying rubble and fire spilling from a dragon's mouth come to me. Flashes of death and blood spilled by a dagger that shines of the moon's light gripped in my hand. An arm reaches out and pulls me from the ground as a wolf shifter lunges for me, but I'm lifted clean off the ground, and I'm soaring through the air held by a man with black wings. Dax.*

I blink, and the sight shifts to what's in front of me. I must be seeing these visions through Raelle's eyes. They are alive, for now. My eyes snap open just as a guard is thrown into the alcove I've hidden myself in. Using my air magic, I cast a barrier between us, protecting myself from the impact of his body. He falls to the ground, limp. I reach down, checking his pulse and as I suspected, he's dead.

Shifting my head back and forth, I scan for a way to get out of the castle. My need to reach Raelle is the most important, though I'd give anything to help these people who don't deserve this vicious attack led by Cano. Bodies push past me in every direction, and finally, the sea of people drifts apart. I see a clear shot through one of the archways leading to a garden, and I waste no time as I take it. I charge a path through downed bodies and rubble caused by the large shifters. Out of the corner of my eye I see something charging at me, and I spin toward it. Before they reach me, the wolf shifter is pummeled by a Loema guard, just inches from taking me down too. I unsheathe my brother's twin blades, readying to defend myself. I'm almost to the archway when a harpy in Cano's group comes for me, her talons reaching for me. I run and slide across the ground, through the arch, just before she tears me to pieces in her deadly talons.

I hop up and press my body against the wall at the edge of the garden; most of the fight is still inside the ballroom or on the outer walls of the castle. A shadow falls over me before a male and female land in the garden in front of me. Raelle jumps out of Dax's arms, dressed in a long white silk gown and war maiden armor with a crown atop her head. She knows.

A smile breaks across my face unabated. "RAELLE!" I bellow, gaining her and Dax's attention. Their thoughts immediately blasting me with questions. *Who is this? What is going on? Who is attacking Loema? Cano? Dragons?*

Blocking out their torrent of questions from their minds, I dart forward,

but Dax moves to intercept me, believing I'm a threat to his mate. I slow my pace and hold my hands up. "I came to warn you! I'm not the enemy. I didn't make it to you in time. You don't know how sorry I am about that, but there isn't time to explain right now. We need to get out of here." Dax's eyes narrow on me, and I understand that he would not trust me given the situation. "Look, my mother was part of the queen's war maidens. We are friends of the crown. We need to either win this battle or get the fuck out of here, so I can explain what I know. You can trust me." I plea with him.

"Fine. Fight with us. We don't retreat until it's a sure loss. Do you know Cano? Because I know this is him..." His words trail off as he scours the ruin around us.

"It is." I agree.

"Find a way to get him to me. I want him alive." His lip curls back as his gaze meets mine. Raelle stares at me, eyes wide. I feel her trying to get a read on me. I can sense that she has some empath abilities too, and I send over all the friendly vibes I can to ensure she knows that I'm no threat to her or her people. She seems to accept what I'm putting off, turning to face her mate.

"We need to find Trent and the others too. Keep your eyes peeled. It sounds like the fight is moving outside of the castle."

Dax gives her a curt nod and then moves, keeping his twin short swords unsheathed and ready. He begins to make his way through the sea of blood and gore. All of these innocent souls were taken by Cano, and for what reason? Revenge? Greed? I could never get a solid read on to his why for all he was doing.

"DAX!" I hear Cano bellow Dax's name before I see him. My head whips around, and Cano's murderous face comes into view as he marches forward, sword in hand. He comes to a stop just outside the castle on the other side of a clearing leading up to the castle grounds. Dax's wings spread wide and then move back to his body, a show of dominance and power.

"Cano? What have you done?" Dax glowers.

"We both knew that this was coming! Didn't we, brother?" Cano spits.

"You are no brother to me," Dax growls savagely.

Cano sees me standing with Raelle, and his eyes flash with hurt before the emotion is replaced by outrage. I step forward, something tells me to stop this before more people die unnecessarily.

"We can figure out a way to peacefully solve whatever problem there is here. Don't let any more people die here, Cano," I ask him, vehemence



coating my tongue.

“I only care about one death,” he spits, his gaze unmoving from Dax.

“If it is my death you wish, we shall duel. No others will die in this fight,” Dax says. Raelle steps up to him and speaks quietly, but I hear what she says, though Cano can't possibly hear. She's worried about a vision she had. Dax sees her concern and takes her hand, assuring her it will be ok.

Cano smiles like a jester, white teeth on full display, “I accept your challenge, brother. However, when you lose... because you will lose, I will take that pretty piece of ass back from you, and all of you will burn.” A fierce growl bursts from Dax, his eyes and face twisting into his Raven as he fully shifts. “I will be your end, Cano! You have signed your death over to me; we will duel in the wastelands, at the Colosseum,” he says through clenched teeth. His fists at his sides trembling with the building magic his anger has summoned. Raelle reaches down and intertwines her fingers with his, the rapid breaths he takes even out.

