



M.F. ADELE

FOR THE
STRONG
AND
FRAGILE

WHERE THE MONGRELS ARE





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DISCLAIMER

For the Strong and Fragile is the third book in the trilogy, **Where the Mongrels Are**. This is the beginning of the series, **Where They Are**, which follows four female characters. The **Where They Are** series is set in a *fantasy world* and contains *paranormal themes*, such as elemental powers and mythical creatures.

This is a *trilogy-wide disclaimer* for **Where the Mongrels Are**.

Current books include: attempted sexual assault.

Current books include mentions of: drug abuse, rape memories, and suicidal thoughts.

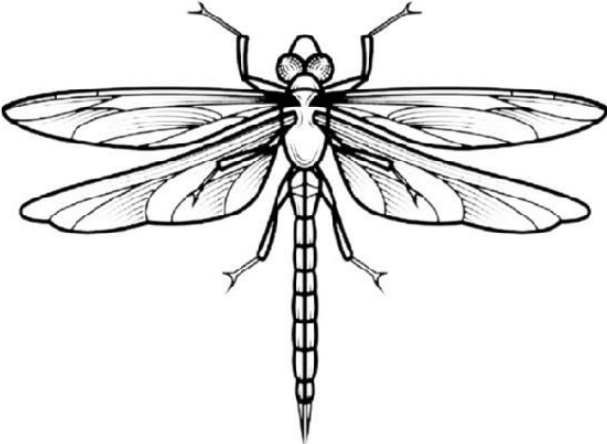
If any of the scenarios listed trigger or offend you, please do not read this series.

To Ada

*Thank you for the sleepless nights,
challenging every possible word I could write...
and helping me grown,
not only as an author,
but as a person, too.*

NAME PRONUNCIATIONS

Ada — Add-Uh
Ecaeris — Eh-care-Us
Talodus — Toh-lah-Dus
Imryll — Em-Rull
Connak — Con-Uck
Isolde — Is-Old
Selmar — Sell-Mar
Rinya — Ren-Yah
Spiran — Spy-Rin
Lyell — Lie-Elle
Cotear — Coe-tear
Faldron — Fall-dron
Pyris — Pie-ris
Thinik — Thin-ik
Ellisar — Elle-is-Are



ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY

“*M*adigan?”

I want to control the shock in my voice, but I can't. We stare at each other in bewilderment, her deep blue irises reflecting my stunned expression. Gobsmacked briefly crosses my mind, though I don't need to say it aloud. Between the two of us, it's clear.

“You know the Shade?” Ecaeris snarls from behind me, stepping away from my back to see my face.

“The Shade has a name,” Madigan grinds, turning her attention to the Mongrel prince. “And she's sick of you throwing *The Shade* around as an insult.”

Tension flows through the throne room like smoke from a doused fire while Isolde simply smirks at the looming argument. She lives for live entertainment. We're her own personal soap opera, filled with drama and romance, secrets and...murder.

And *Days of Our Lives: Spiran Edition* is filming right in front of her.

“Yes,” I answer quietly, not ready to process the turn of events. “I know her from Earth. We grew up together.”

“Then you won't mind telling the Shade from Earth to get the fuck out of our village,” Ecaeris snaps, his ire building, pointing in the wrong direction.

I glower at the ceiling, but this one offers me about as many answers as any other ceiling on this island. Exactly zero.

“This Shade's name is Madigan,” Madi corrects, giving Ecaeris a taste of his own medicine. “And they've just offered me sanctuary and training without your input, so why don't you take your commands somewhere else?”

I'm sure there's a deep hole in the ocean just begging to be filled with shit."

"Fuck my life," I mutter.

Ecaeris takes a step forward, and I wedge myself into his path until I'm stuck between him and Madi.

Talodus sighs so loudly, I feel his exhale tickle the side of my arm from feet away.

And Isolde wiggles in her throne, getting comfortable, as a dazzling smile causes her amber eyes to sparkle.

I know firsthand how much she loves her son, but that woman loves nothing more than watching me push his buttons. Now, there are two of us doing it, and Isolde has added to her roster of court jesters.

"It's where I'll take your body the second you fuck up," Ecaeris murmurs, whispering words sharp as a blade. "You may fool my mother into thinking you're here for help, but I won't be swayed by sobbing pleas and empty promises. I'll treat you like every Shade who's been sent here on a mission; I'll feed you to the—"

"Ecaeris," I caution. "That's more than enough. We knew she was coming. Spiran told us both."

He turns his attention to me, mismatched eyes brimming with anger. "You knew?"

"Of course, they knew," Madi quips before I can reply. "What? Did you think I just showed up out of the blue, completely unprepared for what I was walking into? You're the reason Lyell sent the letter with me. He already warned me you'd act like a snot-nose brat when you found out I was a Shade."

"Jesus, Madi," I say quickly, trying to decide if I want to stay between them or duck for cover. "This isn't going to help him—"

"I'm not trying to help him, Ada," she interrupts. "I'm trying to stay alive. He doesn't need to like me, or even tolerate me, to uphold Lyell's word. The Shade prince seems to think this Mongrel has some integrity. But all I've seen of him since I've been here are sobbing complaints and empty threats."

Talodus pushes Ecaeris backward with a firm hand against the prince's shoulder. "Careful. She's baiting you."

"I'm not baiting him. What I'm doing is informing him that his actions are a stark juxtaposition to his reputation," Madi interjects. "So, either Lyell was grossly exaggerating the truth when he spoke so fondly of you, or you're

bluffing. Take your pick, Water Prince, but understand a fiery path straight from hell is heading your way. I can't stop her on my own, and neither can you. You'll need me to survive as much as I'll need you."

Ecaeris growls under his breath. "You led Nesta straight to us?"

Madigan rolls her eyes. "No. I'm not an idiot. But eventually, she will find me, and when she does, I'd like to be strong enough to kick her ass all the way across the fucking ocean to where she belongs."

"Wait." I hold my hand up, turning so I can see them both. "Why did you say he'll need you to survive?"

"We're all going to need each other, Ada." Madi shakes her head, eyes wide as she whispers, "Nesta is wicked and ruthless. The first chance she gets, she will kill us all."

"And you've brought her here," Ecaeris shouts, his accusations too loud to contain the conversation within the throne room.

I glare at him. "Shut up and calm down or get out. She's being serious, yet you're so blinded by hatred you can't see this warning as the blessing it is."

"Blessing?" He scoffs in disbelief. "This isn't a blessing, Ada. It's a curse. I can't believe either of you are okay letting this Shade stay in the village when she threatens the livelihood of every Mongrel who lives here, present and future. Going to war with Nesta is a fucking death wish. Neither of you has the experience needed to take her on."

"That may be so," I calmly reply, knowing none of my answers will settle him. "But Nesta is also part of the reason Spiran brought us here, why Spiran is helping us learn about our abilities and surroundings so quickly. She doesn't expect us to have the time we need to learn naturally—"

"That may be so?" Ecaeris repeats before challenging me. "Really? What are you going to do, Ada?"

"Ecaeris," Talodus softly cautions, guarded eyes begging his friend to back down.

The mongrel prince takes a step closer to me. "What are you going to do? Kill yourself to prove a point?"

Cold washes over me so quickly I feel as if my fingers are frostbitten. Rage-filled waves rush through my mind, a tsunami ready to tear the world apart. The strength behind the rising storm nearly knocks me off my feet.

"That is enough." My voice is barely above a murmur, though it rings through the room as if I've screamed the words.

Isolde gasps, but I pay her no mind as Talodus drops to one knee between the prince and me. Ecaeris vibrates with tension, though his anger is nowhere in sight now that he's pushed too far.

"I will not have you throw my past in my face. I'm not the only one who's been through shit and thought the worst of themselves. The people in this room are not on separate sides of this brewing war, but they will be if you keep lashing out. We do not want the new Shade queen as an enemy; that will only serve to fuel another war in the future that neither tribe can afford."

"That's—" Talodus struggles to speak as I stare down Ecaeris. "That's not what he meant."

"Then let him explain that to me."

Tal coughs. "He can't. You have to drop your hold, Ada."

I take a step back as I glance at the burly guard. "What hold?"

"That wasn't what I meant," Ecaeris whispers, rolling out his shoulders as if he's stretching. "I might be a dick, Ada. But I'm not emotionless. I would never—we can talk about it later. I just need you to understand that going head-to-head with Nesta is a battle you might not return from, and I'm not willing to chance your life. You may fight with a Shade by your side, but the two of you won't be enough on your own. You need more allies."

"What just happened, Ecaeris?" I ask, shoving down my panic until I have an answer. "You skipped that completely. And it's now more pressing to me than the current conversation."

Isolde stands as she quietly confesses, "You showed your position in the hierarchy, Ada. I knew where you would sit, but to watch you, to feel that power pour over us, drowning us in your energy, is unbelievable to witness."

"Wait." Madi grins at me, trying to ease the tension. "I'm just *a* Shade now? Not *the* Shade? Why is he demoting me?"

Ecaeris waves a dismissive hand at Madigan. "You've become insignificant now that *the* Shade is on her way."

"I didn't say she was right behind me," Madi says with a huff. "I've been hiding from her for weeks with the help of Lyell. He only sent me here because he felt the Mongrels were our last option."

"He was wrong," the prince gripes.

Madigan shrugs a prim shoulder as she smiles, none-to-sweet. "Possibly, but if I die, you'll have a bigger issue on your hands. If Ada and I can't fight Nesta by ourselves, then what will you do? She can't be bartered with; she's after blood. And she won't be satisfied with yours."

Isolde claps her hands as if the show is over, and she's thrilled with our performance. "Thank you all for getting along so well. I'm looking forward to the coming weeks."

I lean my head back, begging the ceiling to collapse on me since it won't give me the answers I seek. But it doesn't even offer a crack. It just gazes down at me, unbreakable and laughing at the bullshit surrounding me.

"What's up there?" Isolde inquires, tilting her head to examine the throne room's ceiling. "It's marvelous, but it's nothing worthy of distraction."

"She does that when she's exasperated with us," Talodus helpfully responds.

Jesus, Neptune, and Osiris.

I'm so fucking done with today.

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY

The Mongrel queen has this uncanny ability of knowing what everyone around her needs... And right now, we all need space.

Isolde runs her hands down her linen pants, straightening them as she steps away from her throne. She grips Ecaeris and Talodus above their elbows without hesitation, walking them toward the door as if they are gigantic children.

To be fair, occasionally they are.

“You can go,” the queen says, dismissing them.

Her son snorts like she’s losing the plot. “I’m not leaving you with—”

“You will,” she snaps, showing no small amount of annoyance. “I’m with two goddesses. Nothing and no one would dare touch me.”

“That’s the second time you’ve called Ada a goddess today,” Ecaeris mentions, his eyes narrow in on his mother. “You have to stop flirting with her. It’s weird now.”

Talodus snorts as Isolde gets them to the double doors. “Are you really jealous of your mother right now? Or that worried she can’t defend herself against one woman?”

“Shut up, Tal,” Ecaeris mutters as Isolde closes the doors, cutting them out of the upcoming conversation.

The Mongrel queen glides across the room to us, taking Madi’s hands into hers and giving them a gentle squeeze. “You must be tired, dear. I’ve set up a room for you while you’re here. Take today as an off day before we begin training. Shower, rest, change clothes. Everything you need is waiting for you. Rinya will show you the way.”

As if she simply hears her name as a whisper in the wind, Rin pops through the doorway at the opposite end of the throne room. She regards Madi with suspicion, but she aims no terror or hostility at our Shade guest.

Madigan smiles at Isolde. “Thank you. I would very much enjoy a place to bathe and wash these clothes after traveling for days.”

“I’ll have someone take them to wash. I’ve already put clean clothing in the wardrobe in your room.” Isolde releases Madi to wave at her linen pants. “Ada has explained that these are a thing Earth women wear regularly, so you’ll find a pair or two in there along with some dresses. Wear whatever you like.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t want to wear dresses,” Madi chides at me, her eyes alight with old memories.

“Hey. I wear them now, and I love them,” I defend. “But nothing beats the pants Isolde makes.”

She scoffs. “And how are you fairing without a swimsuit?”

“We had to make one,” I reply, scrunching my nose.

“Naturally,” she replies with a laugh, then turns to Isolde. “I can’t thank you enough. I know this is likely unconventional, but—”

“But nothing.” Isolde stops Madi, her lips tilting down as she looks at each of us. “The path ahead of you isn’t easy, and I want you both to know someone stands behind you and your decisions. This island has been my home for a thousand years; I won’t see it destroyed because Nesta can’t accept the past or her replacement. You will both do great things...after you’ve rested.”

“Thank you,” Madi whispers, taking her leave.

Rinya raises a curious brow at me before she closes me in the throne room with Isolde. She’s too nosy to not ask about the guest in our village, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to answer all her questions.

“Now that it’s just the two of us,” the queen mischievously begins. “Would you care to explain why you haven’t told me about a guard attacking you in your room?”

I grimace. “It’s not something I’m hiding from you. I would just rather not talk about it.”

“You killed a man, Ada,” Isolde points out, though there’s no judgment in her voice. “That’s not something you should keep inside yourself.”

“Poko had been stalking me, trying to get me alone.” I thread my fingers together as I take a deep breath. “He attacked me from behind with intentions

of raping me. That's when he told me he was doing this to push Ecaeris over the edge so you'd have to punish him. Because if you were hurting, the Shade queen could attack you while you were vulnerable and win this war before it starts."

"Is that why you drowned him?"

"That was how I chose to defend myself."

She gives me a sad smile. "I'm sorry you had to defend yourself in the first place, but don't be ashamed. It is your will as the water goddess to bring life or death with your element. You must not be afraid to wield it in either circumstance."

I furrow my brow as I study her. "Why do you keep calling me a goddess?"

"Because you aren't just the future queen, sweet girl." Isolde rests her hands on my shoulders, staring straight into the darkest depths of my soul. "You're the water goddess in this world. Spiran chose you to carry that honor."

"Just—why?" I shake my head. "I feel like I'm still drowning in boiling water, waiting for the blisters to appear... But the only thing that keeps appearing is new information. It's difficult to be stunned by any news now."

"Spiran didn't explain this when you spoke to her?"

"Not in so many words, no."

Isolde sighs. "That's why you're so much more powerful than the rest of us. You and Madigan. The other two women that came to replace the Howler and Dweller queens... I don't know if they're aware of this yet, but I know your friend isn't."

"Huh. That might have stunned me," I mumble, then distract myself before I can think through the panic. "Madigan doesn't know she's a goddess? What do you want me to do? Tell her?"

"That's not your job," she tells me with a grin. "I want you to train, Ada. You must master control of your element before you come face-to-face with Nesta. We don't have your level of power, but we have so much more experience wielding our elements. That means you must become so attuned with your elemental power that you can pull water from the very fire she throws at you."

I nod, though her request feels as impossible as moving mountains. But maybe it's not... There's water in the earth and the air. Heat creates moisture, so there's bound to be water somewhere. I shelve it for now because I have

more important questions flooding my mind.

“What about Poko?”

She waves her hand to bat my concern away. “Don’t worry about Poko. You’re not in any sort of trouble for defending yourself. I’ll address his death with the village. They don’t need to know all the details, and neither do I. Talodus explained enough.”

“Okay,” I drawl. “What happened to my power earlier? I don’t understand what hold I had over anyone, and I don’t want to accidentally—”

“You won’t,” she cuts in. “Everyone who has control of an element can do that to an extent. The weaker your connection, the weaker your hold. That creates a hierarchy, allowing those with control to show they aren’t the people to mess with. It’s similar to bugs.”

“What?”

Isolde tilts her head, and her lips purse as she squints at me. “You know... How some bugs are brightly colored to warn predators away? They’re still like that on Earth, yes?”

“That’s not at all similar,” I inform her. “We’re not warning predators away.”

“No, but it does help keep the peace,” she admits. “When my authority is being challenged, I can flex my connection to water, showing I’m more powerful, more connected, than the one opposing me.”

I snort. “So it’s a pissing contest.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sorry, Earth thing. What you’re saying is I flexed—”

“So much power I couldn’t move from my position,” she finishes for me. “Neither could Ecaeris. I’m actually surprised Talodus moved at all.”

“Why is that surprising?” I blurt. “Out of everything that’s happened today, why that?”

Isolde wobbles her head, searching for the right words. “He dropped to one knee, Ada. That, to me, shows how much he respects your power and your judgment. I believe Ecaeris would have knelt as well if he hadn’t been so shocked. I keep telling him he’s not paying enough attention; that was the moment he realized I was right.”

I frown, feeling sea sick over my interpretation of her statement. “I don’t want them kneeling before me, Isolde. Respect is one thing, but I’d rather earn it. Especially from someone I’m supposed to be in a relationship with.”

“This is a different respect,” she corrects. “It’s not respect for your

feelings shown to you by your lover; it's the people sensing your power is not to be toyed with. You're in two positions of importance, and occasionally, you will have to remind them of that. Even your lovers. Because to have them show you disrespect in front of others is to welcome challenges from people who think they can do your job better than you can."

"They challenge you?" I quietly inquire.

Isolde tucks her arm in mine, steering us out of the throne room. "Not anymore, sweet girl. They know what I'm capable of now. That's why the few who stray do so in the dark."

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY

More than an hour has passed since Isolde left me alone in her sewing room. And though we didn't speak while we worked on our projects, the room was as loud as thunder clapping in my ears.

My mind still whirls a mile a minute with no signs of slowing down, no matter how busy I keep my hands.

Today, Isolde answered my questions.

It's not the first time I've gotten straight forward answers instead of riddles or more questions. But this feels different.

I'm not processing the news; I'm keenly aware of this, though there's nothing I can say aloud to make my mind catch up with my heart or the strangely ingrained knowledge I've suddenly been given.

It's fucking weird.

So much has happened. And while I know without doubt how many days have rushed by since I have arrived here... It feels like I've been living on this island for more than mere weeks or even decades. This is a *beginning of time* sort of sensation. As if I've personally watched the rise and fall of a dozen empires, only their triumphs and failures have flashed before my eyes in days.

The speed at which Spiran is force-feeding me information is nauseating. But the patterns are all there. From the new arrivals to the regime and societal changes, the influx of elementals surfacing with the next generations to the ever-present wars.

It makes sense...until I get to that part where I'm a fucking goddess.

The word is leaden as it sits on my tongue, unable to tumble from my

mouth. It sinks into my stomach like concrete weights, pinning me to my seat. And though it feels unreal, my chest isn't heavy with anxiety or fear.

My mind is one big knot of contradictions because while I associate these feelings with pressing weight, it's not totally unwelcome. It's like the lead weights of my fishing pole, helping the purple monstrosity stay below the surface of the water to attract the curious fish.

That space between the sandy seabed and the rippling surface is where the purple monstrosity belongs. But this lure can't achieve its purpose without assistance.

The ocean lures.

Sera's confession sneaks into my consciousness, making me wonder if that's a positive assessment or not. I fall in love with the ocean every day, it's shifting tides and warm embrace ensnaring me all my life, for as far back as I can remember.

I've never felt more at home than when I'm in the water... But to control it? That's a responsibility far greater than simply keeping my head above the surface or staying afloat.

"There you are," Ecaeris murmurs from the doorway. "I've been looking for you, but this was the last place I expected to find you."

"Isolde is refining my stitching ability," I reply, though I haven't been paying attention to the inseam of this skirt.

My hands move on autopilot, as if I've sewn hundreds of skirts.

"She's been gone for hours, Ada," he tells me. "Why are you still in here?"

"I'm thinking," I hear myself answer.

His voice follows, but it sounds as if he's underwater, muffled by the current. I can't make myself pay attention to him right now. He's talking to me, yes. About what? It doesn't matter.

We're going to war against Nesta, and here I sit, sewing a skirt I most definitely don't need when I should be training to control my power. Realistically, I should freak out or cry... Something to show my unease at the situation. But I have none.

I'm not numb to the circumstances or the struggles that will come. It's just... There's this little inner voice screaming at me, telling me I'm a goddess now. I've got this crazy, scary power, and I understand things that I really shouldn't have a clue about. The more I think through everything, the louder she gets until she drowns out the self doubt I would have once had

over this imminent war.

And she's right.

I don't know how I know she's right... But she is.

I'm a fucking goddess. And I'll be queen of the Mongrels when Isolde steps down.

I can't keep fighting the inevitable when there are bigger enemies looming in the shadows, waiting to catch us in a vulnerable position.

How does one settle into a role that she never expected to be in, though?

This is more than playing a part or wearing a fancy leadership hat without the responsibility, and it's more than being a queen.

It's an absolute mind fuck.

But in order to move forward, I have to accept this path. I chose it. And now, it's who I am.

That doesn't mean I have to change who I am. I'm still me at my core... Just a better version of myself.

Right?

Ecaeris snaps his fingers in front of my face. "Where did you go? Are you listening?"

"Uhm, yeah." I shake my head. "What were you saying?"

"I need you present, Ada," he nearly pleads. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's been a long day is all," I explain and shrug. "Once you get the stitching down, the monotony of the task leaves your mind wandering. But I'm here. One hundred percent present."

He leans his hip against the table as he regards me. "So, you didn't hear me apologizing for my outburst or the things I said—"

"How did I miss you apologizing?"

Ecaeris gives me a bland look. "You were sewing and humming."

"I was humming?"

"Yes. And I was apologizing." He sighs. "I know I was—am—a dick, Ada. But I wouldn't bring up your past in front of others or use it to hurt you. I wish I would have chosen my words more carefully. I was angry, and I shouldn't have taken my frustrations out on you. For that, I am sorry."

"I know you wouldn't. We're really great at miscommunication, you know?" I try to smile, but it falls flat. "I should have been more aware of my temper, too. Seeing Madi again brought up some deeply rooted feelings, especially after talking about my past. She was the last person I expected to see standing there."

He picks up the plush ball filled with concealed sewing needles and spins it between his fingers. “Is it strange?”

“What?”

“Having someone here that you know from Earth?”

I frown. “Strange isn’t the word I would use. It’s almost... Intrinsic? Predestined? Auspicious?”

“Meaning?”

“Favorable.”

Ecaeris observes me, his brow furrowing as I fold up my skirt. “How so?”

“It’s like a *right on time* scenario.” I scrunch my nose, not liking my quick response. “Madi is the representation of my reality before I washed onto Spiran’s shores. She connects the end of my Earth life cycle to my new island life. If she’s the past, then the news Isolde gave me today is the future. All of these things gave me the opportunity to process what I haven’t ever processed before. Or at least the beginnings of it. And it’s exactly what I needed.”

He huffs his annoyance at my answer. “That sounds cryptic.”

“It is,” I agree. “But only because I’m not ready to say it aloud.”

“This is what you were thinking about when I came in?”

“That and war and Madi and—” I stop myself and stand, dropping all my supplies on the floor. “I need to go.”

“What?”

I grimace. “I know you won’t understand this, but I have to go. Thank you.”

“Where are you going?” he inquires. “Why are you thanking me?”

“To Madi. And I’m thanking you for everything. From day one to today, and tomorrow, and all the things that come after that.” I kiss his cheek before I slam the sewing room door in my haste.



*M*adigan sits in her steaming bath water, arms crossing over her chest as she glares at my intrusion.

“Well?” she prompts.

“Well, what?”

“You just flew into my room like your ass was on fire,” she discloses, like I’m unaware that I slid across her floor and almost fell on my face. “Are you going to tell me why you’re here or just stare at me until I shrivel up in this Arctic water?”

“Oh. Right.” I release a nervous giggle. “We need to talk.”

She rolls her eyes, growing more irritated with my invasion of her personal space. “Obviously.”

“Would you like me to warm your water?” I offer. “I can do that.”

“Uhm, no,” Madi retorts. “I want you to tell me why this conversation can’t wait ten more minutes.”

“Because you’ve waited fifty days to have someone to talk to about all the wild shit you’ve seen. Because Ecaeris just apologized to me, and I owe you the same words he said to me.” I take a deep breath and still my racing thoughts. “I was angry, and I shouldn’t have taken my frustrations out on you. For that, I am sorry.”

“It’s a little late for apologies, Ada. We’re well beyond that.”

I tuck my hands into the pockets of my shorts to stop fidgeting. “That may be, but I still owe it to you. I should have told you sooner.”

Madi studies me, staying well below the surface of her bathwater. I stand awkwardly, a million things wanting to spill from my lips, though none take the plunge of their own accord. I can’t tell her everything all at once. She’s the type of person who needs to be challenged, following the scarce trail of breadcrumbs one leaves until she gets to her goal.

“Since you want to have this now...” she begins, sliding further into the water. “Why are we here? And I don’t mean the bathroom.”

“I can’t answer that.”

“What happened to the other women who were caught in the storm with us?”

I tip my head, giving her a crumb. “They’re fine so far as I’ve been told. They ended up with the other two tribes.”

“Why are *we* here, Ada?” she repeats, slapping the surface of her bathwater. “It’s not just because of the storm. There has to be more to this punishment than—”

“I know why I’m here,” I interrupt, my voice steady, truthful. “But you’ll have to figure out why you’re here without my input. This isn’t meant to be a punishment, Madi. It’s meant to be a second chance.”

“It’s freakish here,” she mumbles, unhappy with my evasion of her question.

I grin. “It’s fantastical and outrageous and otherworldly.”

“You sound like you’re describing a world from one of your fantasy books,” she says with a groan. “But I still don’t want to read it.”

“Not even when you feel the fire pulsing inside you?” I murmur, drawing my hand from my pocket to show her the water that clings to my skin. “When you stretch your fingertips, burning with the brightest of flames, and light the torches that keep the Shades out of the dark?”

Madi laughs bitterly. “What are you talking about? I’ve been in the dark with only a few Shades standing in my corner. There are no masses who need me to light the way.”

“They’ll need you,” I assure her. “We simply need to clear the ashes from the air so they can see the truth.”

“Do you hear yourself?” she asks incredulously.

“Do you?” I counter, then scoff. “Madigan Wilde doesn’t back down when the going gets tough. No one tells her she can’t do something. Stop being the selfish princess your father wanted you to be. Start being the inspiring and passionate queen that you have always been. The Shades need that as much as the rest of us.”

“Fuck you,” she snarls, falling into my riptide of reverse psychology bullshit. “I’m not selfish.”

I raise a brow, my sarcasm thick as I say, “No. You’re right. I suppose you’re just not cut out to do more than waste away under a tyrant’s thumb. Doesn’t really matter which one it is.”

“Did you come in here to insult me?”

“Not at first,” I admit. “But now I can see that you need it. You’re too ambitious to sit idle on the sidelines while the rest of us thrive. You’re aggressive and impulsive, yet courageous and bright. So why are you hiding?”

Madi’s deep blue irises blaze with anger. “I don’t want to be here.”

“Lies,” I hiss. “You chose to stay, same as me. Now, it’s time to show your people you’re unafraid in the face of their biggest fear.”

“I fear her, Ada!” She shouts her confession, though her expression says she didn’t want to tell anyone, least of all me.

I give her a sad smile. “No, Madi. You fear losing more. That’s the one lesson your parents taught you that will fare well on this island. None of us

can afford to fail when we stand against Nesta.”

I turn to walk away, but stop in the archway of the guest suite’s bathroom. “If you’ll give me the chance, I can show you what we—the Mongrels—will lose if Nesta gets her way. I imagine the Shades are in much worse condition than us, so maybe, just maybe, I can also give you some insight into what your people are missing.”

“They aren’t my people,” she mutters petulantly.

I snort and face her so she can watch my eyes roll. “Yes, they are. You’ve already made up your mind, or you wouldn’t be here wanting to learn how to beat Nesta at her own game.”

Her narrow gaze follows me until I’m out of her view, then she yells, “We’re not friends. I’m still really hurt by what you did.”

“I know,” I call back before whispering to myself, “What happened between us matters, but not in the way you think.”

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY-TWO

Nerves batter my mind, imitating out-of-control waves, as I stand in the center of my room, waiting for the guys. We're heading to the village together, but not for a fun excursion or baked goods.

Of course, it won't be that simple.

Isolde is addressing the village about Poko's death, and she wants all five of us to stand with her.

I want to throw up and curl under the blankets for a perfectly timed nap. But I'm well aware that isn't an option.

I loathe being the center of attention.

Despite growing up accustomed to Penny always being in the spotlight, I only ever wanted praise when it came to swimming. Everything else came with negative connotations. Between my sister's drug habits, arrests, and rehab stays, there was never much time for me to shine. And when I did, that was another issue altogether. It's also when people like Penny's boyfriend would step in, showing attention no matter how desperately I didn't want it.

The guys make enough noise to wake the dead as they storm down the hallway toward my room. Thankfully, they pull me from my memories before I can drown in them. It's not that they walk loudly, but they do laugh and jeer at each other in a way I haven't quite witnessed before. It's cute and distracting... Which is the most important takeaway from their behavior.

"Ready to go?" Talodus inquires, his gaze trailing the lines of my favorite lavender dress.

I refrain from glaring at the ceiling, but it's hard work. "Not even a little."

"If you don't show up," Ecaeris begins, raising a brow at me like I don't

already know the repercussions. “She’ll just postpone until—”

“I know, I know,” I mutter. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Isolde will be cautious with her words,” Connak assures me. “No one will know what really happened.”

“I’m not worried about that,” I tell him, though it has crossed my mind.

The hunter circles me, humming to himself, before he asks, “Then what is it?”

I sigh. “I just don’t like being the center of attention.”

“Well, you don’t have far to go,” Ecaeris says, throwing a spear through the carefully constructed wall that *was* holding my anxiety at bay. “So you won’t have time to worry.”

My fingers are immediately on the hem of my skirt, fidgeting hidden in the layers of material. “What?”

Imryll grabs my left hand, lacing his fingers between mine. “I think she knew you would try to talk yourself out of coming, so she arranged to address the Mongrels outside the palace.”

“Fuck,” I drawl, and briefly wonder if I can make a sinkhole with my power. It could swallow me up, not spitting me out until Isolde forgets all about this nonsense.

“Let’s go,” Taldous directs, too freaking cheerful for my liking.

I dig my heels in, refusing to move, as I admit, “I’m nervous.”

“It’s okay,” Imy softly acknowledges. “Nervousness is natural. I’m not exactly ecstatic about being there, either. I’d rather be in the crowd, but we don’t have that option, so we’ll just make the best of it.”

Then he practically drags me out of my bedroom. Talodus places his hand against the small of my back, *helping* me along. Ecaeris leads the way as Connak walks at my back. I’m surrounded, caged in and still wanting to disappear into the floor.

“It’s like you think I’ll bolt,” I joke, but I’m seriously contemplating an escape. “There’s nowhere to run up here.”

“There is no place in this world you could go where I wouldn’t be able to find you, Ada,” Connak murmurs, his breath tickling my neck before he adds, “I chose to be behind you because I like the view.”

I roll my eyes, though his whispered words echo in my ear, making me shiver.

He would hunt me to the end of the world and back, but I doubt he would be alone.

We make it to the bottom of the stairs before I stop, my feet immovable once more. I can hear the Mongrels' chatter as they wait for their queen to step out. She stands at the door, regal in her buttercup yellow gown as she quietly finishes her conversation with her husbands, Rinya, and Marren.

I turn to the guys. "I need to tell you something."

"You're nervous. We know," Ecaeris points out, and I really want a pocket full of rocks to throw at him. "But it won't be as rough as you've let yourself imagine."

"It's not about this," I explain, then rub my hand across my mouth.

"What's wrong?" Imryll inquires, brow furrowing low over his eyes as he studies me.

"Nothing is wrong," I declare, feeling the truth settle further in my mind. "I mean, everything is kind of weird, but not wrong."

Connak tilts his head slightly. "What are you talking about?"

"Ada, sweet girl," Isolde calls. "Are you ready?"

"One moment," I request, before stepping closer to the guys. "I found out some news the other day...and I'm ready to tell you."

"We can talk of Shades and war after this," Ecaeris claims. "We have a full day in front of us."

"Sure," I agree, nodding my head too quickly. "We can do that after we talk about me being the goddess of water."

Connak clears his throat. "Repeat that."

"I'm the goddess of water, not just the next queen," I reply, and spin on my heel to make my escape—uhm, to meet Isolde.

She grins brightly as the guys stammer over my confession. They have questions; I get it. But they won't ask them in the presence of others. It's probably a shitty way to tell them this secret. I can't think of another way to say it, though.

Now, they'll have some time to process before interrogating me.

"Just stay beside me," Isolde instructs, patting my arm. "Don't worry yourself with the crowd."

I force a laugh. "Right. Don't freak out. Got it."

We push through the double doors, and I'm taken aback before we even make it outside. I don't think I've ever seen both of the massive wooden structures open at once. I didn't realize how truly magnificent they were until now, until the etchings of fearsome waves move in unison.

Isolde leads us to stand upon a dais made of water. I still find it

unbelievable, but I don't let my face betray my thoughts. Everything in me says I won't sink, so I focus on Isolde to keep myself from looking at my feet to examine the platform.

She raises her left hand, silencing the crowd before she utters a single word. The power in that one move is incredible, though it doesn't affect me the same way it does the rest of the Mongrels.

"Thank you for joining us to hear this announcement today. I would like to give you some information in hopes that you can assist us, but also so that what has recently transpired doesn't happen again."

Isolde gives everyone a moment to comprehend her statement before she continues to address them.

"You may or may not have noticed, Poko Blackwater is no longer with us. Over the past months, we've been watching him and found him to be feeding Mongrel information to the group of Shades who were attacking us. He was in a position of great trust as a guard, but he betrayed our trust. And he wasn't working alone."

Murmurs from the crowd amplify in the courtyard; the voices ebbing and flowing as everyone glances around.

"Currently, we're looking for his accomplice. If you have any information about Poko, you may speak to myself or one of the Mongrels standing with me. But please, do not be suspicious of your neighbor, for I highly doubt his accomplice is here today. However, if that Mongrel is here, I urge you to come forward. Punishment will be far greater if we find you on our own."

Isolde strategically pauses to scan the crowd, and I marvel at the way she speaks to our people. She's constantly changing how she acts or reacts depending on who she's talking to, so watching her address thousands of Mongrels is as enthralling as the ocean itself. I'm not even sure how she gets her voice to echo through the open atmosphere, but it does, reaching even the people in the back.

How do I speak to them with as much confidence as she holds?

I suppose that's a skill one acquires over time, but for once, I pray Spiran has force-fed me that knowledge, too.

"If you have any questions in the coming days, feel free to bring them to my attention. I will answer them to the best of my ability. As I wasn't present for the death of Poko, I can only give you the facts passed on to me by the witnesses. But there is one pressing fact that I would like to focus on today."

That makes my stomach flutter with gigantic butterflies. Isolde's solemn expression does nothing to ease my nerves. They flow wildly through my body when she cants her head in my direction, a mischievous glint in her amber eyes.

"Poko attacked our future queen with the purpose of not only harming her, but killing her. His actions are why he is no longer with us. Now, if you haven't deduced this by who stands at my side, I'd like to formally introduce the next queen of the Mongrels, chosen by Spiran herself, Ada Stormbrave."

There's a silent moment where my world comes to an abrupt halt. My ears ring, and my vision tunnels. I sort of want to pass out or throw up... Or both simultaneously.

Where is that damn sinkhole when I need it?

Oh-so-slowly, the crowd begins to clap. I swallow thickly because I most definitely don't want this much attention on me while I'm so far from being ready to step into Isolde's shoes.

"Your next queen will take her place as leader of the Mongrels when she is ready," Isolde informs the people. "She's done a wonderful job of learning our ways and bringing solutions to long-suffering problems. And with your support, she will grow to become a better queen than I have ever been. I look forward to the day I can pass my crown along and take my place amongst you, sewing dresses and harvesting herbs."

Laughter weaves through the crowd, and Isolde giggles alongside them.

"It's true, it's true," she promises. "Please continue to show Ada how loving and close our village is. But give her a few days to get over the shock of this announcement because I didn't forewarn her I was going to tell you her purpose. You've all made such a tremendous impact on her time within the Mongrel tribe, and I know you'll continue to be hospitable."

Isolde's praise has the entire crowd on their toes, smiling at their queen like the proud Mongrels they are. I've embraced the sense of community within the village, but the swell of emotion they show her right now is invigorating.

"This concludes my announcements for today," Isolde finishes. "Hopefully, the next announcement will usher in the change of a dynasty. Enjoy the rest of your holiday. You've all earned it."

My heart pounds against my ribs as I wait for someone to shout that I can't be the next queen, to prove myself, that I'm not one of them... But it never happens. Her word is final, and they respect her decision. Generations

of Mongrels have been raised to not question their leader.

I'm sure all the tribes are similar, which leaves me wondering what the Shades really think of us.

The crowd doesn't linger for long, and as they disperse, Isolde pats my arm. I give her my attention until I see a familiar face shoving through the throngs of Mongrels.

My gaze snaps to Connak, and he creases his brow, trying to understand my expression.

"There's Cotear," I whisper as quietly as possible.

His chocolate irises fade to black while he searches the area. The moment he spots his prey, his back goes ramrod straight. This change gains Imryll's interest before Talodus and Ecaeris notice. Connak rushes in the direction of the now missing man, Imy following right on his heels.

Rinya ushers Isolde inside. And Ecaeris tugs me into the palace before I can run after Imy. The prince's dilated pupils swallow his mismatched irises. He centers his full concentration on the doors until Talodus closes them.

"Was he there?" Isolde asks me.

"Yes," I reply, grimacing when Ecaeris flexes his fingers in my grasp.

"We knew he would be," she acquiesces, though she doesn't elaborate on who she's referring to. "Relax now, Ada. Let the boys find him."

Talodus narrows his eyes at the queen. "Why didn't you tell us we were looking for him?"

"We weren't," Isolde corrects. "Rinya and Marren were. So were my husbands. You were there to support Ada."

"So you had us there for protection?" he clarifies, missing the point completely.

"No," Ecaeris cuts in before his mother can respond. "She had us there for support and to show the people Ada isn't available to court. They don't need protection, Tal."

Isolde gives them her signature coy smirk. "I suppose ignorance is no longer the bliss you crave. How does it feel to be in bed with—"

"Please don't finish that," I plead to her. "I know what you're going to say, and as much as I adore you, I'd really, *really* rather you stay away from that topic. Please, Isolde."

"Only because you said you adore me," she murmurs before stirring the pot. "But I reserve the right to tease these clueless boys when you aren't around."

“By all means,” I agree without hesitation.

“Ada,” Ecaeris gripes. “You’re supposed to say no.”

I just grin at him. “She’s better than rocks.”

IMRYLL

DAY FIFTY-TWO

Connak darts through the crowd as his hunting instincts take over. He's a snake slithering across the water's surface, bent on chasing and catching his prey.

I follow behind him, silent as I search our surroundings.

Cotear triggered Connak's hunt days ago, and he hasn't settled since letting the defector disappear into the shadows. Ada was and is more important. But there will be no getting away now. If we don't find him today, Connak won't sleep until he's cornered.

I can't say with certainty that we will find Cotear, though I've never doubted Connak's ability to track.

Cotear has already proven that he and Poko could work around Connak's senses, throwing him off their tracks. I hope that isn't the case today, though I won't say it aloud.

They've been too prepared, too thought out, for me to guarantee success on one hunt. Eventually, Poko became brave enough to make a move, but he wasn't expecting Ada to fight back. Cotear will be smarter about his movements after his friend's mess up.

Her admission, though so many weeks ago, plays in my mind. She acted meek for that reason, knew if anyone ever came after her, they wouldn't expect her to fight with everything she had.

It angers me we let him so close that we weren't right behind her. But to know she has the gall to defend herself to the bitter end offers me a small amount of comfort. Only the barest, though. Because she should never be in that position again.

Cotear helped Poko. Helped him get so close to Ada that she was bloody and her clothing was ripped. He helped Poko touch her. As far as I'm concerned, his hands were on her, too.

And for that, he has to die.

Poko's death isn't enough to satisfy the rage that chills my veins. It's not enough to calm the raging ice storm that has my breath fogging in front of my face or my lips cooling. Icy water drips from my fingertips until I shake out my hands and reclaim my control.

Between my unstable element and Connak's murderous energy, the people in the village square turn away from us as we push forward.

The hunter follows his prey to the eastern side of the Mongrels' town center, taking us down a wide path that leads to droves of smaller homes. New relationships and young families blossom in the area, none of them the wiser to the monster that lurks in their midst.

Connak steps onto the quaint porch of the gray wash home and doesn't stop. He slams his foot into the door, pursuing his prey at all costs. And where Ada is involved, the hunter is lost to reason or privacy or innocence. He doesn't care who's on the other side or whose space he's breaching.

I don't either.

I'm ready for a fight the moment we cross into unknown territory.

The sitting area is empty, and the home itself is a wreck. Connak searches the rooms, his low rumble of a growl betraying his own storm.

"There's no one here," he tells me, his voice a little deeper than normal. "Let's go."

"Connak," I call, my jaw grinding as I stand in the doorway of a bedroom. "We can't leave yet."

"His tracks are fresh, but they split in two directions," he continues.

"Connak." I raise my voice to get through to the hunter. I need the man, not the animal. "Look."

He stomps into the room, and I witness the very moment he sees what stopped me. His irises fade from the feverish black of his hunt to his normal brown as his nostrils flare.

"Is that Ada's—"

"Her undergarments?" I finish for him, my breathing slow as I struggle to control my temper. "Yes. And her missing shoes."

"This isn't Cotear's room," he grumbles. "This room smells faintly of Poko."

“Which one is Cotear’s room?” I ask.

He nods his head to the left. I follow him to the opposite side of the home, stopping in the doorway. Connak swings the wardrobe open, and hanging where his clothing should be are maps of the island.

I turn to face him fully, my eyes narrow. “You were just going to keep hunting without bringing this up?”

“You were checking the rooms, too,” he argues. “I knew you would find it. Otherwise, I would have told you when I came down from my hunt.”

“That could have been too late.” I scrub my hand over my face. Connak isn’t the person who deserves my ire. “We need to search the property and take all that seems important. He can’t come back to get it.”

“The hunt—”

“We’ll find him,” I interrupt. “Ada needs to know where her missing items were going, Connak. And we need to talk with Isolde. They had her stuff, which means three things for us.”

Confusion crosses his features as his shoulders lose their tension. “Three?”

“One, whoever was delivering the clothes to Ada wasn’t giving her the undergarments. We need to know who that was,” I explain. “Two, she needs to decide what to do with her things now that we’ve found them.”

“And three?”

“We need to apologize.”

“Why?” he asks.

I frown, more disappointed in myself than him. “Because not all of us took the missing items seriously. In the end, we did. But not at first. We left her in that room, with no lock or protection, for far too long to walk away from this with our heads held high.”

“She knew something was going on,” he whispers to himself. “She knew she wasn’t safe. We should have let her stay at our house—”

“Should have,” I agree. “But we didn’t fight hard enough or fast enough. We have no idea what they’ve been doing with her stuff, or how much of it is here. What else was she missing that she didn’t even notice?”

He sighs, shaking out his arms as he completely dismisses the need to continue his hunt. “Where should we start?”

“Do we bring her here or take the items to her?” I counter.

“Bring her,” he replies without pause. “She’ll see connections that we overlook.”

“Then go find Ada,” I instruct him. “I’ll wait here.”

I expect him to argue, wanting to stay so the scent is still fresh in his mind, but he doesn’t. He simply nods and races out the door.



I thought I was angry.

We clearly know nothing of the storms that rage in Ada’s mind and body.

Every step she takes through the house is inaudible. Every breath is steady. Her hands don’t shake or fist at her sides. She doesn’t cross her arms over her chest to comfort herself.

But fury fills the space around her, a near physical presence that we must swim in until she calms.

Ada ambles through the rooms, soaking in everything before the first clap of thunder rings overhead in the otherwise sunny sky.

“When you followed his tracks,” she begins, glancing at Connak. “Did he go straight through the house, or did he veer into one of the rooms?”

“He went into his bedroom,” Connak answers quickly. “To the wardrobe, then out the back.”

Ada nods as she spins in a circle, making sure she hasn’t missed anything. “So he’s a ghost.”

“I don’t understand,” Ecaeris says, standing in Cotear’s bedroom doorway.