“One week. Find your peace, brother, because death is coming for you.” Cano looks at Raelle and says, “And then I'm coming for you.”

“The fuck you will,” Raelle barks back.

“Then it's settled. Fuck all the way off, Cano,” I say to him, my eyebrows drawn together as I try to read what he thinks. I get a flash of a hooded figure and feminine hands reaching out to him, but nothing else. Then he turns from us, and he and his army retreat from the battlegrounds of Loema, disappearing into the trees at the edge of the town. Before I lose sight of Cano, he turns back to face us, his eyes finding mine.

“You chose your side in this. I won't hesitate if I need to kill you too.” He snaps his fingers, and a cloud of black smoke reveals four bodies huddled close to each other. Cano looks at Dax, then. “I didn't want it to come to this. It was supposed to be only you.” His words unleash a torrent of emotions on my mind. Remorse, confusion, hope, anger—all of it is coming from him, but there are so many Fae around me that I'm not sure what I feel is all from him. It doesn't make sense, and I find my head hurting as I try to narrow my power on him alone. I need to know.

Then he is gone.

Dax runs to the group, Raelle trailing behind him. I hear sobbing coming from them and the emotions I feel are overwhelming. Heartbroken racking cries.

“Who?” Dax asks frantically. A male lifts his head to look Dax in the

eyes. His eyes and face are red with tears, and his brow furrows into deep lines at the center.

“She wasn't supposed to be here, Dax. I told her to stay hidden. I told her to stay with Maki. She didn't listen. She never listens!” His voice breaks as he stands, lifting a small body in his arms. Dax runs to the male holding the child.

“NO! She's not gone. She can't be.” Dax's eyes fill with tears as he screams to the sky and falls to his knees. Raelle stands behind him, placing her hand on his shoulder and cradling his head as he breaks into a million pieces.

His sister lies dead in the arms of his younger brother. Trent's hands tremble as he holds her limp body. The anguish he feels blasts to me as his emotions run rampant. I couldn't even shut him out if I tried; all he feels is failure as a fissure seeks to split his heart in two. His anguish envelops me, and my chest tightens, stealing the air from my lungs. My breaths become ragged, and I drop to my knees. Raelle turns her head, sparing me a glance as a vision rips through me, sending me flying through space and time.

*A cloaked figure walks through the mist of an early fall morning, the moon still high in the sky. Twin onyx swords crossed at his back as he crosses the forest floor. There is a hatch in the earth in front of him. Looking around, he ensures he's alone, then drops into the darkness, landing heavily on the dirt ground, and dust plumes around him. He makes his way through the underground tunnel and presses himself into an alcove, where he waits.*

*There is a commotion and shuffling, then a very bloody Raelle stumbles right to where he lies waiting. He places his hand over her mouth and whispers in her ear, “I'm sorry.” As her body goes limp, he begins to run, clearly knowing the tunnels well. He stops in front of a lit platform and lays her body on the rocky surface, then knocks back his hood before his magic flares to life at her temples.*

A sharp gasp slices through my lungs as my vision blurs and I'm thrust back into reality. My hands tremble where they hang at my sides. One word comes to my lips on a whisper as deep lines form between my brows.

“Ric.”

If you loved Fated Unkindness and want to **join the discussion group.**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to say thank you to— you! The readers who have taken a chance on me as a new, itty-bitty, baby author. I am forever grateful for you going out on a limb for whatever reason, picking up my book, and getting to this point.

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Last but certainly not least, Justin, thank you so much for editing my debut novel and making it something worthy of publishing!

# BLAKE GALLOWS



Blake lives in the Pacific Northwest and while she's not writing or reading she's typically living the lavish life of a domestic goddess. Caring for her energy leeches aka three children, husband, and two Rottweilers.

When she is not reading or writing, and the weather permits, she enjoys getting outdoors whenever possible. Hiking, camping, and riding dirt bikes with the entire family. She is part of a fantasy motocross/supercross group and is a big fan of the sport.

The Moon Raven Trilogy: Fated Unkindness is Blake's debut novel, but she's got so much planned! She has just had a short story published in an anthology curated by Dark Villiage Publications called Twelve Months of Smut- *Flames of Betrayal*. (Which is a Dark Romance with Bonnie and

Clyde vibes.)

She is also just beginning the revision and developmental edits of book two of The Moon Raven Trilogy, and working on a Standalone Dark Paranormal Romance with vampires and Fae!

If you loved the book and want to discuss Fated Unkindness and other related things join The Gallows Hangout Group on Facebook too! You're going to want to be a part of this. The FB group is taking the place of her newsletter (for now) and is where she will be most active with readers.

Blake gets a lot of inspiration from music, if you would like to listen to a Spotify playlist with the vibes from her perspective, please go to [Blakes Linktree.com/BlakeGallows](https://linktree.com/BlakeGallows) to find the playlist, along with others for her other works in progress... Including