“He’s already proven that he can throw his tracks, though I haven’t figured out how he does it. I’m assuming he had some type of bag prepared, ready for his escape, once he realized Poko wasn’t coming back.” She shrugs. “He’s probably living on the land.”

Connak furrows his brow. “Why do you shrug like *this is it*, like we won’t find him?”

“We could all hunt him for weeks and not find him. We know very little about him, but—” She stops mid sentence, pursing her lips as she stares at the wall.

“But what?” I prompt.

She shakes her head. "He won't leave yet."

"How do you know?" I ask, curious why she would think he isn't already on his way across the island by now.

"Cotear was at the palace today," she explains. "He was waiting to hear what the announcement was about. And while we may know he's the accomplice, no one else does. He won't disappear forever. That's not what people like him do. He'll stay out of sight for a while, then come back to say he was camping or fishing or whatever you do for leisure."

"Because he's not done?" Talodus guesses.

"Because he's not done," Ada agrees. "Maybe he'll come after me, or maybe he just needs one more piece of information from the catacombs... Or maybe he's got a lover somewhere he'll want to say goodbye to. Whatever his motive may be, we'll see him again."

I feel myself leaning closer as I try to understand. "But how do you know?"

She meets me halfway, a slight grin lifting the corners of her lips as she whispers, "I watched a ton of true crime documentaries on Earth."

"Why are you so calm right now?" Ecaeris inquires before I can ask what she means.

"She's not," I reply to him without thought. "The storm inside her—"

"Is a hurricane," she cuts me off. "The weather rages, but the eye is calm. That's where I will stay until I no longer need the peace."

"It's your defense," I point out. "Like playing meek, so Poko would underestimate you."

Ada wobbles her head, telling me I'm both right and wrong. "Close. But I don't need to hide anymore. Cotear seems intelligent; he'll have caught on."

"And if he hasn't?" Talodus challenges. "Then what?"

"Then he'll wait until I'm not with one of you," she acknowledges, her slight grin growing. "And he'll make the same mistake Poko made, thinking sweet little me couldn't harm a fly, much less kill someone."

"What about your stuff?" I ask, moving the conversation forward so we can leave.

She looks disgusted as she points to Poko's room. "You mean my undergarments and my shoes?"

"Is anything else yours?" Talodus inquires. "None of us recognized the womens' items."

"No. The rest of that belongs to someone else." Ada runs her hand

through her loose vermillion hair as she thinks through the situation. “Now we need to find out who she is.”

Connak looks at me. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” Ecaeris leans against the door frame, settling in like we’ll be here all night.

“He said the same thing before I went to get you,” Connak tells the prince.

“Why wouldn’t we need to look for her?” I argue.

“If we find Cotear, we can find her,” Talodus states.

Ada shakes her head. “No. We find her first; she might be able to lead us to Cotear. She could also be a pawn in their plan, not knowing what she’s been helping with, or even doing it against her will. We already know they attacked Rin twice and me once after weeks of stalking... What’s to say there isn’t another victim too scared to come forward?”

“Is that what you think?” Ecaeris asks, attempting to piece everything together before we have all the information needed.

“I don’t know what I think about this yet,” she mutters. “What I do know is I want to destroy the undergarments because who knows what they were doing with them, and I want to scrub my shoes clean.”

Talodus snorts. “You’re keeping them?”

“Hell yes, I’m keeping them.” She rolls her eyes at the guard. “And eventually, I’m going to find someone who can recreate them.”

“Why?” Ecaeris drawls, frowning at her. “They’re hideous.”

“And comfortable,” she snaps back. “And perfect for trekking around the wilderness without tennis shoes.”

That leaves each of us confused. Except Connak. He spends more time with William than we do, so he’s probably heard the term before now.

“What?” Talodus finally whispers to himself, testing the strange word. “Tennis.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ada assures him. “My shoes are more supportive than the sandals I’m wearing, and I happen to like them.”

Connak chuckles to himself. “That’s all that matters.”

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY-FOUR

I taste nothing as I eat breakfast with Ecaeris and Connak. It's no fault of the mysterious Mongrel who cooks the food but has everything to do with the way they're watching me.

"What is it?" I ask, snippy as my appetite dissolves. "Say whatever it is that's making you stare at me like I'm a loose cannon."

Connak takes a sip of water before he asks, "What's a cannon?"

"A big gun." I scrub my hand over my face. "It doesn't matter. It's a figure of speech on Earth. Just... Tell me so I can try to eat without being gawked at."

"Are we going to talk about you being a goddess?" Connak inquires, laying his napkin atop his empty plate.

"I'm not sure what else there is to say," I mumble, pushing my nearly full plate away. "Spiran decided my fate. I'm just along for the ride."

"When did she tell you?" the prince presses.

I shake my head. "She didn't. Isolde did."

"So you don't know?" he continues.

"I know I feel like I could move the ocean," I reply, giving him the same bland expression he so often shows me. "But that could be all the anxiety you two are causing me from your incessant focus."

"I don't understand how they can say you're a goddess without some kind of proof." Ecaeris grimaces. "Not that I'm calling you a liar."

"I get it," I mutter. "It's a lot to take in."

Connak takes a piece of bread from my plate and throws it at the prince. "Well, I don't. Would you question Spiran if she were sitting here?"

“No,” he drawls.

“Right,” the hunter pops back. “So, why question Ada?”

Ecaeris picks up the bread, putting it back on my plate. “I’m not. I’m questioning my mother.”

“We knew Ada was strange,” Connak tells him.

“Hey,” I protest, though I’m not exactly offended. “Don’t talk about me like I’m not sitting in front of you.”

“I’m not talking about you, Ada,” he placates. “I’m reminding Ecaeris of the questions we had about you when you first got here.”

I raise a brow. “Like what?”

“Like when we went to the lake?” the hunter prompts. “I mentioned that the land spoke to you when you pointed out the bugs, but I didn’t understand why. Isolde told me she knew, and then she told me she wouldn’t tell me. I asked the guys, and Ecaeris thought you were a fisherman.”

“I love fishing,” I murmur, though that’s clearly not the point he’s trying to make.

Ecaeris nods thoughtfully as he recalls the conversation. “The land speaks to you, but you’re not a hunter. What are you?”

“A goddess,” Connak obnoxiously answers.

“Can we just eat?” I beg them. “I can’t even pretend to enjoy my meal while you two are discussing my fate and how it’s tied to the world. It doesn’t change anything between us. There’s just more responsibility for me that I haven’t quite comprehended yet.”

“What else is there to talk about?” Ecaeris inquires, haughty as he peeks over the rim of his glass.

“Literally anything.” I point at the wall. “How do you make paint? Is the weather always the same? Are there three-headed deer or killer wasps? Oh, how about that purple otter?”

Connak scrunches his nose. “Why? Otters come in other colors on Earth?”

“Yeah.” I scoff. “Brown.”

“That’s boring,” he says quietly.

“I know,” I agree. “Let’s talk about that.”

Connak sighs like I’m killing his jovial mood. “Purple otters are so normal. But eating breakfast with a goddess and knowing you’re her favorite Mongrel... That’s new and entertaining.”

I twist in my chair and hold up two fingers. “One: you sound like Isolde.

Two: Rinya is my favorite.”

“Aww, Ada,” the hunter coos, twirling a strand of my hair around his index finger. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

Ecaeris chuckles. “I wouldn’t call her entertaining.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but before I can reply, Isolde’s husbands lumber into the dining room, dragging their feet as they come to the table. They look exhausted, like they’ve been up all night, poring over ancient tomes and texts to unravel the world’s secrets.

“Just getting in?” Ecaeris casually asks them. “It’s a little late.”

“What time is it?” I whisper to Connak.

I have yet to find a single clock in this palace or the village, and I’m beginning to think I simply don’t know what I’m looking for... Which would make too much sense. They probably have sundials and water clocks.

He shrugs. “Morning?”

“Long night at the tavern,” Kerr responds as he drops into the chair across from me.

Zivol watches the three of us as he ruffles his bright red hair. “Should you two be sitting so close?”

Noctis scoffs. “Let them fight, brother. We could host another great battle in the Colosseum. Call it the Royal Tussle of the century.”

“You’re charming when you’re tired,” I snark with a grin.

He blinks at me, not sure how to reply at first, but then he drawls, “I’m always charming.”

I turn to Ecaeris. “The similarities are uncanny.”

“No,” he responds. “I got my sense of humor from Noctis, not—”

“That’s what we’re calling it?” Kerr asks through his laughter. “Humor?”

Connak bumps me with his elbow, a knowing smile lighting his features.

“And your attitude from Kerr, I’m guessing?” I sarcastically inquire.

“Noctis taught him to speak before he thinks,” Zivol divulges, stirring shit the same way Isolde does, but with a bit less tact. “Kerr taught him how to talk to the ladies. His charm comes from me.”

Ecaeris groans. “Breakfast has been lovely, as meals tend to go with you three—”

“You don’t get to walk out now,” I cut him off, grinning. “Tal said you weren’t supposed to meet him until noon, whenever that is. You have nowhere else to be until then.”

Connak snorts. “She speaks the truth.”

“Have you not heard?” Noctis asks, shaking his head. “I’m sure all three of you have somewhere to be. There was another beast attack this morning.”

My back snaps straight. “When?”

“Maybe an hour ago?” Kerr responds as he picks at his food. “Two guys limped toward the clinic as we were passing. They didn’t want any assistance, and sent us on our way. Proudful guys.”

“Lucky guys,” Zivol mumbles into his tea. At least, I think it’s some sort of hot tea... “They weren’t too injured, but they didn’t want to talk about the attack.”

The prince shoves his chair back. “We have to—”

“No. Wait.” I place my hand out to stop Ecaeris from standing. “What do you know of the beasts?”

“Not much,” Noctis tells me.

“Please don’t lie to me,” I whisper, though my gaze is hard as I stare at him.

“Ada,” Ecaeris admonishes.

Kerr gives me a dark smile. “How did you know?”

“Intuition,” I smart, shrugging one shoulder. “I wasn’t hand selected to be a Mongrel for my charm.”

He nods, conceding to me. “Isolde mentioned she told you the story of Elias.”

“She did,” I confirm.

“Elias wasn’t always a man,” Kerr confesses.

I tilt my head as I observe the queen’s husbands. After Isolde’s story, I had briefly suspected as much, but it wasn’t a question I was ready to ask or could follow up with any facts. It was just the way she recounted her run-in with the beast in the forest.

“We didn’t care for him at first,” Zivol admits. “But then he told us why he was here.”

“Why he thought he was here,” Noctis corrects. “He still had his memories of the dark island. His time on earth. The things he had done.”

I lean forward as I quietly add, “Spiran chose him to give Isolde the gift of a child.”

“She did,” Kerr agrees. “And we were all thrilled for a child. Didn’t matter which of us helped to create this life.”

“You think they were all humans from Earth?” I suddenly blurt as the

story clicks into place. Isolde told me as much without truly telling me.

Connak jerks his head back. “How did you reach that conclusion?”

“Am I right?” I press, witnessing centuries of memories flit through Kerr’s dark irises. “You’ve seen something.”

After a moment of silence that seems to drag on forever, Kerr nods. “I believe they were once human. Not of our world or the land beyond the ocean. And not mindless animals.”

He waits, watching me as if he’s expecting judgment to float across my features. But I have none. What he’s just said feels like facts settling in my mind, though I can’t sift through all the new information to figure out why I know this without doubt.

“Not long ago,” Connak begins, shaking his head. “I was attacked by three beasts. I swung my sword, cut off an arm... And when it hit the ground, it wasn’t covered in fur.”

“It looked like your arm,” Zivol describes. “Like my arm. Ada’s arm.”

The hunter slowly nods, almost as if he doesn’t quite believe it. “Yeah.”

“They aren’t what we think,” Noctis states, his voice distant. “That’s why we stopped hunting them, why we opened the tavern.”

“What does one have to do with the other?” Connak inquires.

I lean back in my chair as I answer, “People talk. More so in bars than in bakeries or general stores. People drink, and their lips loosen. They spin wild tales, but all of those stories have some seed of truth to them.”

Kerr cracks a smile. “What do you know of taverns, goddess?”

The moniker, or possible title, takes me by surprise. I don’t know if he means for it to be condescending or kind, though somehow, it sounds like both.

“We call them by many names on Earth. Taverns, saloons, bars, pubs, nightclubs... But there is one universal truth.” I wobble my head. “Maybe two. People talk when you serve them alcohol.”

“And the second?” Zivol challenges.

“People fight,” I declare.

Noctis chuckles, and I find myself wondering how the coy queen ended up falling for such dark men. I suppose opposites attract and all, but the more I talk to them, the more odd her relationships with them become. Though one can probably say the same of my choices in men—past and present.

“Why haven’t you brought her to the tavern?” he asks Ecaeris.

“People fight,” the prince repeats. “Ada more than most. And she throws

rocks. She can't be trusted after drinking."

I scoff. "You've never seen me after I've drank. I happen to be a bubbly, happy drunk."

"With a pocket full of rocks," he mutters.

I shrug. "They already have your name on them. I won't waste them on anyone else."

Ecaeris flourishes his hand in my direction as if to prove his point. But his parents only end up fighting to hide their amusement.

Zivol is the first to contain himself and speak. "The people *do* talk. They've seen things they don't believe to be true. It goes against everything we told the previous generations when we began this dynasty."

"Huh," I huff.

"What is it?" Kerr asks, observing me as I try to count on my fingers.

It only works if I count centuries, though... So, I finally relent and ask a question I've refused to acknowledge until this very minute in time.

"You've been with Isolde since the beginning of her reign?"

Noctis sighs wistfully. "Followed her like lost children since day one. Not that she was going to let us walk away after she decided she liked us. It wasn't easy, but we stuck like barnacles until she cared too much to cast us aside."

Connak chuckles when I swivel my attention to Ecaeris. "Sounds familiar."

"You know what I haven't heard," the prince begins, and I expect something snarky. "No one has come to get me about the attack."

"That is strange," Connak agrees.

"Go check it out," Kerr tells us. "But if you don't find them in the clinic, you'll soon find them whispering their tales at the tavern. You're always welcome to join us, Ada. It's not as rough as Ecaeris will lead you to believe."

I tip my head as we stand from the table. "I like to make up my mind on my own. He doesn't have as much sway as you believe."

"She's stubborn," Ecaeris interprets.

I elbow him in the ribs as I smile at Isolde's husbands. "Thank you for the invitation."

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY-FIVE

The afternoon sun beats against my back as Talodus throws another punch. I'm quicker than him, more nimble, but he has a hundred pounds on me... So his swing, though not aiming to hurt me, knocks the breath from my lungs when I fail to dodge.

My mind just isn't into training today.

All I can think about is the supposed beast attack from earlier yesterday morning.

I can't make it make sense.

We've waited, but no one has come forward. No one has shown up to the clinic with damage. And no one has whispered a peep about attacks.

I don't get it.

The village is tiny compared to where I'm from, so to hear nothing is more concerning than having the entire tribe talk about it.

Did these Mongrels skip the clinic and go home to heal? Don't they have a family that will worry for them, send them to see a doctor? Were their injuries not bad enough for them to need medical attention? And if that's the case, then how did they scrape by with little to no wounds?

I need the answers to these questions.

But more than that... I need to know how often this happens.

The beast attacks not being documented are a tremendous problem for our map. If people are being attacked and not coming forward about it, then we're missing vital information. And if we're missing information, then my theories are no longer valid. We'll have to start at the beginning.

Where does the beginning really begin? I can't even wrap my mind

around how far back to look. What I do know is this: the Mongrels haven't always documented attacks, so we can't go back too far.

Before I can fall further into this rabbit hole, my ass hits the unforgiving dirt of the Colosseum's training yard. Once again, I'm reminded that I was sparring hand-to-hand with Talodus, and I asked for this because I was too preoccupied to trust myself with anything more.

"You have to focus, Ada," Talodus reiterates for the twenty-fifth time today.

"I can't," I respond, grabbing his hand.

He hoists me to my feet with a frown. "Why?"

"We're out here playing games while people are still being attacked, and we're no closer to understanding why," I snap, feeling more frustration with myself than him. "I don't get it, Tal. Why wouldn't they say something? Or, I don't know, go to the fucking clinic. They could—"

"Ada?" Talodus calls calmly, pointing his index finger above his head. "This is why we train."

"What?" I ask, and a beach-ball-size sphere of water drops onto the guard, soaking us both.

He gives me a small smile, though I can see the strain behind it as he repeats, "This is why we train. You're agitated, and your element is lashing out because you're not holding onto your control."

"I'm sorry," I mumble, scrubbing my hands over my face. "I just can't do this right now. I can't focus when I have so much on my mind."

Talodus gently pulls me closer. "It's okay. We'll end today's training here."

I rest my forehead against his chest, feeling the faint flutter of his heart from his exertion. We've been exercising for hours, though it's all been a blur. "Thank you."

"No thanks needed," he reassures me, leading us toward the fence where Rin waits. "Ada... You have to understand, sometimes there aren't answers to these questions. You're curious, but we don't always have an explanation for others' actions. Sometimes you just have to let go and know the people will do what's best for them."

Rinya passes my canteen to me as she joins our conversation. "Maybe they're scared, or maybe they escaped without harm, so they didn't feel the need to go to the clinic. If there was no harm, we don't consider that an attack."

“Kerr said they limped toward the clinic,” I inform them.

“Doesn’t mean they were injured by a beast,” she points out. “They could have fallen while running or strained muscles while escaping.”

“I guess,” I mutter. “It makes sense, but I still want to track the beasts’ movements better for the future.”

Talodus nods. “Then ask Connak to teach you how to hunt them. The land speaks to you, so you should be able to do something similar to what he does.”

“That’s a great idea,” I mumble before taking a sip of cool water.

The temperature catches me off guard, but it shouldn’t.

That was one of the first tricks I learned to do with my power, though at the time, I didn’t know I was doing it. If I wasn’t so aware of how in tune I am to my element, I would swear the water was cool because the canteen was against the post, angled to sit in the shadow and out of the sun.

“I know,” Talodus sarcastically agrees, grinning at me. “And I’m offended that you think I would give you a bad idea.”

“You give me plenty of bad ideas.”

He steps away from me. “No. Don’t do that. I still have to train with the—Madigan, and the last thing I need is to hear that tone from you.”

I smile at him. “I bet you have a spare minute or two.”

Rin pitches the bridge of her nose. “I’m so torn. Is it immature if I say gross? But also, a minute or two? You’ve seriously got to raise your standards, Ada. Or he needs to practice more.”

“I wish I did,” he says with a sigh, ignoring our company. “Madigan is right on time, so we’ll pick this up later. Without Rin’s commentary.” Then he turns to his friend. “A minute or two for her. We weren’t talking about me. That’s what happens when you join conversations without being invited.”

“Right.” Rin snorts. “I could have gone the rest of my life without knowing what I now know.”

Talodus drops a quick kiss to my cheek before he meets Madigan at the training yard’s entrance. I wave to her as they pass, but she doesn’t return the gesture.

“She’s still mad at you?” Rin quietly asks as we watch the start of Madi’s first training session.

“It’s going to take more than one apology and a few days to stew on the past for her to entertain forgiving me. I didn’t apologize for what I did, just what I said.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not sorry. Pushing her away led us both to a second chance at life. But I won’t pretend to understand what she went through without me.”

Rinya huffs as she pushes away from the fence. “I kind of like her. She’s feisty, even for a Shade.”

“They couldn’t beat that out of her,” I whisper. “Though some have tried. I’m happy to see she’s still herself after everything she’s been through.”

“Everyone changes when they stay, Ada,” Rin murmurs, frowning at me. “You were in over your head, drowning and overwhelmed, but rolling with the punches. You changed for the better, but some don’t. Check on her before you assume she’s still herself.”

Rin doesn’t wait for me to reply. She jogs toward Talodus and Madigan, ready to get our Shade guest in fighting shape.

I only stay for the first few minutes, observing Madi attempt to throw punches or dodge Rin... The pixie of a guard is just too fast for the future Shade queen. Talodus swaps places, his hands moving much slower than I remember from our first session.

But Madigan struggles.

I can’t figure out why the lessons aren’t clicking for her.

I’ve seen her fight. It’s not that she can’t do what they’re asking of her... But it’s almost like... Like she doesn’t trust herself to strike back. Or it could be that she doesn’t trust that she can hit back. As if there’s some catch to the Shade hitting the Mongrel.

Her feeble attempts make me uncomfortable, so I venture away from the arena, thinking possibly it’s just me making her uneasy.

And then I hope... Just hope.

That she hasn’t lost herself while she’s been alone.

That she hasn’t given up before she’s gotten started.

That she fights for her second chance at life, the one she deserved all along.

I know it’s a lot to ask of someone, so again, I hope one last time. For the same baby steps Ecaeris has been taking. It wasn’t too much for him, though it has taken a while to get to where we are.

I have faith Madigan will rise to the challenge.

If not for us or herself... Then out of spite. She has always loved proving people wrong.



Isolde glides around her sewing room as easily as water sliding over smooth river stones. I swear her feet never touch the ground as she tucks rolls of fabric into their rightful cabinets and fluffs the pillow on the armchair.

“You didn’t come all this way to stare, did you?”

“You’re snarky today,” I observe.

She delicately huffs as she puts her hands on her hips. “Well, you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I was a little mad at you,” I admit. “You could have warned me that you were going to announce to the village that I would be the next queen.”

“Had I warned you, you wouldn’t have come to the announcement of your own will,” she states. “You would have forced me to have Ecaeris and Talodus drag you onto the platform, and that wouldn’t have looked good for either of us.”

I tip my head. “Fair. I wouldn’t have been happy either way.”

“What brings you here today, sweet girl?” Isolde asks, waving my confession away. “More sewing, or is there something on your mind?”

“There’s always something on my mind,” I mumble.

“Welcome to leadership,” she cheerfully proclaims, holding her skirt out as she curtsies.

I snort, then sigh. “There’s a rumor of a beast attack that happened yesterday.”

“Yes, I heard,” she tells me without concern.

“But no one has come forward,” I press.

“They won’t. If they got away without injury, then they’ll consider themselves lucky,” she explains. “They won’t speak of it for a while, Ada. The older generations instilled—what does William call it...”

I squint at her. “Superstitions?”

“Yes. That,” she acknowledges before continuing. “The older generation instilled superstitions in the village. To talk of the attack after a successful escape is like that story you told me of whispering that lord’s name.”

“What?”

“The one where they whisper his cursed name and he appears.”

“Oh. Lord Voldemort?”

Isolde gives me a half-shrug. “Sure.”

“So, they think if they speak of the attack, the beasts will... What?” I inquire. “Show up in their homes and finish the job?”

“Exactly.”

“What the fuck?” I murmur, mystified or astonished... Or... I’m not even sure how to describe what I’m feeling other than plain old confusion.

“Ah. Language,” she softly scolds.

I scratch at my scalp as I wonder aloud, “Who started that?”

“The queen before me,” Isolde answers. “She didn’t want her people so scared of the forest that they refused to trade with the other tribes. But she also didn’t want them believing they could escape without harm every time they ran into a beast. So they were ordered to not speak of *almost* attacks. Really, they didn’t speak of actual attacks either.”

“Okay,” I drawl, trying to comprehend the previous queen’s reasoning. Without knowing her, I can only speculate, but if she had limited knowledge of beasts, then I can understand wanting to avoid mass hysteria. “Why haven’t you stopped it?”

She frowns, her expression belying an unpleasant memory. “I’ve tried. There’s only so much I can say or do when fears are that deeply entrenched in the peoples’ minds. It doesn’t help that we tell them not to go into the forest after dark.”

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“What?”

“Who,” I correct.

“Old boyfriend,” she teases.

I chuckle. “Not even slightly. Can I ask you something else?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t know what to do with Madigan.”

Isolde clicks her tongue. “That’s not a question.”

“It’s not,” I agree. “But questions don’t always get anywhere with you. I thought I would state my problem first.”

“It’s not a problem, Ada,” she informs me. “You simply need to speak with her.”

“I watched her train, and she was struggling. I’ve never seen her struggle at anything,” I confess. “She’s the type of person who refuses to fail, no

matter how difficult the task is.”

“Who said she was failing?” Isolde counters.

It’s a valid question, one I should have given more thought.

“No one,” I reply.

“Then what advice do you want from me?” she asks.

I shake my head. “She used to be my best friend, but something happened to me, and she didn’t understand why I withdrew from the people around me. I was indifferent, distant, and Madi was lonely. I was closer to her than her own family, so she pulled harder, trying to keep me from hiding within myself, but it only pushed me away.”

“And you felt guilt over this?” Isolde guesses.

Did I feel guilt? Not at the time. All I had room for was keeping myself protected and getting a drugged-up rapist out of my house. Safety and revenge. Mourning my innocence. My best friend wasn’t even a thought that registered in my mind.

“I should have told her that I needed time, but I didn’t,” I finally admit. “I just started avoiding her until she was angry enough to stop bothering me.”

“So tell her that.”

“I want to help her, though I don’t see how I can.” I lean against the wall as I contemplate my next question. “How would you guide someone who has never had guidance in this world?”

Isolde studies me for a moment too long before she advises, “Ask what you really want to know.”

“How do I guide Madi without just giving her the answers she’s looking for?” I inquire. “How do I assist her like you assisted me?”

“You don’t need to guide her, Ada,” the queen gingerly tells me. “That isn’t your role.”

“You guided me.”

“Did I?” Isolde challenges me, a coy smile playing on her lips. “I’m most certain I showed you a few things to pique your interest, and those people showed you other things that lead you to find the answers on your own. The only thing I’ve handed you is food and clothing, Ada.”

She gives me a full minute to digest her words, though I find myself struggling. And she sees it.

“I didn’t give you answers until you made me aware you were ready,” she clarifies. “Even then, I only gave you a few at a time because I thought you were overwhelmed and didn’t want to admit it to yourself. You did the rest

on your own. You took from it what you could and filled in the blank spaces once you knew what questions needed to be asked. Madi wants the answers because she doesn't know the questions."

"So show her where to find the questions?" I speculate, though I'm not sure how to start.

"You can do that."

I lean my head back, bumping it against the wall twice before I give Isolde my full attention. "But how?"

"Offer her an olive branch."

"You know that saying?"

The queen scoffs. "Sweet girl, I know tons of Earth sayings, some older than the civilization you came from."

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY-SIX

*I*maginary hooks reel me toward the ocean, and I drag Ecaeris with me. He's excited to go, but he doesn't show it well. We're still working with him to be okay with wanting. Just wanting. The smile on his face makes all my fussing worthwhile, though. It's the first time I've seen him express genuine want on such a basic level.

As soon as we touch the sand, he has discarded his shoes and most of his clothing. I hang back and admire the scene until I see an indigo tentacle slap the surface of the water.

Clicking fills my mind, growing louder and faster, urging me to come play.

Indigo has grown so quickly that I can hardly believe this is the same mini kraken I met in the garden. But here she stands—floats—in all her glory, though I'm only privy to the top of her head while I'm on the shore.

Glowing purple eyes observe me as I test the temperature of the water. It no longer bothers me, but it's an Earthly habit I enjoy. The young kraken does not appreciate my hesitant movements. She lifts the end of her tentacle, slapping the water once more, with the sole purpose of splashing me.

I ease my way into the ocean, trying to relax my mind enough to fully enjoy this suspended moment in time.

It's difficult to focus on the now when war can befall us tomorrow, but I make it my mission. These are the moments that matter to me. Everyone has memories they'd kill to relive for the first time, and I don't want to miss those opportunities because I'm worrying about something that may be months away.

The truth is, we don't know when this war will start. We only feel that it's coming.

And that's why this one moment is more important than I thought it would be when I was walking to the beach with Ecaeris. It's his infectious joy and witnessing his progress. The opportunity to see him indulge in something he really wants to do. It's also the playful nature of Jade and Indigo. And the freedom to float in the ocean with nothing to worry about...

But all that goes away when war befalls us. It's not just the people we need to keep safe. It's the animals and plants, the rivers and oceans, the very air this world breathes. Every bit of that will be impacted by our actions, so once this war begins, we need to end it quickly.

I walk toward the end of the shallow water, a well-meaning tentacle guiding my way. As the water deepens, I submerge myself and have a brief flashback of my first adventure in this very spot... when I first met Jade, and she thought the aluminum jon boat was chasing me and tried to save me without knowing I had tied it to my ankle.

She scared the hell out of me.

But now, I see these creatures are simply misunderstood.

I'm going to keep you safe. I think this to myself, though I forget who is listening to my innermost thoughts.

Indigo's clicking slows as she pulls me toward her eyes. They're massive purple orbs, but there's a knowing glint in them, a window into the giant cephalopod's emotions that keep me privy to her secret.

She hears me.

And though our connection isn't as strong as Isolde and Jade's, it becomes stronger each time I'm in her presence.

Indigo's skin is smooth despite the ridges and bumps that line her head. She has soft, gripping suckers on her tentacles that remind me more of an octopus rather than the teeth and spikes you find in a squid's suckers. I don't want to compare her to an animal that only lives for two years, but that's the only reference I have.

When my life slows down, I'll take the time to study her properly.

Before I can begin anymore of an examination, she pushes backward, gently pulling me with her into deeper waters.

This is the first time I've been this far in the ocean since I've grown in power... Or since swimming to the shore so many weeks ago. And it's a marvelous sight that leaves me in awe.

The sun's rays illuminate towering rocks and beds of coral. Small fish swim along the habitats in schools ranging from a dozen to hundreds. I'm not familiar with their species, but their behavior is captivating as they circle Indigo and me. Light reflects off their iridescent scales, but once they switch direction, they become completely camouflaged in their environment.

Indigo takes me on the excursion of a lifetime, squeezing her body through rock formations and natural tunnels as she shows me her home. The ocean has always captured my heart and imagination, but seeing this ecosystem as the goddess who is supposed to protect it is unnerving and invigorating in equal measure.

My underwater tour guide leaves nothing out of the journey she's taking me on. Not even the bright red eels that snap at her tentacles and blow bubbles of smoke through their enlarged nostrils.

There's such harmony below the surface of the water that my chest clenches with joy and sadness. This feels like home to me, though I know part of that is Indigo's emotions leaking into my own. I can't let this environment be destroyed; the wildlife won't bounce back the way people do.

You can't explain war to creatures who only know peace and survival.

And as I glance around, the peace surrounding me is mesmerizing.

A fish swims nearby, and I reach my hand out to touch it. It shows me no fear. It doesn't scurry away or hide in the crevice of a rock. The eels aren't as friendly, but maybe one day, I'll get closer to them. I'm assuming I'll need Indigo's permission for that adventure. As for today, she scoots me away from them and swats her tentacle like they're disobedient children.

I don't realize how deep we are until I look up and see Jade floating in the distance. We've not played at all, but Indigo doesn't seem to mind. I turn to gaze into her purple eyes. Happy clicks fill my mind, and she pushes us to the surface of her home toward our companions.

Ecaeris wipes droplets of water from his face and does a double take. "Have you been under the water this entire time?"

"It wasn't that long."

"It was," he begins to argue, but Jade shoves him with her tentacle, hurling him several yards from us.

Indigo clicks quietly, and I snort. I don't know how to interpret the tone of her sounds, but I find myself mumbling to her anyway.

"I agree. They are a bit rough, aren't they?"

Jade swats at us, and Indigo pulls me backward, ready to keep me out of

reach of the elder kraken.

“Are they fighting?” I ask aloud. “Or did we interrupt their wrestling match? I can’t tell.”

Indigo doesn’t reply immediately, not that I’m expecting her to, but she does blow bubbles, which is something new for me to understand. I need more time with her, though I’m not sure that will improve communications between a human and a mythological sea creature...

I mean, it could. But I don’t know. It’s just a hunch.

Three months ago, I’d have laughed at the person who told me I’d be swimming with krakens in a mysterious new world.... If they told me I was a goddess of said world, I’d have called the cops.

But here I am. Next queen of the Mongrels. Water goddess of an entire world. Happy.

That’s the biggest kicker of them all.

I, the former Adelaide Storm, am happy.

“Do you want to let them fight while we pick shells? I need some teeny-tiny ones to mix in with the ones you’ve already given me.” I pinch my fingers together, not quite sure Indigo knows what *teeny-tiny* means. “Like this small.”

She clicks quickly, and it’s the only warning I have to take a big breath before she dives, carrying me to exactly what I’m looking for.

And all day... No matter which way I look or how hard I search, I don’t see a single shark.



E caeris and I lounge on the beach, his arm behind my head as I press my cheek against his chest. The krakens have disappeared into the chilly depths of their home, away from the sun’s heat until the moons bring cooler temperatures. They had enough time on the surface with us, and I’m grateful for the privacy they give.

“She’s gotten big,” he mentions, his mind wandering far beyond the krakens’ playground.

“I didn’t believe she would grow so fast,” I admit. “It’s mind-boggling.”

He chuckles, the humorous sound rumbling beneath my ear. “I never thought there would be two.”

“Where did they come from?” I inquire, curiosity finally getting the better of me.

It’s a question I haven’t wanted answers to because it leads to others I don’t have the mental capacity to comprehend right now. But later... Later, I want to know all the things about Indigo and Jade.

“We don’t know,” he mutters. “They just show up.”

I furrow my brow. “Indigo isn’t Jade’s baby?”

“Do animals on Earth produce young without the opposite sex?” he counters, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“Actually, yes. Some species are asexual. They don’t need the opposite sex to produce young,” I explain, gazing up at him. “But not octopus or squid.”

“How do you know?” he asks, mismatched irises alight under the sinking sun.

“Are you playing the devil’s advocate?”

Ecaeris shakes his head. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Arguing both sides,” I reply, turning over to lie on my stomach. “And I was a marine biology major in college. I’ve studied an octopus or two.”

“And now you have a pair of krakens to study,” he teases.

“I have so many things to study,” I mumble, a frown tugging at my lips. “I’m not sure where to begin.”

He tucks his arms under his head as he observes me. “You say that, but you usually have a good guess.”

His attentiveness causes me to snort in surprise, and I find I’m floundering to articulate a decent reply.

“I’ve been spending so much of my time pouring over the beasts and watching the people, but I’ve realized I don’t know much about either.”

“You’re still worried about the announcement?”

“I haven’t gone back to the village yet,” I confess as I hang my head, swirling my finger through the sand. “It makes me a little nervous. I’m concerned they’ll question me about things I don’t understand or expect me to act differently.”

“Mongrels aren’t complicated creatures, Ada.”

I raise a brow at him. “Really, *Mongrel* Prince?”

“Okay, I see what you mean,” he says with a grin. “They aren’t all as

complicated as me.”

“That’s a relief.” I exaggerate a sigh. “You had me scared for a moment.”

Ecaeris ignores my comment as he continues. “They look to the queen for leadership, stability, and growth. These are all things you’ve helped with already.”

“Helped with and doing them on my own are two totally different things.”

“You won’t have to do them on your own. Isolde does now, but that wasn’t always the case.”

I grimace. “It’s weird to hear you use her name.”

He gives me his signature blank expression. “My point is you’re seeing the end of her reign, not the beginning or even the middle. When she stepped into her role, the Mongrels were a mess, much like the Shades are now. The queen had become tired of her duties, and as a result, she became complacent. My mother has been an active queen for over a millennium, but even she’s grown tired.”

“That’s why you told her not to stress herself when I arrived?” I inquire, swooning just the slightest bit.

“No, I just didn’t want her to go out of her way for a Shade,” he replies, his face scrunching up like he’s confused by my question.

I roll my eyes. “I thought you were being sweet.”

“Have you met me?” he playfully asks. “I’m not sure what that word means.”

“Liar.”

Ecaeris skips a snarky remark, too intent on finishing this conversation. “The Mongrels’ needs and wants normally line up. They want advancement; they need growth. The expectations here are that you will lead them to both.”

“What if I can’t?”

“What if you already are?”

I pluck at my bottom lip as I study his reactions. “How will they handle Madigan being here?”

“Depends,” he says, cycling through a dozen emotions before he settles on sincerity. “Some will see her as a threat, thinking they’re unsafe if Shades roam the village. Others will see her and hope for the turmoil to end. Neither will recognize the brewing war we must fight first.”

“And you protect them by keeping the Shades out,” I fill in.

“They don’t come here for a friendly visit, Ada. Madigan may be with us to help fight Nesta, but then what?” He waits for a moment. “What will

happen when they adjust to her presence and another war begins?”

“I can’t let her leave without mending our burned bridges,” I state. “It might not make a difference centuries from now, but it also might be the sole action that stops future wars.”

He nods his understanding. “Right now, she’s a bigger issue than the other Shades who’ve been here. For me, at least.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The beasts are attacking more frequently. Cotear is still running from us. There are so many things happening at once...” He sighs, glancing at the jewel-toned sky. “The Shade being here is an extra weight on my shoulders. I can’t keep track of everything that’s going on every minute of the day. I’m just trying to keep some semblance of control. The one thing I have done without fail is keep the Shades out of the village.”

“I get it,” I admit. “But I don’t know that keeping Madigan out of the village is the only way to control the situation we’re in.”

“You want to take her into the middle of our territory?” he asks, though there’s no judgment in his tone. “Expose the people to sights that will make them wonder what we’re doing and bring them closer to potential danger?”

I shake my head. “No. I want to show them that the next generation can be peaceful. Madigan isn’t the problem, Ecaeris. Nesta is. You can’t blame her for things that happened before we got here.”

“There are too many unknowns—”

“This isn’t an unknown,” I cut in, scrunching my face as I struggle to explain. “Try to remove your bias and stop fighting against her. You don’t have to trust her; you only have to trust me.”

“I do trust you,” he tells me, his honesty palpable. “But I don’t trust the people who get their hopes up and then find out we’re going to war against Nesta.”

“Who says they’re going to war?” I challenge. “Who says you’re going to war?”

Ecaeris scoffs. “You think we’ll just let you run off on your own to fight the Shade queen?”

“No,” I concede, battling my rising grin. “I know all four of you will be right there, ready to fight... But I don’t believe you’ll have to. This is between Isolde and Nesta, Madigan and Nesta. Why else would Spiran bring us here, and give us so much power, if it’s not to fight for the people who shouldn’t have to?”

“There’s a word for that,” he mumbles, glancing away from me.

“I’m not trying to be a martyr,” I acquiesce.

He snaps his fingers. “That’s the one.”

“I’m the goddess of water, Ecaeris,” I argue. “Spiran herself told me I’m immortal. I will fight with Nesta before I let her near Isolde.”

“She’s got a thousand years of experience on you,” he points out.

“She may have that,” I agree. “But I’m a goddess for a reason. Spiran is giving me a crash course in all kinds of things. As strange as it is, I’m not worried about Nesta. What I am worried about is the future, the way the Mongrels will look at Shades after all this is in the past. I don’t want them to fear; I want them to coexist.”

He sighs, trying one last time to convince me of anything other than the plan he assumes I have worked out already. I don’t have a plan, though... Just a general feeling that I should follow my intuition.

“I don’t think you understand—”

“I understand the severity of what I’m saying,” I interrupt, standing my ground. “Despite living here your entire life, I’m in a position where I know things you don’t. I’m learning every day, even when I’m doing nothing. Sometimes, I don’t even realize I know it until... I just do. Until I need the information. All I’m asking is for you to trust me and my judgment. I know Madigan, and she’s not Nesta.”

Ecaeris meets my gaze, and I dare say he looks a little proud of my stance. “You want to have alone time with the Shade?”

“Don’t be jealous,” I tease. “I need time with her to mend a bridge and extend an olive branch.”

He nods, his last question leaving half a grin in its wake. “Why is this so important to you?”

“This is how living in peace begins,” I whisper, like it’s a secret for just the two of us to share until the morning.

ADELAIDE

DAY FIFTY-SEVEN

I'm not sure what I was expecting when I decided to take Madigan into the village, but it wasn't this.

Rinya and I observe her with varying levels of curiosity as she flounces around in her ruby-red dress. She gathers the fabric in her hands, swooshing it back and forth as she walks, and I just can't comprehend what's going on in her head.

"Are you hot?" Rin asks, a confused grin stretching across her pink lips as she points at Madi's skirt.

"No," she replies, sighing wistfully. "I admire the craftsmanship. On Earth, something like this would have easily cost hundreds of dollars, and I would have fawned over it until one of my parents paid me to keep quiet about their affairs."

Rin wrinkles her nose as she shakes her head. "I don't understand."

"Which part?" I inquire, raising a brow at the Mongrel guard. "Madi's parents or the money?"

"Why she's so excited by the craftsmanship." Rin shrugs, her hands held out to ward off the contagious feelings from our Shade guest. "I've never seen you happy about wearing a dress."

"This is a Madigan thing, not a *me* thing," I clarify. "I didn't wear dresses before I got here unless someone forced me. But Madi wore them every day. No one makes dresses quite like Isolde does. And where we're from, the few who do charge an outrageous price for their works of art. She's more excited about it because Isolde gave it to her without expecting something in return."

Madi tips her head in agreement. "True, but I'm most excited about

having clean, fitted clothing in general. I went from having all the material items I could have ever wanted to having literally nothing.”

Rinya studies her as we pass between the guards’ barracks on the footpath to the village. “I’m sorry your time on Spiran hasn’t been welcoming. That’s not a representation of the island as a whole.”

“Thank you,” Madi whispers, a little shocked by her sincerity. “Not everything has been unpleasant. I’ve learned a lot, but every time I get the hang of things, I’ve had to flee—”

“We won’t be fleeing anymore, Madi,” I reassure her. “You don’t have to fight on your own.”

“I’m not above asking for help,” she sasses, an inquisitive expression turned in my direction. “Has that changed for you?”

“Not until I got here,” I answer truthfully. “I ask for help when I need it, but I still prefer finding the answers on my own.”

The sounds of bustling Mongrels fill the space surrounding us before the scents of the village follow. Madigan is quick to notice the change, immediately on edge. Her gaze darts around as she searches for familiarity and enemies.

People chatter as they traverse the square, collecting supplies and running their errands. Children laugh and play near the fountain. Smoke plumes from the bakery’s chimney as the aroma of fresh bread and pastries meets my eager stomach.

I’m hungry, and muffins are exactly what I need to start this day.

I lead Madi to the bakery, only stopping for the little girl at the flower stand who offers us tiny blooms in bright colors. We each thank her for our gifts and tuck them in our hair. Then, we occupy our usual table on the bakery’s patio. Rin walks in but comes back out too soon, empty-handed and stunned.

I give her a pouty look. “Muffins aren’t done? Or have they run out?”

“No. They’re done and ready to eat.” She glances at the doorway, still wearing her twisted expression. “I was sent out.”

“Why?” Madi asks quickly. “Is it me?”

“No,” Imryll states, placing his hand on my shoulder and a basket of pastries on the table. “It was me. I ordered you all some tea, but it’s still brewing.”

Rin narrows her eyes, suspicious of his presence. “How did you know we were coming?”

“Ecaeris?” I inquire.

Imy grins at me, grassy-green eyes twinkling with hidden knowledge. “Something you said is driving the prince out of his mind. He’s decided he would like to make a better impression on our guest.”

“So, he sent you?” Madi snarks, then covers her mouth.

“I have better manners,” he deadpans, unfazed by her default sarcasm.

I can’t stop my snort. He barely bats an eye at Madigan’s attitude, but then again, she’s not as feral as I was the first time I met him. Rin flat-out cackles at his comment, swiping at her cheeks as if Imryll has brought her to tears.

“Why is that funny?” Madi asks.

“He’s as much an animal as the rest of us,” Rin tells her. “He likes to pretend that he isn’t, but—”

“Imy keeps himself on a tighter leash,” I say, interrupting her, though my statement only makes her laugh more. “He does have better manners than Ecaeris, though.”

“That’s not saying much,” Madi mumbles.

Imryll furrows his brow, his intense stare fixating on Rinya. “I’m not an animal.”

“Oh?” she hums. “Did Ada tell you about that handsome Mongrel from the butcher shop asking her—”

“Rin,” I chastise, palming my forehead to stop the incoming headache.

“What Mongrel would that be?” Imy asks, his eyes now narrowing into slits as his fingers cool against my skin.

Rinya shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“No Mongrel,” I declare with a huff. “I haven’t even been in the butcher’s shop. She’s just stirring shit up with you to prove her point.”

Imryll glares at Rin. Not that it does him any good. In fact, it does the exact opposite.

“Animal.” The pixie of a guard smiles unapologetically. “Thanks for breakfast, though. Now, you can stop freezing Ada and go back to the clinic so we can have our girls’ day.”

He chuckles to himself before pointing at her. “We’re going to talk about that. It’s not nice, and we’re trying to show the future Shade queen that we’re —”

“No, *we’re* not,” she confidently tells him. “I’ll do what I do, and you can do what you do. It’s kind of sweet when you’re possessive over Ada. But

take it somewhere else, want you? We're in the middle of something."

I sigh. "You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"No," Rin and Imy answer at the same time.

Madigan's lips tip upward like she wants to smile. "Your guy?"

"One of them," Imy responds before I can fumble through an explanation. "When you ladies finish your girls' day, stop by the clinic. I'm not sure how comfortable you are with the conversation, Madigan, but we have a doctor from Earth here, and he was concerned about Ada's previous birth control. It's something to consider while you're visiting with us."

She furrows her brow, casting a glance at her arm. "I didn't think about that, but thank you. We'll stop by."

Imy tips his head at her, then leans in to kiss me on the cheek, before he takes his leave. And Rinya gawks at me like I've suddenly grown a second set of eyes.

"Since when does he do that?" she asks a little too loudly.

The lady from the bakery drops three mugs of tea at our table, and I smile politely. She does a double-take when she sees Madigan or senses her elemental power, but she doesn't say a word.

"Uhm, I'm not sure," I tell Rin. "They all do it now. I don't know when it started happening, though. Am I supposed to track those things?"

"Yeah, but Imy?" She shakes her head, trying to get her point across. "He's not exactly a public kind of Mongrel. Connak, I could understand. Maybe even Ecaeris and Talodus... But Imy? No."

"So, how many guys *have* you collected?" Madi teases. "I've seen three, I believe."

"Four," Rinya answers on my behalf.

I sigh with exasperation.. "I'm not collecting them."

"No. They were a collection before you got here," Rin divulges. "But you can't have one without the others. Could you even pick just one?"

I glare at her, channeling Imryll, though it does me as much good as it does him. Exactly none.

"Can I ask you a question, Rinya?" Madi inquires, picking a pastry from the basket.

Rin nods, mouth thankfully stuffed with a berry muffin. What kind of berry? I can't begin to guess. So I don't even try. I'm still holding onto the illusion that some ignorance is bliss.

"Why do you talk like us, like you're from Earth, too?" Madigan asks.

“My father is from Earth.” Rin shrugs and stirs her tea. “We’ve all picked up a lot of weird sayings from him and the others who’ve stayed.”

“And cuss words,” I add. “William taught them swear words when they were kids, and Isolde hates it. It’s pretty funny, actually.”

“Them, who? The Mongrels?” Madi guesses.

Rin wobbles her head, saying yes and no. “Mostly Ada’s guys and me. We grew up together. They were my brother’s friends and became mine when Joldwin died.”

“I’m sorry,” Madi begins, frowning at her pastry before she sets it down.

“It’s okay,” Rin tells her, perplexed by the Shade’s condolences. “It’s not something you should feel bad about.”

“But I do,” Madigan murmurs. “I had an older brother, too. We were really close.”

“Had?” I ask, catching the past tense. “Oh god, Madi, when did he...”

Madigan grimaces, her eyes glistening as she stares into her cup of tea. “The last day we were on Earth.”

“Your dad?” I inquire, barely able to hear my voice.

“Me,” she replies, awaiting judgment, but I have none.

I tilt my head, confusion causing me to squint. “What do you mean?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she tells me.

“Okay,” I softly reply, though I hope she opens up.

I won’t push her. She doesn’t owe me an explanation, but Harrison’s death is not something I want her to grieve on her own. Not when I’m here to grieve with her. There was a time when I felt Harrison was more my sibling than the flesh-and-blood related to me.

Instead of letting her fester in her pain alone, I choose to be the first to open up. It’s what I should have done years ago, but I wasn’t ready.

I survey the surrounding Mongrels, noting quite a few are studying our table, though no one is close enough to hear us.

“I killed Penny,” I confess with no context.

Judgment isn’t something I’m concerning myself with anymore. Either they accept it, or they don’t. Rin doesn’t even blink as she sips her tea. Madigan’s face morphs to show that fiery passion she’s always held so close to her heart.

She never liked my sister.

“Who is Penny, again?” Rin asks, knowing exactly who I’m talking about.

“Her sister,” Madi answers, brows furrowing. “And good. Can I say good? Is that okay?”

I chuckle, though they can tell I’m forcing it. “Yeah. It was three months before we got here. But Dad was in the car with her when she lost control. He didn’t make it either.”

“Wait,” she drawls, eyes wide as they brim with tears. “What?”

“It’s a long story, but I tried to make her overdose like I did her boyfriend,” I say, swallowing the thick grief down.

The emotions grow thinner every day, though I’m keenly aware that some pain never goes away. It only gets easier to live with the grief. Moving on sucks when you deeply love the person you lost, but there is no magic cure that stops the mourning. Not in either world. The only thing we can do is endure and hope they knew how much we cared.

“Wait,” Madi says a little louder. “What the actual fuck, Ada? You can’t just tell the bare minimum of that story. Are you talking about that piece of shit she was with before we—”

She cuts herself off, fearing she’s crossed some invisible line, but it’s clear where she’s going.

“Before we fell out?” I finish for her. “Yeah. He’s sort of the reason behind that, in a nutshell. What he did is why I pushed you away. Honestly, it wasn’t until I got here, until I met Rinya, that I realized I should have leaned on you instead of pushing you away.”

“He didn’t—Did he—Oh my god, Ada,” she fires in rapid succession. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Embarrassment?” I speculate. “Shame? I was angry, and I needed time to process.”

She nods, though her nostrils flare. “He’s dead now?”

“Has been since we were fifteen,” I divulge.

“Jesus,” she whispers, swiping furious tears away from her lashes.

Rin chews at her lip. “How did I make you realize you should have leaned on Madigan?”

“You leaned on the guys,” I emphasize, trying not to tell any of her story. “I should have leaned on Madi. She was all I had.”

“Other than your dad,” Madigan supplies. “But he would have gone to jail for torturing that scumbag.”

I cringe at the truth in her statement. “I never told him.”

Madi scrubs at her tear-stained cheeks. “I don’t even know what to say. I

mean, I'm so pissed you didn't tell me because I would have helped you. And your dad? I could have been there. Should have been there for you."

"Hindsight is like that..." I murmur, smiling sadly. "If I would have told you, we wouldn't be here."

She scoffs. "That's not saying a lot for me."

"It will, though," Rin tells her, the guard's confidence unwavering. "My dad says that sometimes we have to dig through shit to find gold."

"When did he get here?" Madi curiously asks, trying to settle her emotions.

"The seventies on Earth?" Rin answers, though it sounds more like a question.

"Oh, he's totally talking about shrooms," Madigan informs us, but Rinya doesn't seem to understand what she means.

I sip my cold tea, having completely forgotten about the fruity brew. "Probably, but the point still stands."

Madi glances around, suddenly aware of all the attention we've drawn. "Hey, remember that time you stayed the night, and we drank my mom's wine coolers?"

"Ugh," I groan. "I wish I could forget."

"It wasn't that bad," she insists.

"I was so sick when I got home," I complain. "I still haven't had a hangover that bad."

Madigan laughs lightly. "Yeah, but we had so much fun."

"Fun?" I repeat, her definition nauseating me. "I thought I was dying."

"You're being dramatic," she claims. "You had a headache."

"I threw up in my dad's lap," I hiss, covering my face. "It was mortifying."

Madi leans across the table toward us. "Have you noticed all the people staring? Or am I reading too much into this?"

"We've noticed," I tell her.

"They're staring because you're the first Shade in more than a decade to be welcomed into the Mongrel village, the last being Doctor Raf. And they feel how much power you and Ada have." Rin wobbles her head. "And they think I'm escorting the two of you for protection."

"You got all that without looking beyond our table?" Madigan asks, suspicion tinting her tone.

Rin grins devilishly. "I'm not on the queen's guard because of my stellar

looks, Madi.”

I nod my agreement. “Seeing you here, us together, will give them hope that the turmoil between our tribes is going to end. Maybe some will be more fearful, but having you here means more to them than it does to you.”

“They fear Nesta, too?” she whispers, scanning the crowd with a new understanding.

“They fear all Shades because of Nesta,” Rinya explains. “This is the first positive encounter they’ve had in decades.”

“You’re helping them see that not all Shades are the same,” I add.

Madi shakes her head. “I’m not like her. I won’t be like her.”

“I know,” I assure her. “It might feel daunting, but you’re doing the right thing. This is how peace begins. With you. And me. And letting them see we can work together. I’m guessing Nesta never did that for her people, either. When we’re ready, I’ll show the Shades that the Mongrels are a laid-back bunch.”

“Peace between us is one thing...” Madi stops, frowning at me. “Have you met the Howlers or the Dwellers, though?”

“Not yet,” I quietly admit.

“How do you think they’ll feel about this upcoming battle?” she inquires.

I frown, but once again, my words carry the conviction of a goddess. “It won’t be a battle, Madi. It will be a war. They might not like it, but we come from a time when we all wanted to coexist. That’s part of the reason we’re here. To show the people it’s possible. To fight for them and the peace they deserve.”

She sighs as if I’m asking the world of her, though she straightens her shoulders and smiles at the crowd. “I really missed you and your disgusting amount of optimism.”

“Welcome home,” I tease. “Consider your guest room in the palace a summer home in the Hamptons.”

ECAERIS

DAY SIXTY

I pace through the dried leaves beneath the forest's canopy, trying to release some of the tension in my posture. It's not helping as much as I'd like, but I now have a new understanding of why Ada insists on stepping on them. The crunch beneath my boot gives me an odd sense of satisfaction.

"Is that the signal?" Connak asks, his sarcasm thick. "They're to follow the crunch of leaves to find us?"

"No," I grumble. "This isn't the signal. We're listening for the crane."

"Then stop stepping on the leaves," he snaps, always wanting silence while in the forest.

"Have you tried it?" I inquire. "I never understood why Ada did this, but I think I get it now."

Talodus sighs, leaning the back of his head against a tree. "I've never seen Ada step on leaves like that."

"She does," I tell them.

"To annoy you," Connak points out. "You think she's loud in the forest, so she does that to piss you off... Which is something I now understand better because you are pissing me off."

"She is loud," I argue.

"No, she's not," Talodus informs me. "She's quieter on her feet than you are."

I snort. "I've heard her—Oh."

Connak chuckles. "Yeah. Just you. She doesn't do that with us or Imy."

"Why me?"

Talodus gives me a blank look. "You two live to get under each other's

skin. What better way to make you mad than to cause so much rumpus you can't speak over it?"

I feel myself shrug, but I stop, straightening my posture and moving away from the leaves. "I'm not sure what rumpus is, but this is satisfying."

"To hear yourself talk?" Connak snarks.

"To step on the leaves," I retort. "I'm not sure why, but I find it enjoyable."

They both turn to look at me, and the sudden attention has me scowling. Talodus is wide-eyed, but Connak only grins.

"Are you feeling okay?" the guard asks.

"Yeah. A little anxious about this meeting, but otherwise, I'm fine," I confess.

Connak clears his throat. "You find something other than fighting and arguing enjoyable? Since when?"

I scoff. "I know how to have fun."

"No, you don't," Tal mutters.

"Since when?" Connak repeats. "You're worrying me."

"Since Ada," Talodus answers for me. "Did you tell Nook about how she hurt your feelings?"

"She didn't hurt my feelings," I defend, though I don't know why I'm lying to them.

I wouldn't exactly call it hurt feelings, though I don't have another word to associate it with.

"Right," Tal drawls, slowly nodding. "She sliced open your chest with a freshly sharpened blade, flaying you open until your organs lay on the ground for all to see."

I narrow my eyes, glowering at him. "I told you that in confidence."

"She stabbed you?" Connak inquires, his grin growing into something triumphant. "I'm sorry I missed that."

"Ada didn't stab me," I insist. "She's not violent."

"Yet," he quietly adds.

"No, but she choked you," Talodus continues.

I throw my hands up. "She did. But she also put some things into perspective—"

"Quite a few times, by the looks of it," Connak cuts in.

"And now I'm trying to enjoy myself more and step away from always being on duty," I finish, not that I need to justify my actions.

“You?” the hunter asks, disbelieving.

“Is there someone else here who sounds just like me?” I glance around. “No? Then yes, me.”

The honking of a Red-Crowned Crane stops our bickering. They were closer than we thought. Talodus cups his hand over his mouth, replicating the call of the sacred bird, to respond to our visitors.

“Are you sure about this?” Connak inquires, his voice a hushed whisper.

“There’s no turning back now,” Talodus remarks.

“I’m sure. This is the right thing to do.” I nod as I smooth my shirt. “This war isn’t about us. We aren’t the ones who will be on the front line. Ada and Madigan will be.”

Connak tilts his head as he studies me. “So this is to help Madigan?”

“This is for Ada,” I admit. “She cares about Madigan, and she’s worried her friend isn’t thriving. She thinks Madigan is holding back in training because we’re Mongrels, and there’s some hidden rule that she can’t accidentally hurt one of us, or we’ll kill her.”

“She said that?” Talodus asks, frowning at me.

“Something like that.”

“Ecaeris,” he admonishes like I’m a child.

I wobble my head, speeding through the little I understand. “She also thinks having the Shades here will help the people see that the next generation of rulers can coexist peacefully. And she wants to make sure Madigan is ready for Nesta because Ada intends to fight the unstable Shade queen in the place of my mother.”

“That sounds more like Ada,” Connak comments.

“I tried to argue—”

“We know you did,” Tal interrupts, smirking at me.

“It didn’t work,” I fill them in, though I’m sure they have no doubts.

Connak snorts. “Why did you think it would?”

“I didn’t,” I concede. “But it was worth the effort. She explained a lot to me, some I’m still processing.”

“Ecaeris?” someone calls from the dense trees ahead.

“Here.”

Lyell steps out of the brush, surveying our surroundings as he gestures to someone behind him. The Shade Prince dips his head at me before grabbing my hand and pulling me into a half hug.

“It’s good to see you again, brother,” he says, slapping my back.

“You too,” I reply. “How goes the fight?”

“Nowhere. It goes nowhere.” Lyell sighs. “Are the Mongrels safe from her destruction?”

I nod. “We are, but our new queen doesn’t intend to sit this fight out. We can talk more when we get to the palace.”

“Only three escorts?” a gruff Shade inquires. “I assumed you would have a full detail to accompany us.”

Talodus chuckles. “No need, Faldron. You aren’t our enemy.”

“No, but ask Ada how she feels about assumptions,” Connak tells him.

I hold my hand out. “Faldron. Thank you for joining Lyell.”

The Shade guard glances at my hand in distaste. “I’m not here for him. Where is Madigan?”

Connak blows out a heavy breath. “She’s with Ada.”

“Why would you leave her—”

“Faldron,” a blonde man cuts in, rounding out their party of four. “I’m sure this *Ada* is perfectly capable of keeping Madi safe. We’re visitors here, so try to find your manners.”

I motion them forward, second-guessing my plan now that Faldron Stillblade has shown up with them. He’s a knowledgeable fighter with a strong tie to his element... But if Ada thinks I’m an ass... She’s going to be pleasantly surprised with his personality. I’m not sure what’s worse than being a dick, though I can say with absolute certainty that it’s him.

We stay quiet on the trek back to the palace, and I pray to the goddess that we don’t cross paths with any stray Mongrels once we step through the stone fence.

The palace comes into view, and I lead the Shade visitors through the catacomb entrance, staying in the side halls until we can’t avoid the main paths. Talodus advances ahead of us, clearing our way and sending any guard members he may find in the opposite direction.

I’m taking a giant leap, allowing them to see inside the safest place in our territory, but this is the best way to get them into the palace without being seen.

I didn’t tell anyone they were coming.

Granted... They were already on their way when I sent the homing pigeon to Lyell. So they were going to show up, anyway.

I push the thoughts away as we near the palace door. I’ve known Lyell since we were children, playing together at the bi-yearly meetings between

the queens that used to take place in the center of our island. He wouldn't bring anyone with him who wished ill on the Mongrels. I trust him and his judgment.

He's not who I'm struggling to understand, though.

Inside the palace, I lead them to the throne room to wait for Ada and Madigan. Rinya fixes herself at the double doors for us, ensuring no one enters without permission.

Lyell glances around once more, then he turns to me. "Where is Madigan?"

"They went to the clinic to see Imryll," Connak dismissively explains.

It's not a big deal to us because Ada frequents the clinic simply to be in Imryll's company while he works. But the Shades don't know that.

"Why does she need a doctor?" the quiet man asks, his irises fading to black as he speaks. "Where is she?"

The Shade hunter only settles when Lyell grips his shoulder. "Perhaps it isn't Madi that needed a doctor, Thinik? We've just arrived, and by the looks of it, she didn't know we were coming."

"I didn't tell her or Ada," I confess. "I thought a surprise visit might raise her spirits."

"And he didn't want to tell Ada she was right," Connak adds.

I glare at him. "That too."

Lyell grins. "Who is Ada?"

"I am," she answers from the doorway, regal in her navy skirt and pale blue blouse. "Who are you?"

Madigan stops in her tracks, gripping Ada's elbow as her mouth hangs open in shock. Liquid pools in her eyes as she murmurs, "What are you doing here?"

"It helps to know people," Lyell jokes, walking toward her.

She laughs as she wipes the tears from her cheeks. "It's not safe to be here."

"We're safe," Lyell promises her. "Ecaeris keeps his word."

Ada narrows her hazel eyes as she watches me. I shrug as if I don't know what he's talking about, but she's quick to call me on my lie.

She gently elbows me in the ribs as she whispers, "I thought you said you weren't sweet."

"I'm not."

"This is sweet, Ecaeris. Doing for others, even if it's outside your comfort

—”

“I didn’t do this for her,” I quietly state. “I did it for you.”

“That’s even sweeter,” she says, her smile illuminating the vast room.

The blonde man moves toward us, his ire set on Ada, though it doesn’t seem to bother her. “Why does Madi have a bandage on her arm?”

“Hi,” Ada snarks in such a familiar way that I struggle to hide my grin. “Lovely to meet you. I’m Ada Stormbrave. And you are?”

“Why does—”

“Pyris,” Madi cuts him off.

He frowns at her, but Ada touches his arm to gain his attention. Pyris jerks back like she’s struck him.

“Imryll removed Madigan’s earthly birth control,” Ada explains. “She’s likely already healed, but she can’t stomach the idea of seeing the incision.”

“Why?” he challenges, raising his chin, ready to argue.

“Raf feared it wouldn’t be compatible here,” she answers without pause. “As he was a doctor on Earth before coming to Spiran, we thought it was in our best interest to trust his word. Imryll also removed mine with no complications, not even a scar.”

Pyris watches Ada for a moment before he dips his head. “Thank you. I am in your debt.”

“You are most welcome,” Ada says, though she wears a confused grin. “But you don’t owe me a debt. In different times, Madigan meant the world to me. I only want to see her thrive on Spiran and become the goddess she’s always been.”

His brow furrows so low I can no longer see the blues of his irises. “You know?”

Ada simply smiles.

“She doesn’t know,” he mutters, glancing at the new Shade queen over his shoulder. “Or she doesn’t want to believe it. But we do.”

“Give her time,” Ada whispers. “Knowing you all care for her is the first step in welcoming her to her new status. Spiran will visit soon enough, and she won’t be able to ignore it any longer.”

“Then I owe you two debts,” he replies, bowing his head before he returns to his queen.

“He owes thanks, and I owe apologies,” I mumble, watching Talodus and Connak talk to Lyell.

Ada tucks her hand in mine. “You owe me nothing. This is enough.”

“I don’t know if I believe that.”

“You believe with your heart, Mongrel.” She taps my chest. “That has nothing to do with your eyes or ears or mind.”

Lyell approaches before I can explain myself. He folds his arm over his waist, bending as he exaggerates his bow. “As I live and breathe, a water goddess stands before Shades.”

“She’s taken,” I respond dryly. “Stop flirting.”

He ignores me, humor glinting in his golden eyes. “I’m Lyell Valestorm, the better half of the Shade princes. But don’t tell my brother I said that. He goes straight for my face.”

“It’s lovely to meet you finally,” Ada acknowledges. “Who are the others with you?”

“Faldron Stillblade, royal guard,” Lyell points as he speaks. “The man you were talking to is Doctor Pyris Fairbain, apothecary... Madi calls him a chemist or a mad scientist, though I’m not clear on the definitions of those Earth terms. And the quiet guy is Thinik Templefox, the best hunter the Shades can offer you.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” Ada says, holding her hand up.

Lyell chuckles. “I wasn’t really offering him. Madi might kill me if I did.”

Ada nods as she scans the room. “You didn’t come with protection. You’re her Shades.”

“If you mean she’s ours, then yes,” Lyell insists, though he shrugs too. “We couldn’t stay there without her. It no longer felt like home.”

“No,” Ada tells him simply. “I meant what I said. She’s not yours; you are hers.”

“Is there a difference?” he inquires.

I cast a side glance at Ada. “There is when you have to share her with the world.”

CONNAK

DAY SIXTY-ONE

I had hope when I woke up this morning... But it was quickly smashed, stomped on, and lit on fire when the princes decided they were going to join my hunt.

Not just one... Both of them.

They're noisy. They talk constantly. And I hate it.

This trip would have been more pleasant with Ada and Rin. Or Ada and Madigan. Or all three of them... Because at least they know how to walk silently.

It's like Ecaeris and Lyell want the entire village to know where we are. They've grated on my nerves until every sound rolls across my darkened vision in obnoxiously bright colors. My hunt flees with its tail tucked, leaving me with nothing but my aggravation and a headache.

"Are you seeing anything?" the Mongrel prince asks.

"No. The hunt is done," I growl, kicking at the stack of branches Cotear left in his camp near the coast. All that does is make my toes throb.

"He just disappeared?" Ecaeris continues, aiming a skeptical look my way.

"No," I drawl, agitation thick in my tone. "I can't focus while you two are chatting like ladies in the village. This is why I hunt alone."

Ecaeris rolls his eyes like I'm being dramatic. "This is not why you hunt alone."

"You've grown used to the silence," Lyell says, picking through a small pile of charred wood. "Try to push through our noise."

"Do you even know why we're out here?" I inquire, trying to fight the

primal part of me that *needs* to finish this hunt.

The Shade prince lazily shrugs. “Ecaeris told me the issues with your new queen. I offered to help.”

“Then go help over there,” I snap, pointing to a clothesline Cotear hung between two trees. “Both of you.”

Ecaeris holds up his hands, sensing my hostility. I’m doing all I can to rein it in, but it’s like capturing the ocean in my hands. I need Ada; her presence would calm the animal within me.

Once their quiet chatter is at a distance, I try to hone my vision onto the footprints Cotear left. I see three sets of them, each leading in a different direction... But the discrepancies are starting to show themselves. He’s getting sloppy. And while they are his tracks, not all have the same weight or length between paces.

I’ve seen this before, though it’s been a long time. It definitely wasn’t in our territory.

“Fuck,” I snarl under my breath. “Check the trees. Look up.”

“What is it?” Ecaeris asks, scanning the canopy above us.

“Cotear is a Howler,” I whisper, turning my grayed vision skyward.

His tracks illuminate in the tree branches, a dozen feet between each step. He’s been using his air element to aid him in jumping from one place to the next, to stay hidden while he leaves false prints.

“But how has he been throwing me off?” I wonder aloud as the information paints a new scenery.

“He’s spreading his element,” Lyell answers, understanding more than I expected. “Using the air to move his shoes along the forest floor while he pushes himself upward to the safety of the canopy.”

I nod my agreement. “That’s what I’m thinking, too. He’s never left tracks that show he’s moving upward, but I suspect that’s because the other points would have been higher than these branches.”

“You didn’t know he was a Howler?” The Shade prince frowns at our surroundings, attempting to see more than the surface evidence.

Ecaeris shakes his head. “As far as I can tell, he’s been with the Mongrels all his life. We’ve spoken to a few people, but no one knew he had any elemental power. His parents were merchants, and everyone thought he was born while traveling between the tribes.”

“They hide it so well,” Lyell complains. “We’ve had a few Howlers scoping out our village from the mountain tops. They like the cliff edges

where we have little access, but they haven't attacked, so I assumed they were just keeping tabs on my mother."

"This is a problem," I tell them, scanning the dense trees outside of this tiny clearing. "He could be anywhere."

"We need to go," Ecaeris confirms. "Anywhere includes the village, and he's already proven more difficult to track there than here."

"Let's circle back to his home," Lyell suggests. "See if you can find his tracks in the trees or the roof. We can open a map when we get back."

I motion for them to follow, keeping my focus on the overhead canopy. Now that I've found his tracks, I see the clear path in the trees. The single path.

He sought this camping spot out and didn't deviate from his exact tracks... Back to where he entered the forest.

"He's a hunter," I murmur, mostly to myself. "That's the only way he could follow his footprints so perfectly, without overstepping or crossing paths."

Ecaeris strays a few feet to my left, spreading out as he searches for anything we might have missed on the ground. "So it was Cotear stalking Ada for Poko."

"Maybe, but I'm leaning toward Poko being the one who was standing in the treeline outside her room," I explain, my thoughts swirling. "Cotear would have been better hidden, wouldn't have let her see him so close. That just leaves me to wonder if Poko—"

"If he had any elemental power, he would have used it to save himself," Ecaeris points out. "He didn't, so it no longer matters where he was from if he wasn't a Mongrel."

"I'm curious to know how my mother found him, though," Lyell wonders aloud from my right side. "She strayed from her usual behavior to put this plan into action."

I keep my eyes on the tracks as I ask, "Can you trust what you know?"

"There are very few people I trust to stay consistent with their behavior," he divulges, a slight hint of dark humor in his voice. "Nesta isn't one of them."

Ecaeris leans forward, glancing at the Shade prince. "You trust Madigan?"

"Do you trust Ada?" he counters.

"I do now," the Mongrel prince confesses. "But I didn't when she first

arrived.”

I nearly scoff at his understatement. Ecaeris thought she was a Shade spy on a mission to destroy us from the inside out.

Lyell grins as if he has caught the lie, too. “You are someone I trust to stay consistent with their behavior. That’s why we sent Madigan here.”

“But you trust her judgment enough to stand back while she—”

“Yes, Ecaeris. I trusted her first, then I loved her. Too much to leave her with the very people she’s supposed to lead,” Lyell says. “I trust Madigan with my life, her judgment included. What I don’t trust is my mother’s actions when I turn my back. When I fail to make it to Madi on time.”

“So you don’t intend to let her fight her battles?” I inquire, shaking my head. “She has to stand on her own, and that includes the war with your mother.”

“I don’t intend to let her stand alone,” Lyell corrects me. “Would you leave Ada to fend for herself when you’re capable of offering support at her side?”

I frown. “We wouldn’t leave Ada—”

“I’ve had to leave Madi and only just got back to stand with her, not against her,” he clarifies. “Someone needs to watch their backs because they aren’t expecting Nesta to knife them from behind. But that’s exactly what my mother will do.”

“Then we need to train them both to prepare for that outcome,” Ecaeris says matter-of-factly. “Because they fully intend to finish whatever war Nesta is starting. And to do that, they’re going to need allies.”

Lyell sighs. “Let me guess... You want to take them to the Howlers and the Dwellers?”

“No. I wouldn’t call it a want, but more of a necessity,” Ecaeris defends.

I hum in agreement. “Ada will see that as the best way.”

“The best way to do what?” the Shade prince challenges. “Walk for a week through enemy territory?”

Ecaeris chuckles to himself as we near the stone border. “She doesn’t see them as enemies, Lyell. Unknowns, yes. Dangerous, though? Not really. Maybe you should go to training with Ada... She’s not worried about the rest of the people being a hazard to her; she’s worried about hurting them by accident.”



It's a terrible idea. I repeat the same line, over and over, the entire way to the Colosseum, but it doesn't change either prince's mind. I huff and smother my complaints, letting fate take its course.

I've seen Ada train more than Ecaeris has, which is why I was arguing with them. But they don't want to listen. So, this should be an interesting lesson in not underestimating your partner, or your queen... Or a newly created goddess.

I suppose she could say no, though I doubt she will. She rarely turns away from an opportunity to learn, and fighting with an experienced Shade warrior will yield invaluable information.

If I'm being honest with myself, I would love nothing more than to watch her make Lyell bleed... And Ecaeris. They've really gotten under my skin today.

But just a little blood. Nothing that Imy can't heal.

Ada and Madigan are still in the Colosseum when we arrive. They're sitting in the dirt, hands held shoulder-width apart as they summon their elements. Water clings to Ada's skin like living armor as she peeks through one eye at Madi.

"What are you doing?" Ada inquires. "Stalling again?"

"Shut up, Ada," the Shade snaps. "It's not that easy. Fire is uncontrollable when I'm not focused."

"Your mouth is uncontrollable, but that didn't stop us from learning to deal with it," Ada snarks, catching me by surprise.

I've never heard her talk like that to anyone other than Ecaeris. Most of the time, he deserves her attitude, though I don't believe Madigan sits in the same boat as the Mongrel prince.

Madi scoffs. "That bullshit isn't going to work on me again."

"Clearly," Ada drawls, mocking her friend. "We're still sitting here. All you have to do is focus, Madi. Come on. Get it done."

"You're being a bitch today."

Ada snorts. "Ecaeris called me a Shade for the first few weeks I was here. I'm still not convinced that it isn't island slang for weak cunt."

Madigan makes an aggravated noise and throws a handful of fire at Ada. Her water armor is quick to douse the flames, but the defense doesn't stop my heart from plummeting into my stomach.

"You've got to stop instigating me," Madi warns.

Ada scoffs, then smirks. "You were stalling. I knew you could do it. You've got to believe in yourself more."

"Nicely done," Talodus praises both women.

"What are you teaching them?" Lyell asks, anger heavy in his tone. "Parlor tricks won't help them."

Ada smiles sweetly at the Shade prince, and Ecaeris grimaces. I lean against the fence post to watch this argument unfold, because I'm smart enough to stay out of it when my goddess wears that expression. I'm surprised to see the Mongrel prince has picked this up...

Lyell, though? He doesn't know what he's walking into.

"Do parlor tricks offend you?" our next Mongrel queen asks curiously.

"Wasting Madigan's time with your water sports offends me," he growls.

Ada cuts her gaze to Talodus, and the guard hangs his head to cover his grin. I don't understand why that's so funny, but Madigan coughs to cover her giggle... So it must be an Earth thing that Ada has explained to Talodus. I scratch my jaw as I wrack my memories for an explanation.

"I'm sorry you didn't enjoy our—" Ada snorts as she tries to hold back her laughter. "—our water sports performance. Next time, we'll keep our lewd behavior behind closed doors."

"Ada," Tal admonishes, though there's too much humor in his voice to show a drop of ire. "Stop it."

"She's just being kind," Madi defends, feigning innocence. "If either of us had known Lyell wouldn't fancy water sports, we wouldn't have done it."

The Shade prince tilts his head, anger evaporating at his lover's tone. "Okay. What does that mean?"

"What?" Ada inquires as Madi replies, "Nothing."

Lyell glares at Talodus. "You know what it means?"

The Mongrel guard nods. "Yeah, but I'm not sure you want to know. They've been working hard today, and while that might have looked like water—" he chokes, then growls at himself. "—water play to you, I can assure you it wasn't. Not by their definition, anyway."

"Later," Ecaeris intervenes. "One of you can explain it later, perhaps over dinner?"

Both women burst into a fit of giggles, and I'm utterly confused. Ada is adorable when she's this happy, but none of us know how to act because we have no idea what's going on right now.

"Are you dehydrated?" Lyell asks, concerned. "Delirious? Have they been drinking spirits or mead?"

"We're fine," Madigan tells him. "It's just funny. That's all. We'll explain it when we're done training."

"Right," Ecaeris drawls. "And what were you training them to do, Tal?"

He points to Ada. "She can explain it better than I can. I was just overseeing their safety."

"Ada?" the Mongrel prince prompts.

"We have no rules," she states, then wobbles her head. "I mean, I'm sure there are rules we should follow... But that's not the point."

"What is the point?" I ask.

"Coming from Earth, where elementals aren't a thing... We have no preconceived notions of what we can or can't do in this situation. I don't know how I control the water. I just do. I feel it in every molecule of my body, and then I act or react."

I nod. "Water and fire are alike in that aspect. They're very emotional elements, ranging between extremes. Calm or destructive. Passionate or devastating."

"Right," she agrees. "But they also produce life. Safety. Warmth. Balance. So, that's what we've been testing."

"Does she ever make any sense when she speaks?" Lyell asks us.

"Sometimes," Ecaeris divulges, his brow knitting as he tries to understand Ada. "Other times, I just follow her lead until I grasp what she's trying to do. Usually manipulate me, but truthfully, I'm just happy she hasn't thrown rocks at me today."

"What?" The Shade prince sounds outraged. "Why rocks?"

The Mongrel prince only shrugs. "Something about a glass house."

Madigan snaps her fingers. "Hello. We're in the middle of a conversation. Please do try to pay attention."

"So you were testing your elements to see if they can provide safety during an attack?" I inquire, getting us back on topic. "They can. Talodus knows that better than any of us."

"Yes and no," Ada replies in very typical fashion. "We wanted to know if we could repel the attacks, yes. But we also wanted to test our limits, see if

we could warp the rules you follow to fit our... What's the word I'm looking for?"

"Style?" Madigan supplies. "Game plan. Agenda. Technique. Modus operandi," the Shade sings.

Ada squints at her. "Approach. We have a particular way of looking at things that's different from what you're used to, so we're pushing the boundaries."

Lyell squeezes his temples. "Will you just show me what you're talking about?"

Ada glances at Madigan, silently asking for permission to fight the Shade's lover. She shrugs at our Mongrel goddess, a slow grin creeping over her lips.

"Knock him on his ass, Ada."

The Shade prince takes a step backward. "I'm not getting in—"

"Yes, you are," Talodus tells him, his grin one of first-hand knowledge. "If you want to see, it's best to experience it. She won't hurt you."

Madigan points to Ecaeris. "You too, Water Boy. Let's go."

I'm shocked that Ecaeris lets the comment slide by him, though he's more focused on comprehending the situation. Talodus leans against the fence beside me as both princes step forward. He still wears a knowing grin that leaves me wondering what I'm about to witness.

"Wasn't Faldron out here with you?" I inquire, searching for the Shade guard.

"He was," Tal answers, his attention never wavering from our goddess. "He grew tired of Ada and Madi knocking him down, so he went with Imy to review the maps."

Lyell stands across the training ring from Ada, Ecaeris several feet from his right side.

"What do you want us to do?" The Mongrel prince calls out.

"Hit us with everything you've got," Ada requests.

Ecaeris frowns. "Everything?"

"Everything," she repeats. "Don't hold back."

Both men look uncomfortable, chancing glances at Talodus. The guard dips his head, and that's all they need. If he has faith in their abilities, then the princes have no reason to be hesitant with either goddess. Other than their love for the women.

I have no doubts about Ada's power, but I almost want to close my eyes.

It's difficult not to watch the spectacle before me, though. Especially when I *know* one of them is a goddess chosen by Spiran, and I firmly believe the other woman is, too.

Ecaeris calls water from the atmosphere, pulling all the humidity out of the air and into a large sphere between his hands. It grows and grows until the surface wavers under its size, begging to be used.

Flames dance over Lyell's fingers, gaining intensity as the colors change. He holds a pyre in his grasp, stretching out before him in a mesmerizing display of his control.

Ada stares at the Shade prince, tracking his every breath. Water flows from her skin, coating her arms like clothing. The ball of liquid in her hand is no bigger than the cork top from William's mead bottles, and she loosely holds it as she patiently waits.

Madigan shakes her arms out, and vivid embers float through the sky. Bright fire creeps across her chest, licking at her neck. She swipes her jaw, pulling the smallest of flares away from her face, keeping her vision clear.

Ecaeris takes half a step forward, and I stop breathing as I witness the quickest fight in the Mongrels' history.

Ada takes the hit from Lyell's element, her feet barely sliding across the dirt field of the Colosseum. Only... He doesn't do any damage. His flames didn't even touch her. They disappear into a plume of smoke as they reach her water shield. She doesn't boast a single burn or blister.

My Mongrel goddess flicks the cork-top-sized ball of water at the Shade prince, and the impact sends him skittering across the ground. He tumbles, unable to stop himself, until he ends up lying flat on his back.

Ecaeris watches the Shade prince fly by before he makes his move. Though, at this point, I'm not sure why he follows through with it. That landing was enough to make me want to surrender.

That would have been the smart choice, but he makes the stubborn choice.

His water attack evaporates within feet of Madigan, the steam clouding around her before it suddenly clears thanks to her partner in training. The Shade's cheeks are pink from the heat of her element, but not one burn has appeared on her fire-covered skin.

Madigan rotates her hand, shoving the minuscule flame at the Mongrel Prince, and he tries to counter. Only he doesn't know which way it's coming from and overestimates his defense. He aims toward the left, following the

direction of her move. But he's hit from the right by a stray flame and sent sailing into the air to land beside his fellow fallen royal with a grunt.

I frantically blink, trying to understand what just happened. And while I saw every bit of it, I'm not sure I can comprehend each separate part of their attacks.

The first thing I register is Lyell's strained cackle as he stares at the sky.

Ada scrambles toward them, worry creasing her brow. "Are you okay? Are either of you hurt? Should I send for Imy?"

"We're fine, Ada," Ecaeris replies, though he wheezes through the words.

"Did you see how high he went?" Lyell asks, struggling to catch his breath. "That was amazing. Definitely worth taking the first hit."

Ada sighs heavily as her concern wanes. She slowly alters her direction, walking toward the fence.

Talodus elbows me as he pushes away, quietly whispering, "Grab her."

I grin at her, but she stares beyond me like she can't see me. Her steps falter as her face loses color... And I run, sliding across the dirt to catch her before she hits the ground.

I turn to find Talodus, preparing to yell at him, but he's carrying Madi toward the grassy area at the fence. The new Shade queen glares at him, her arms crossed over her chest, but the Mongrel guard pretends not to notice.

"You scared me," I murmur to Ada as I adjust her in my arms. "Are you okay?"

"Sorry," she mutters, weakened but attempting a smile. "I knew it was coming; I couldn't get the words out. We've pushed too far today, but it's the only way we can grow."

"Training is done for the day," I gently tell her. "If Imy knew you'd just passed out, he would lose his mind."

"I didn't pass out," she argues. "I got lightheaded."

I chuckle as I hold her closer. "You can explain that to him after you take a nap and a bath."

"Do I stink?"

"You smell like smoke, and you're covered in dirt." I kiss her forehead. "But you were fierce. Every bit the goddess of my dreams."

ADELAIDE

DAY SIXTY-TWO

Yesterday wore me out, but of course it did. Madigan and I trained for hours, pushing our power to limits we didn't know we had. That's how growth happens, and we're going to need every inch.

Today, I awoke feeling brand new. Taking some time off from training is probably for the best, though the idea doesn't pacify my busy mind. There are still so many things to figure out... Including why I'm back to having an escort every waking moment of the day.

The guys are freaking out about me being lightheaded. I keep telling them I didn't pass out, but that doesn't help. They just nod and agree, and then do whatever they want... Which is why Talodus is following me around at the moment.

"Rinya is finding the Mongrel women who delivered my clothes when I was staying in the guards' barracks," I mention absently as we walk along the outskirts of the village. "That's one thing that has been taken off my plate, although I still want to question them."

"She shouldn't have an issue finding them," Talodus acknowledges, then huffs in annoyance. "Why are you focusing on that right now? Shouldn't you be resting after passing out yesterday?"

I roll my eyes and continue talking. "Having my underwear stolen is probably the strangest thing that's happened to me. Other than the royalty bit, and the elemental powers, and the krakens... And the goddess stuff too, I guess. But it never happened on Earth, and I feel like that's the one place it would make sense to steal someone's underwear."

"What?" he asks, shaking his head like he can't understand me.

“I mean, missing undergarments made it on my list of strange shit that’s happened to me, which makes it more strange than anything else,” I ramble.

“But is it?” he challenges. “Undergarments that you never even wore aren’t really that important.”

I shrug. “Sure... But what were they planning on doing with them? And what if I had worn them?”

“That’s a good question, but I’m still stuck on this.” He glances at me as we veer toward the outlying neighborhood. “So, appearing in a whole new world doesn’t make that list? Or drowning a man on dry land? Or—”

“My shoes.” I snap my fingers and point at him. “That’s just weird, too.”

Talodus grabs my hand and pulls me to a stop, concern creasing his brow. “I know we’ve been asking this quite often, but are you feeling okay? Did you hit your head when I wasn’t looking or something?”

“Yeah. I’m feeling fine. Are you?”

“Yes,” he drawls, his narrowed gaze studying me. “I’m just trying to understand your thoughts right now... And I’m struggling.”

“I’m a little spacey,” I admit. “My attention is running in thirty different directions. Ecaeris is right; there are too many things happening at once, and I can’t solve any of them until I narrow down my focus to one thing at a time.”

“So, undergarments?” he agrees, the tiniest bit of humor replacing his worry.

I scrunch my nose. “It’s the easiest and quickest problem to solve.”

“Which is what we’re doing?” he speculates.

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” I snark. “I’m going to Cotear’s house to sort through the rest of their belongings.”

Talodus grins, returning my sarcasm. “And I’m going with you.”

“Not that I have complaints,” I begin as we meander through the neighborhood. “But don’t you have guard duty today?”

“Marren is taking my shift,” he explains. “I’ll go in later. I wanted to sleep in after yesterday. Getting knocked around so much really wears on the body.”

He side eyes me like that’s some kind of hint I need to take. But I really *do* feel fine. I suspect he does too; he’s just trying to keep me from overexerting myself.

I can’t be sure until I ask Spiran, though my educated guess after talking with Isolde’s husbands is that they’re just as immortal as their wife is... And that makes me wonder if my guys are too. Or they will be at some point.

I hope...

It's the top question on another list I've made. My life is quickly becoming overrun with lists of things I need to sort out, and I'm terrible at delegating. If it wasn't for Rinya assigning herself the task of finding the delivery ladies, I'd be doing that today, too.

Talodus sighs loudly. "You're not going to slow down, are you?"

"Doubtful," I sincerely confess. "There's too much to do to get things settled down. I have all this knowledge and nowhere to test it. And the smaller issues keep piling up. Collectively, they're now as big as the massive issues we're facing. So, today, I'm tackling the underwear thing. Then tomorrow, I'll focus on finding Cotear."

"Connak is out looking for him with Thinik and Faldron," he tells me.

I nod. "Faldron is going to track Cotear's movements on the map as they go. I'm curious to know why he hasn't left the area."

"But you have a guess?" he remarks.

"I don't want to assume I understand his motives, but I suspect two things," I state. "Either he can't go back to the Howlers or the Shades... Or he can go back to the Shades, but he needs one more something for Nesta before he leaves. What 'something?' I haven't figured that part out yet."

Talodus stops me once more, his hands on my shoulders. "Have you considered you might be pushing yourself too hard?"

"No," I answer, then backtrack. "Well, yes, I have considered it... But no, I'm not."

"Ada." He sighs, hands falling to his sides. "I watched my mother work herself to death. She wouldn't stop, and that caused her to make a mistake that cost us her life." He rubs his hand over his short-cropped hair. "I need you to understand where I'm coming from when I ask you to slow down."

"I didn't know that," I mumble.

There are so many things I don't know about these men. Knowing their history won't change my mind about them, though it would be helpful to understand for occasions like this... Especially when they worry about something I can't quite comprehend.

I wish we could have more time to enjoy the honeymoon stage of new relationships, but I suspect that won't happen until after our war. Unless we can sneak in small moments like this.

Talodus rubs his hand over the top of his head, uneasy with the topic. "It's not something we talk about often. She was Isolde's personal guard on

most days, same as Rin. But other days, she would take extra shifts, barely get any sleep, and do it all over again the next day. After my father died, she felt like she had to work that much to keep herself busy and our household running.”

“That’s why you became a guard?” I ask.

“My parents are the reason I became a guard,” he reveals. “I wasn’t old enough to take care of my mother when she needed it most. But I can take care of you, even if you don’t want to listen. You won’t rest? Fine. I’m going to be with you all day, and the moment you show fatigue, I’m taking you back to the palace. I don’t care if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet them. Your parents sound like they were as hardworking as you are,” I murmur, then shake my head. “I don’t want to make light of this knowledge, because I appreciate you telling me. But Tal... I can’t die, even if I wanted to. That option isn’t on the table for me. Spiran made sure of that when she turned me into a goddess. I promise I’m not working myself to death. Yesterday was from using so much power at once. I haven’t ever flexed that much in one day, so it was a shock to my system.”

I take a step closer to him, breaking the distance that’s between us to wrap my arms around his waist. “Before I got here, this answer would have been different. But now? I care about too many people to be reckless with my health. Mental, emotional, or physical. I promise I will let you know when I’m nearing my limit, when I’ve had too much. You’re going to have to trust me to know that line, though.”

“You’ll tell me if you feel—”

“Faint or hungry or thirsty... I’ll tell you the moment I’m in any kind of distress.” I grin at him, trying to ease his tension. “I’m not opposed to you throwing me over your shoulder and carrying me away once we’re done with our tasks. That would be hot.”

He gives me the same bland look Ecaeris so often wears.

I prop my chin on his chest, ready to distract him however I can, when a thought strikes me like a physical blow. “Did you live with Isolde after you lost your mother?”

“I did,” he replies. “So did Imryll and Connak.”

That makes me pause to collect my thoughts before I speak again. “I knew about Imy, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard Connak say anything about his parents.”

Tal frowns, reaching up to smooth the skin between my brows. “He won’t talk about it. He was young when he lost his parents, and he had no other family. Isolde is the only mother he’s ever known.”

“How young were you?” I ask.

“Four when my father died. Twelve when I lost my mother and moved into the palace with Isolde.” He watches me for a moment, almost as if he’s weighing his words. “Connak never met his mother. She didn’t even get to hold him; her life was gone before his birth was over. His father went missing when he was five. No one knows where he went, if he’s dead or alive. He just disappeared.”

“And Imy was fifteen,” I finish.

He nods. “Imryll was the oldest of us when he moved in. Last in, first out. I followed within a year, going from the palace to the guards’ barracks. Ecaeris stayed until Connak was old enough to leave.”

“Imy is twenty-seven,” I math out loud. “So, you’re a year younger—”

“No. We’re the same age. He likes his space and craved his quiet time away from us when we were all teens.” Talodus grins as if he’s recalling a memory. “Connak is the youngest. He’s... Twenty-four? Ecaeris is a year older than him, and Rin is a year younger.”

“And her brother?” I inquire.

I still find myself curious about Joldwin Battlerain.

Their group used to be five instead of four, and I wonder how things would have turned out if he hadn’t died. Would these Mongrels still have been mine? Would my heart beat for one more person? Or would I even be here?

His death changed the course of our futures, but we’ll never know how much he altered our journeys.

“Joldwin would have been twenty-six in the Virgo season,” Talodus answers.

“What’s your favorite color?”

He blinks at me several times, confused by my change of topics. “What?”

“I just realized I don’t know enough about any of you,” I admit. “I mean, I now know why you became a guard, and that you don’t sleep during storms —”

“You knew?” he asks, eyes so wide I can see the streams and bands in his crystal blue irises.

“That you were awake when I left?” I clarify and shrug. “Not exactly;

though I suspected. I thought about waking you, but I wanted to make my decision without bias. And if you'd gone with me to meet Isolde that night, my choice might not have purely reflected my wishes. I wanted my resolve to be true, to show I stayed because I wanted to be here, even if that meant starting over and being alone."

Talodus brushes his thumb across my cheek. "We just wanted to make sure you were safe."

"I knew you wouldn't try to change my mind," I reassure him. "But if I chose to leave, it would have been that much harder with you there."

"You had already made your decision before you got to the beach," he states.

I nod as I lean my head against his hand. "I had, but I was still scared."

"We all feared, Ada," he whispers, delicately cupping my face like I might break under his brute force. "Feared that you would leave after we'd grown attached, that you would change your mind about us once you knew what you really wanted."

"You are what I want," I tell him. "All four of you. It's just... The thought of knowing what I want is as terrifying as deciding to make Spiran my new home."



*W*e've barely opened the door to Cotear's house when we spot Rinya pacing in the living room as if she's a caged animal. Her jerky movements remind me of Ecaeris when he has too much on his mind.

Rin points at a chair in the corner, wordlessly telling me her task is complete. We see the delivery woman sitting there, ready to meet us.

I take a moment to read the room, discreetly examining the woman who was taking my undergarments... and she's not what I expected. She's young, striking, with light brown hair tumbling over her shoulders. Guessing an age is a tricky game on Spiran; Isolde looks in her forties, though she's over the thousand year mark. But I want to say this woman looks as if she isn't a day over twenty.

"Tell her," Rin demands after the awkward silence.

“Poko and Cotear were courting me,” the woman informs us without hesitation. “And then you showed up. I was jealous of the attention they were paying you, so—”

“They were stalking her,” Talodus defends, giving her no time to say anything further. “There’s a big difference between that and giving someone the attention they’ve asked for.”

I sigh before I can stop myself. “Just so we’re clear, I never asked for anything from them.”

“That’s not how they spoke of you, though.” She takes a fortifying breath as she gazes at her intertwined fingers. “When they continued to talk about you after I asked them to stop, I popped. I thought they were courting you in private, so I took the things from your barracks and your deliveries from Queen Isolde out of spite and inconvenience. Delivering offerings to you gave me the opportunity to snoop around and search for signs that Poko and Cotear had been there with you.”

I rub at my forehead, trying to keep my face from scrunching up in confusion. “So, you weren’t held against your will or manipulated into anything? You were just acting out of spite because you thought they were courting me?”

“I wish it were that simple,” she answers, her skin flushing a splotchy pink in her embarrassment. “I heard them talking about how they had been seeing you at night, but this night was going to be different. They didn’t care who tried to stop them, and I took that statement as meaning me. I also knew you were publicly courting several men. I couldn’t understand why there was so much secrecy, why you were hiding some, but not others. Why, unless you knew they had a lover already...”

She touches her chest, then fists her hand over her heart as she hangs her head. “So I put your things in their house while they were gone, and I waited. But they never came back. Poko didn’t wake me up to fuss at me about leaving shit in his room or ask where it came from. He was just... gone. I found Cotear two days later, and he was jumpy about giving me answers. Then the announcement happened, and everything started to add up.”

“That’s it?” Rinya asks, sounding disappointed.

“What more can I say?” the woman counters. “That’s the story of why I stole the undergarments and shoes.”

Talodus bites at his lower lip before gently inquiring, “Do you know why they were stalking Ada?”

“They wouldn’t admit anything about her, even when I confronted them.” She shakes her head as if to ward off the memories. “Poko would get so angry when I asked. He told me this thing between him and me was out of convenience, and he had no intentions of our connection being a lasting relationship. That was the day before he dis—”

“I killed him,” I interrupt, confessing so she doesn’t doubt the severity of the situation we’re currently in.

“He was a good man,” she declares, rising out of her chair as if she can’t contain her outrage.

“He tried to rape me,” I snap, refusing to sugarcoat anything. I want to add bits of Rin’s story to my admission, but I won’t overstep. “He attacked me from behind, broke my nose, ripped the buttons from my clothing as he choked me. And I wasn’t the only one. Poko admitted to raping others. He wasn’t a good man; he played you for a fool. It happens to the best of us.”

There’s a beat of silence where she simply stares at me, processing what I’ve just said. Something in her expression evolves as the truth sinks in. I won’t pity her, but I do feel the urge to hug her.

“I thought he loved me,” she quietly claims, her voice cracking. “That *they* loved me, and you were the issue.”

“Ada’s arrival saved you from a lifetime of misery with two men who were using you to cover the tracks of their crimes,” Rinya spits, her ire boiling over at this woman’s naivety. “You were the person they planned to use as proof they hadn’t done anything wrong. They expected you to lie for them to your queen.”

“What do you want me to do with her?” Tal asks, blocking the doorway.

“Nothing. She’s suffered enough between the heartbreak and the knowledge that the men she loved are dead.” I turn my attention from Talodus and Rinya to the woman before me, hoping my expression doesn’t show my lie. “You will no longer work in the palace. And you will not steal. If you’re caught committing crimes again, I will punish you for your past and present transgressions.”

She nods, tears pooling along her lashes, though none tip over the edge. I’m grateful to see her emotions. Her actions in this moment allow me to believe many of these people deserve a second chance. That I can lead and not be merciless.

“Please,” I softly beg, my chest clenching. “Do not make me the villain of your story. I do not wish to start my reign as your enemy. I’m willing to call

this incident water under the bridge, but I need assurances that you can move forward, too. So let me explain.”

I wait for her to look into my eyes before I continue. “At no point did I court them or spend any time with them. I saw Cotear when I was in the general store, but I was always with Rinya. I saw Poko a few times; however, most of them happened while I was with my lovers or Rin. There was never a moment where I called upon them at night, sought them out, or did anything in attempts to gain their attention.

“The night Poko attacked me, he told me he was doing it to hurt Ecaeris. He was doing it for his queen, the old Shade queen, to weaken the Everwar dynasty so Nesta Valestorm could exact her revenge for a perceived grievance. And that grievance has nothing to do with the people who’ve been hurt. Not us. Not the Mongrels. And not the Shades.”

I take her hands in mine. “I’m sorry your heart is broken and you’re mourning your losses. But please, don’t let that turn you away from the light within yourself. Don’t let the pain fester into a pit of darkness that swallows you whole. I look forward to watching you become a florist or a blacksmith or—”

“A baker,” she cuts in.

“Or a baker.” I smile. “When you do great things on your own, and have confidence that you can be whole by yourself, your next relationship will prove to be that much stronger. We aren’t fragile; we’re all warriors in our own right.”

She softly chuckles. “I guess I should dust off my armor.”

“I think so,” I murmur, more to myself than anyone else. “I imagine we all should.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SIXTY-THREE

Connak leans against a tree as he waits for me to finish inspecting Cotear's camp. It's in a sensible location, far enough away from the village for no one to spot him, but close enough to the shore to enjoy the ocean's music at night.

I doubt he's been back since they first found it, but I'm still curious why he's hanging around.

There have been no incidents in the village that would lead me to believe he's just visiting our tribe. And no one really knows much about him or how he got here.

"You're sure he's a Howler?" I ask Connak for the tenth time.

"As sure as I can be without asking him," he snarks.

I shake my head at his attitude. "How would a Howler blend into the Mongrels without someone noticing? Feeling the difference in power like they do with the Shades?"

"I didn't say he has an exceptional connection to his element," Connak clarifies. "Just that he has it."

"I know. I'm just spit-balling, trying to work out the problems aloud. We need to find him. Knowing where he came from or what kind of power he has will only help us if we're face-to-face with him. At this rate, he's going to run us all over the Mongrel territory while he ambles through the village unseen."

"I understand your frustration," he tells me. "I feel it, too. I've never had a hunt stretch this much time, and it's given me a headache."

Connak stays quiet while I look over the campsite and surrounding area one more time. I search the ground so long that the colors of the fallen leaves

blur together. Every stick and branch appears just like the last. And my frustration only grows.

“Have you found anything?” he inquires.

I shrug. “Not much that you didn’t see when you were here. It’s just a convenient spot for Cotear to sleep and not be seen.”

“Did you search the trees?”

“Did you see me climb?”

“Too short?” Connak smiles. “You need me to pick you up?”

I give him the same bland expression Ecaeris so often gives me. “Why did you bring me out here?”

“Because I value the way you see the world around us,” he explains. “You have a different view than the natives, and that makes you unpredictable. I can’t guess what will catch your attention or what looks out of place to you.”

“But you don’t want me out here?” I finish for him.

He tips his head. “I would prefer to have more protection. I’m used to hunting on my own, not with company, although you are much less distracting than Ecaeris and Lyell.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not,” I mumble.

“It’s a compliment,” he confirms. “They talked so much I couldn’t focus on my hunt. But you understand the importance of focus.”

“Yet you still want more company with us?” I challenge.

“I know you are capable of fighting and protecting yourself.” He hangs his head for a moment before continuing. “But I’m not confident that I can keep you safe.”

I frown. “You’ve kept me safe in the past, even when you didn’t know—”

“I’ve also failed to keep others safe,” he cuts in, his words soft but serious. “Lost people because I couldn’t protect them. I’m not willing to let anything happen to you again because I can’t hold up my word.”

“That isn’t your fault, Connak. We have to trust each other, and I do trust you. You haven’t *let* anything happen to me. I know you’ll do everything in your power to keep me safe, but I also know that won’t be necessary. I’m not *others*. Don’t let your past cloud your judgment to the point where you end up hurting yourself.”

My last statement sounds so much like one I’ve said to Ecaeris that I begin to wonder if each of these Mongrel men needs to hear it. I understand that one’s past can and will follow them, haunt them, but if they fear it, the

fear only becomes worse with time.

“You can’t guarantee that nothing will happen to you while we’re out here,” he claims.

I shake my head. “You’re right. I can’t, but I can promise that we’ll get away. This flirty hunter once told me something about knowing when to retreat and when to fight.”

“Which flirty hunter would that be?” Connak prowls closer to me, a smirk on his face as I back away. “We may have to pay him a visit. Someone has to tell him he can’t have you. You’re taken.”

“I tried.” I shrug, moving toward the call of the ocean. “Didn’t really stop him.”

“That’s how they wear you down.” He nods to himself. “Must be a handsome Mongrel for you to still be thinking about him.”

“He is,” I agree, grinning. “Handsome and spontaneous. Attentive and confident.”

Connak raises a single brow at me. “Dashing too?”

“Too charming for his own good.”

“Sounds like we’d make great friends.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea... See, I prefer him more.” I take another step back. “Maybe I’ll introduce you to him later.”

The hunter advances, each measured step carrying him closer to me. “Does he make you squirm in anticipation?”

“He keeps me completely satisfied, leaves me exhausted in his wake.”

“Does he know that you’re taken?”

I stare deep into Connak’s chocolate brown eyes, tracing the rips and tears of his irises. A smirk slowly creeps across my lips as I inch closer to him, wrapping my hand in his cream-colored shirt.

“That may have slipped my mind.”

“Do I need to remind you?” he purrs, causing goosebumps to trail up my arms.

“Maybe you should remind me,” I whisper, releasing my hold on his linen shirt.

Connak stretches for me, but I twist out of arm’s reach, grinning as I dance away. I tsk as he narrows his sight on me. His advancement has all the grace of a cat stalking a mouse, though he won’t corner me so easily. Not while we’re out in the open.

He needs a successful hunt, and I’m more than willing to give it to him.

I bolt.

“Ada,” Connak snarls behind me.

But I don't stop. I run so fast I feel as if I'm flying through the trees, ducking and dodging low-hanging branches. Leaf litter covers the ground, though only sparse sections crunch under my feet. The sudden noise I'm making causes me to cringe.

Connak never makes a sound when he wanders through the forest. I need to be just as quiet and even more cautious.

I'm on high alert, opening my senses to pick up on any anomaly within the woods. The pounding of my heart becomes so loud in my ears that I worry I won't hear Connak sneak up on me... Or anything else that may be waiting in the forest.

I attempt to stretch my senses further away from my being, searching for any hint of my hunter. The top of my spine prickles with awareness, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end as sensations overwhelm me.

A fine fog spreads through the forest, twisting and warping until it feels as if I'm surrounded by many men. I can taste their sweat in the air mixing with dirt and decaying leaves.

They move as I do, their eerie unison playing tricks on my mind until even the trees' shadows take on a life of their own. I stop behind a wide trunk, digging my fingertips into its bark as I gather my bearings.

The ocean calls from my left, telling me I'm still close to the shore. But I can't sense Connak anywhere. I take a deep breath, smelling only the exotic flora perfuming the air. It's not like I can point my hunter out by scent alone when his natural aroma surrounds me.

He's much better with his elemental control than he lets on.

Though he's overwhelming my senses, using his ability to herd me in the direction he wants, there's one part of his power that mystifies me... The silence.

I hear nothing.

Not a footstep. A twig snapping. Leaves rustling.

There is nothing. And that makes me wonder whether he's in front of me or behind me. Is he being so quiet because he knows what I'm doing or because he's actually hunting me?

The quiet also comes with an unsteady feeling. The forest always grows silent when a beast is near, and I haven't been paying enough attention to recall hearing any animals or even bugs in the background.

No. I hear nothing.

His element, this fog he has created, is blocking everything around me.

Despite that knowledge, I'm keenly aware that staying in the woods without him near me is probably not the best idea.

I shove away from the wide trunk and rush toward the ocean, the cresting waves singing my name until I can faintly see them through the treeline.

White sand merges with damp dirt, the combined texture removing the much-needed traction from beneath my feet. And as I slow, something snags my waist.

Not something. *Someone.*

I squeal at the sudden fright, my heart nearly imploding from the rush of excitement, and I fight not to grin.

"Does he like it when you run?" the hunter growls in my ear as he calmly unties my skirt.

"I believe so," I breathlessly reply, his erection pressing against my back.

"I know what you're doing, Ada," he informs me as he relaxes his grip.

I gently pull away, turning my head to grin at him, but I stop. His eyes are still black, not yet fading from his hunt. So, I run once more, though he doesn't let me get far this time.

Connak grabs me from behind, his arm tightly winding around my chest, under my breasts. But we're both in motion with this catch, causing us to lose balance. A shallow pool of water forms below us, the tension on the surface reminding me of an overfilled waterbed. It slightly bounces with our weight, but we don't sink into it.

"Clever trick," he quips, his smile growing devious as he looks down at me. "How long can you hold it?"

I open my mouth to reply, but Connak grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger as he swallows my words. His tongue battles with mine, though he doesn't seek dominance. No matter how much I give, he intends to devour every breath I take, as if all the air surrounding us is his. As if he'll only share that oxygen when I've become too lightheaded without it.

My hands roam up his arms until I can tangle my fingers in his hair to pull him closer. I crave the heat of his skin, searing this memory into my mind as he settles his weight atop me.

But Connak doesn't bend to my will.

His dexterous fingers nimbly work at the jeweled buttons of my shorts, taking care not to rip them completely away from the fabric. He slowly

unwraps me like he may break his reward.

I yank at his shirt, forever impatient to trace the masterpiece of his body, all of his soft scars and hard muscles. His movements are a sharp juxtaposition to mine, especially as he continues to treat my mouth as his favorite candy. But I kiss him languidly, only breathing what he shares.

Connak reluctantly parts from my mouth to help me remove his shirt before he unties the front of his pants, releasing himself to my now wandering hands.

My fingertips barely grace the satin skin of his thick cock, and he's pulling me away, my wrists captured in his grasp and held above my head.

He pushes my thin shorts down, just below my knees, and then his lips are silencing me once more. It's like he knows I was one breath away from a snarky remark about him needing both hands to undress me.

He doesn't.

Connak grabs my lower thigh and pulls my left leg up, opening me to all his daily desires. My shorts drift down my right calf, pooling at my foot.

As if to emphasize how wrong I was, he glides the head of his cock between my slick folds and slides inside me, sheathing himself to the hilt.

"Connak," I sigh, drawing his name out as he once again steals my breath.

Black eyes stare down at me, and a thrilling tingle races along my spine as his smirk becomes ravenous. He's no longer concerned with breaking his reward. Connak's thrusts are slow yet powerful, bordering on too deep as he gazes into my eyes. He means for his pace to teach me a lesson.

He's the predator who has caught his prey.

Only instead of tearing me to shreds, he worships me. This quiet sandy beach is the temple which holds the altar of my body where he tempts me with his offering. He drops to his knees to call upon me. A whispered prayer falls from his lips as he begs me to spare him, for I am his goddess.

Connak doesn't hold my heart. He owns a piece of my soul, the very thing that will remain *me* as the millennia pass us by. My heart, though? It only beats for one, and that is the ocean.

The gravity of this sentiment swells inside me, leaving me bereft as I drown in my emotions. They are as vast and deep as the ocean, as swift as the river, but as calm as a crystal clear lake on a summer morning.

My nails dig into his back, dragging across smooth skin and scars until I can feel his blood well to the surface, slick on my fingertips. Every pump of

his hips drags me further into the current, building momentum as waves crash around us.

“Ada, my goddess,” he softly murmurs, his chocolate eyes searching mine.

As badly as I want this moment to last forever, the tone of his voice brings me to heel, willing to give him more than the very breath from my lungs as I return his belief. If I am his goddess, then he is my reason.

Between us, the dam wall breaks, flooding our senses. We freely jump, plummeting through the waterfall of pleasure one after the other... And the bed beneath us evaporates, turning our metaphorical freefall into an actual drop.

Connak is quick to catch me, snaking his arms around my back and head to keep me from colliding with the abrasive sand. The impromptu tumble separates us well before I’m ready, but it’s hard to complain when he’s done exactly what every woman longs for without me needing to ask or plead.

He simply catches me every time I fall for him.

Connak rests on his knees once more, leaning back on his heels as he places me on my unsteady feet.

“Tired yet?” the Mongrel animal asks, grinning at my shaking legs like he’s proud of himself. “I can try again when we get back to the palace. You don’t look very tired, and I’d hate for you to call your other hunter. It would be such a shame to kill him in a fit of jealous rage. There are so few of us already.”

“Ha. Ha,” I deadpan, glaring at him. But it’s difficult to fake ire while he’s being sweet.

Connak holds my shorts out so I can step into them, helping me balance as my knees threaten to buckle.

“I like undressing you,” he mentions as he deftly fastens my buttons. “Dressing you is equally enjoyable, though.”

As he cinches the last jeweled button closed, twigs snap just inside the treeline. I peek around Connak but don’t immediately see anything. He quickly snatches my skirt off the sand and ties it in place.

“Do you think he’s out there?” I whisper so quietly that I’m not sure he’s heard me.

Connak’s eyes fade to black as he slowly turns around to face the direction of the sound. It only takes me a heartbeat to recognize the tension rippling through the muscles of his back.

It's not Cotear.

"Ada," Connak mutters, quickly lacing his pants. "Stay close to the water. Head east."

I lay my hand between his shoulder blades before I move, images of his injuries flashing through my mind. "You're not coming with me?"

"I'll be right behind you."

"Don't lie to me, Connak."

"I will be a few minutes behind you," he amends. "I just want to see which direction the beast is coming from and if there's more than one. We have fishermen coming in from the far coast in less than two weeks. We'll need to inform them they need to dock closer to the twin boulders."

"Okay," I reply in a hushed breath. "I'm counting the seconds."

I back away from him until the ocean wraps around my ankles, tugging at my skirt. He disappears into the forest, the underbrush swallowing him whole. And I start counting.

The waves calm behind me, playing a soothing rhythm that eases my anxiety. I take measured steps toward the east as my imagination conjures more images that make me want to turn around.

Connak is fine.

I just need to give him time.

Once I reach the thousands, I pause to peer at my surroundings. I haven't been to this part of the Mongrel coast, and while it's beautiful, it's not enough to distract me.

I look to the cotton candy sky, but even as the dusky orange overtakes the neon pinks, it feels shallow and empty. So, I keep my eyes fixated on the treeline, scanning for movement as my count hits four-thousand. I will Connak to appear with each breath I take.

And when he does finally breach the trees ahead of me, I nearly jump out of my skin. His attention doesn't leave the thick overgrowth, the shadows darkening the forest well before the sun has set.

"We need to go," he says, nodding his head east. "We'll stay on the shore for as long as we can."

"They don't like the water," I recall.

"There's a place up ahead," he begins, warning clear in his voice, "We'll have to cross through the spitting starflowers or cut through the forest—"

"Or go through the water," I cut in like it's the most obvious option. "What are spitting starflowers?"

Connak shakes his head. “The current is heavier on this side of the Mongrel shore. Even those of us with the best control can’t slow it.”

I’m not quite ready to test my control over the ocean like that. Calling orbs of salty water to my hand is one thing, but slowing a current? Maybe soon, however, I won’t put Connak’s life in jeopardy to figure it out today.

Before I can mention any of this, he takes my hand in his, lacing our fingers together as he answers my question.

“And spitting starflowers are just that. Star-shaped flowers that spit poisonous nectar.”

“Good thing we know some krakens...” I tease, but I’m intrigued.

I wonder if any of Isolde’s books explain which flora and fauna to avoid. Or which of those things will, without a doubt, kill a person? I really hope there are pictures somewhere to help me identify what I shouldn’t touch... Although, now I have questions only Madigan, Isolde, and I can answer.

Connak chuckles as he checks behind us. “Anything but the krakens.”

“Which direction did the beast go in?” I inquire, peeking around him to glance at the forest.

“It’s heading toward the Shade’s mountain range. I’ll let Lyell know when we—”

“Great,” I interrupt. “Show me these poison-spitting flowers.”

“I should have known that would be your response.” Connak groans as he drops his head back. “You can look but don’t touch. Then summon Indigo so we can get closer to the village.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SIXTY-FOUR

Connak slid out of my bed as the sun peeked through the window, setting off for another day of hunting. He seems calmer after a successful chase, even if that was by design. The missing warmth at my back keeps me from falling asleep again, and a thick book on the table catches my attention, glowing like the bright beacon of a lighthouse.

It feels invasive to read Isolde's ancient diary, but it was left in the stack of books weeks ago. For a moment, I wonder if she knew, though the thought is laughable. That woman knows exactly what she's doing, and this leather bound memory bank didn't end up in my hands for no reason.

Spiran's forced knowledge has allowed me to finally read the pages. The language has changed twice, though Isolde's handwriting doesn't deviate throughout the centuries. There's maybe one entry every year or two until they fade to every five years, then every ten... Until she stopped a little over two decades ago.

But her struggles are there, each stroke of ink a triumph and failure wrapping into one.

No matter how successful she was as the Mongrel's queen, she longed for a child. Like the one she'd lost before she arrived on the island.

It's one of the few memories she constantly writes about, almost as if she's reminding herself it was real and still okay to miss her child, her family, her life.

She always signs her entries with the same line.

Be brave.

The further into her diary I get, the less she writes of Earth. The world of

Spiran keeps her attention, dividing it in too many directions, but her loss holds her heart hostage. She spins beautiful lines about the Mongrels in her bed, how they aspire to make all her dreams come true, but even they can't give their queen the one thing she wants.

I don't know how long I read Isolde's most private thoughts before I become her biggest fan, rooting for her to receive her every desire... But as I get to the end, my eyes are puffy, and my nose is stopped up. My cheeks are raw from wiping the tears away, and I have a new love for my mentor.

I also have questions.

I tuck the diary under my arm and quickly hunt down Isolde. The first place I look is in the sewing room; it's the only place she would be waiting for me.

Because she knows. I don't know how... But the glossy gaze she gives me says she's ready to talk about it.

"I haven't seen that book in weeks," she comments as I set it on the table. "I haven't opened it in—"

"Twenty-five years?" I guess. "Give or take a couple of months. The last entry, Ecaeris has just been born."

"I used to write every day," she admits, like it's a secret. "But every so often, I would read through my entries and sum up the important things, in case I ever lost them. They all went into that book, which I kept hidden until you arrived."

"Why did you put it in the stack you gave me to read?"

She raises a brow. "So you would read it."

"Why?" I ask. "It's intrusive of me—"

"It's a guide, Ada. Everyone has a different experience here, but this shows you that some of your feelings aren't yours alone. I worried for the people, still do. I mourned my Earth life while learning what it meant to be a Mongrel. Spiran dazzled me. Men courted me, and I had no clue what they were doing."

Isolde chuckles, though she wears an emotion I can't name. "Noctis was the first to explain the Mongrel ways to me, helping me sort friend from foe. Kerr showed me how amazing my life would be on this island if I only gave it a chance. Zivol fought with me and against me, trained me.

"I had lost everything I loved on Earth, was chained to a post in the middle of my village awaiting trial for simply being born in a rival clan. They killed my husband and my son. He was a baby. I don't recall many other

memories from my time in the other world. Just the loss and heartache I felt before the storm... And the night my father sold me to my first husband. I was fifteen, and the last words he said to me were—”

She speaks in her native language, and I realize I only understand it when it's written. But I have a suspicion it's, “Be brave.”

Isolde nods. “The first memories I lost were their voices. Then the familiar smells left me... And the scenery, and the textures. After a thousand years, what I *do* remember is the birth of my first son and the words my father always told me. *Be brave, Isolde. Be strong like the moon. Move the water.*”

“How soon will I forget?” I ask, though I don't want the answer.

“I can't say,” she quietly replies. “Eventually, you will forget many things, both good and bad. Time takes all of that from us. But what you will remember are the moments that made your heart beat faster, your chest clench with excitement, and your stomach flip.”

“Chest clenching is more anxiety than excitement,” I say, trying to joke but falling flat.

“Is it?” she challenges. “Or did your society prime you to believe excitement and anxiety are the same thing? They share many similarities.”

Her question causes me to pause, nipping at my lip as I think it through. “I suppose you have a point. I've felt both since I've been here, but they're easier to tell apart without all the stimulation of a big city.”

“Whether you are ready to admit it or not...” she begins, gracing me with a small smile. “We were born to be here, Ada. Our time on Earth was fraught with pain and trauma, only leaving us fleeting glimpses of the life we wanted for ourselves. But here? You have the power to structure your life as you see fit. Not just your own, but mine, and so many others. You don't have to dictate over them to lead them. You simply have to guide them with a gentle hand.

“This wasn't the way I lived on Earth,” she states. “I'm sure it wasn't the way you lived, either. But we can change the course of our fate. You did so the night you chose to stay. And the night you defended yourself. And the day you took a Shade into your village, letting your people witness you would be a kind and just leader.”

I sigh as the weight of her words settles in my bones. “The question is, will they trust my judgment and leadership?”

“You've given them no reason to doubt you.”

“I’ve given them no reason to believe in me, either.”

Isolde scoffs. “You’ve given them more than you realize. Just because it isn’t tangible doesn’t mean it isn’t as important as a physical reason.”

“How do you always end up changing the conversation so quickly?”

“You wear your emotions in your eyes, Ada. I can see your self doubt, though it flees more each day. I can see new love brimming, even if you’re not ready to accept it. And I can also see your reluctance to ask the questions still swimming in your mind.”

I huff in disbelief, actively avoiding two of her points. She’s right on all three accounts. I feel less doubtful of myself each day, and closer to my guys every minute we’re together. I’m still unclear about the moment we began this relationship we’re in, but I almost want to say... Day one.

Sixty-four days on this island, and Isolde calls me out for being in love. She’s not wrong.

Isolde grins, rolling her hand to welcome my questions despite my reluctance.

“I don’t want to spoil the moment,” I mumble.

“Ask.”

I grimace and blurt, “Do you think I’ll be barren, too?”

“When Spiran chose me, she was looking for a new queen. When Spiran chose you, she was looking for a goddess,” Isolde explains.

She passes the diary back to me, clasping her hands around mine as she speaks, her voice reverent to the point of bringing tears to my eyes.

“Spiran spent a millennium trying to sort out our fertility issues, and she didn’t once give up. She figured out how to give us children before she went looking for goddesses on Earth. You aren’t her first experiment, Ada, though you are her first success. The only human to ever hold the water element at such a profound level. Before you, the only other goddess the Mongrels had was created from this world, not of another.”

“What else is out there?” I inquire, needing the distraction to ease the tightness in my chest.

“An entire world that’s suffocating in darkness,” Isolde whispers. “We must defeat Nesta before we can help them breathe again. After that, they’ll find hope in their goddesses once more.”



I traverse the palace halls in a daze, and one thought slowly sinks into the abyss of my stomach. The diary feels like pallets of bricks condensed into a single book that weighs entirely too much for me to comprehend... I think I retained the wrong piece of information.

What if I can't have kids?

I've never considered having them, but I've also never considered not having them. The topic feels like yet another thing the Goddess of Light might have taken from me. I understand the effort she put forth to give the queens children, though I don't know if the mysterious technique will work on goddesses. I doubt she knows that either.

Do I even want kids?

Not for a long time... There's no rush or biological clock to race now. But eventually I will want them.

I think...

Rinya slides into my path, her brow furrowed as she leans closer to my face. "Ada? What's wrong? Can't you hear me?"

"Nothing," I deflect. "I was just—"

"I've called your name about a dozen times," she insists, eyes narrowed as she observes me. "You acted as if you didn't hear any of it."

"I didn't," I admit. "I was lost in my thoughts."

She stays at my side as we walk toward my bedroom, but I don't elaborate on what thoughts consume me. I'm not even sure how I would explain Isolde's diary and the conversation without telling her too much of a story that isn't mine.

"What's going on?" Rin asks as soon as the door shuts behind us.

"How does childbirth work here, Rin?"

Her mouth pops open, shock draining the color from her face before she can control herself. "Are you pregnant?"

"No," I drawl, holding my hands out to ward off her incoming interrogation. "Just curious. My Earthly birth control is gone, but I'm drinking the tea. What happens when I want to have kids? Do I stop drinking the tea? What about pregnancy tests? How do you know?"

“Slow down,” she pleads. “Where is this coming from? I can hear you freaking out about something, but outwardly, you look so calm. Tell me what’s happened, please.”

My rambling is immediate. “I was reading a book, and then I went to talk to Isolde. Then I was just thinking that if I can’t die, can’t get sick... Can I get pregnant? Or will my immortal body stop it before it starts? What if I’m drinking the tea for nothing? What if—”

“Stop,” Rin commands, and I bite my lips together. “You need to talk to my mom. She can explain all the kid things better than I can. I only really understand the prevention part, because I don’t want them, and the medical part... because Mom made me watch a birth when I started having sex. She can tell you about the teas and tests and how you know.

“What happens when you want kids isn’t in anyone’s control, not even yours,” she tells me. “People try to conceive for years, and though they’re healthy, it just doesn’t happen. Some people are told they can’t have children, and then they do... There aren’t always explainable reasons behind these events, especially with the gap in medicine between Spiran and Earth. When you want to have kids, you’ll try until you succeed. No one knows how long that will be.”

“Spiran took my mortality, Rin,” I murmur, though I don’t want to drown in this topic again. “The one promise life gave me was that I would die some day... And she took that from me. What if she took away my ability to have children, too?”

Rin wraps her arm around my shoulders, turning me away from my room where I would stew over this thing I can’t control until it drove me crazy. She doesn’t say what we’re going to do. She simply leads me away from isolation.

“Spiran takes,” Rinya confesses before we descend the stairs. “But she also gives back, Ada.”

IMRYLL

DAY SIXTY-SIX

I aim to have a quiet morning in the clinic, but tension thickens the air, making each breath heavy with dread. My chest is aching, and my ears are ringing. The walls seem to groan with impending chaos as I check the stock of the operating rooms.

I don't know when it will happen, or what it will be... But I know something is coming.

After I've replenished the resources and put extra materials in the exam rooms, I step out of the clinic and wait at the door for someone to pass by.

The idea of knowing the patients are coming without actually knowing is silly, but it's the intuition of a water elemental that allows us to feel things. Being a healer allows me to sense the cloud of fear floating in the humid air. It settles in my soul like a wet blanket smothering joy.

Minutes tick by before a guard ambles around the corner, heading to the catacombs to report his attendance and start his patrol. He frowns as I wave him down.

"When you get to the catacombs, please send Prince Ecaeris or Talodus to the clinic. Let them know Dr. Stoneheart needs them urgently."

"Of course, doctor. Anything else?"

"No. Thank you for your help."

I watch him disappear and begin counting down the seconds.

For me, the worst part of being a clinic doctor is the waiting... The knowledge that someone is coming that needs us, but you don't know when or what condition they will be in. What I do know is that they will be injured in some way. Mongrels don't come to the clinic for everything, and we don't

administer healthy check-ups here.

Ecaeris is the first to make it to the clinic.

“Has something happened?” he asks quickly, brows knitted together as he takes in my appearance outside the door.

I run my hands through my hair as the anxiety builds. “Not yet.”

“You feel it again?”

“Yes, but this is stronger than I’ve ever felt. How many Mongrels are in the forest today?”

He scrubs his face. “Three hunting parties—”

“Not Connak?” I interrupt.

“No. Connak is with Ada,” he replies before continuing. “Forty-two guards on duty, twenty-four swapping shifts right now. We aren’t expecting merchants back from the Dwellers for six days. And the fishermen should head upstream in a week.”

“Send guards to check on the hunters,” I suggest.

“I will.” He watches me for a moment. “I’ll also post a guard here in case you need to send for Selmar or Raf or one of us.”

I nod my thanks and turn for the clinic door, unease clawing at my back. I’m not inside for more than a heartbeat before Ecaeris swings the door open.

He walks backward, holding the end of a makeshift gurney. “Where do you want him, Imy?”

“Op one,” I rush, moving out of their way. “Was he the only—”

“No. Two more inbound,” the guard cuts in. “He stopped me just before my shift ended. Said his daughter and his father were attacked, but he managed to escape to get help.”

“How did you get him here?” Ecaeris asks as he pushes through the door to operating room one.

The guard frowns at us. “I carried him until I got closer to the stone wall. Marren was teaching new recruits to make tents, so he made this gurney. One of the guys helped me carry him here.”

“I sent the other guy to Talodus so we can get search parties out looking for the other victims.” Ecaeris glances down, then quickly back at me. “How do you want to move him?”

“He’s unconscious,” I observe as I check his eyes.

“Yeah,” the guard confirms. “Passed out right before we got here.”

I take the handles of the makeshift gurney from the new guard. “Go to the village. Find Selmar and Raf. I don’t care if you have to shout their names in

the streets. Get them here.”

“Yes, doctor,” he agrees and dashes away.

“It’s eerie that you knew,” Ecaeris whispers, supporting most of the weight as I move the patient.

“I’ve been feeling weird since last night, but I couldn’t figure out why until I walked into the clinic this morning,” I explain. “I should have known.”

I tune Ecaeris out as I begin cutting the shredded clothing off the first patient. He’s covered in blood, and rapidly bleeding, though I can’t tell from where until I can get him somewhat cleaned up. His left arm is mangled, and puncture wounds litter the right side of his ribcage.

The clinic door bangs open before I can finish my assessment.

“Imy,” Shyla shouts. “You’ve got a patient coming in.”

“We’ve got one now,” I call back. “Can you help?”

She pops around the corner. “What do you need me to do?”

“We need to clean them up so we can find the active bleeds. I’ll start on this—”

“No.” Ecaeris stops me. “Go meet the next one. We can clean him up and give you a report.”

I nod, rushing out of operating room one and into the waiting area. I’ve barely gotten my sleeves rolled up when the next patient is within view.

Blood drips from a nub that hangs limp over the edge of the gurney. They leave a trail all the way to operating room two. Selmar slides through the doors of the building before I’m completely in the next operating room.

“Where do you want me?” Selmar asks, ever the calm mentor in the face of chaos.

“Check on one. Ecaeris and Shyla are cleaning up the first patient. I’ll head to op two.”

“Two attacked?” he murmurs to himself.

I shake my head. “Three, from what I can gather.”

“Is Raf on his way?” he inquires. “Or should I check on Shyla and prepare for operating room three?”

“I sent for him when I sent for you,” I divulge. “But if he isn’t, we’ll figure it out.”

“You should send for Ada,” Selmar advises as he opens the door to operating room two. “She can help you heal them.”

I nod to the guard on my left. “Find Talodus and Connak. Tell them to bring Ada now.” Then I take over the makeshift gurney and turn my attention

to the second guard. “Have you noted any injuries?”

“No. He’s bleeding badly, but we couldn’t find the source, other than the missing hand.” He fights a shiver. “We just ran as fast as we could to get him here.”

“Did he tell you his name?”

“No. Just told us to get his granddaughter first.”

I stop cutting the elder man’s clothing to glare at the guard. “There was a child?”

“No, a woman,” he answers quickly. “It was a woman. And she was already on the move, but she wasn’t handling the transport so well. They had to stop and tie her down because she was wiggling.”

I nod and focus on my patient. “Take his boots off. Cut them if you have to.”

Commotion erupts at the clinic doors again, but I don’t stop what I’m doing. Raf’s voice carries through the building as he instructs another patient into operating room three.

Now that I’m looking at the damage to my patient, I begin to catalog each injury. He’s missing his left hand; we need to stop that bleeding immediately. Broken right arm. Scattered punctures and slices. Pupils dilated; possible concussion. Shock.

“What do you need?” Connak asks, slipping into the room as he dries his hands. “Ada ran in with Raf to help the woman. Talodus is on his way.”

“I’ve got to stop the bleeding,” I tell him, examining the end of the elder man’s arm. “Give me a tourniquet. Fourth cabinet, at the very top.”

“Got it,” Connak calls, his back facing us. “On the left?”

I nod again, moving toward the man’s head and neck to heal the severely seeping punctures. “Yeah. Mid forearm. Tighten it as much as you can. We’ve got to stop the blood flow below the elbow.”

Connak launches himself into action, wrapping the thick leather right below the elder man’s elbow. He tightens the tourniquet as quickly as possible without adding more injury. I take a moment to hold my finger in front of the man’s nose, hoping to detect breath.

It’s shallow. His chest is barely moving. I can feel him slipping away with each minute that passes by.

I motion for the guard to move to the other side of the table. “Hold his arms to his chest. Connak is going to help you roll him on his side so I can check his back.”

Connak holds the elder man's head steady as he instructs the guard to be gentle yet sturdy while they take on all his weight. I work my fingers down his spine. My hands heat and cool, heat and cool, with each mended fracture of his spine.

But it's not enough.

We ease the elder man onto his back, and shift places. The hunter-turned-temporary-medic cleans punctures and gashes while I check for bigger problems. I run a healing hand around his head again, searching for anything that feels unusual. Not with touch, but power and intuition, closing my eyes as I seek the trauma.

I just can't find the usual abnormalities. None of the internal issues I'm sensing are new or caused by their attack.

There is nothing left for me to heal.

The man's eyes roll open, gray as a thunder-filled sky. "My son?" he wheezes. "My baby."

"He's in another room," I reassure him. "Selmar is with your son."

"My baby," he repeats.

"His granddaughter," Connak whispers.

"She's with Raf," I tell him. "We're doing everything we can for both of them."

The corners of his lips lift slightly, and his frail face goes slack. His chest freezes, tenses, as his breathing stops.

"No pulse," Connak tells me. "I can't find it."

"He's gone," I say and sigh. "He was dying already. The attack just weakened him too much for his body to handle when it was already in overdrive."

"That's it?" the guard asks in disappointment and frustration. "All that, and he dies? You're just going to stop?"

I hang my head as I walk to the cabinets. My feet seem stuck to the ground, each step heavy with the impending devastation of telling the elder man's family of their loss.

"Disease was eating away at his body before this," I quietly clarify. "I can't heal everything. I was only really able to take the pain of the injuries away."

"That's why he awoke?" the guard inquires.

"No," I respond, fully facing them. "His love for his family did that. He couldn't let go without knowing they were here, too."

I cover him with a clean linen before I walk to the sink, scrubbing my hands and arms to wipe away the blood. I'm needed in another room by another patient who just lost their father or grandfather, though neither victim is in a proper state to get bad news.

I turn to the guard. "After you wash up, I need you to see if they have any other family. If they do, bring them here, but don't tell them anything. That part isn't your job."

"How do I find them?"

"Ask Talodus," I advise him. "He'll know by now."

The guard scoots out of the room as Connak washes his hands. "I'll go to Selmar. You can check on Raf."

"Yeah." I sigh. "Thank you, Nook."

He nods, his expression downcast, likely mirroring my own.

"No!" Ada shouts, and we both run out of operating room two and into the doorway of bay three. "No!"

"I'm calling it, Ada," Raf gently says, pulling her away. "We've tried everything. This is all we can do."

"Why can't I heal her, Raf?" she implores, her voice broken and hollow as she mourns a stranger. "I should be able to—"

"You did," he reassures her.

Ada leans against the wall, bloody hands hovering in front of her face. "She was talking to me. She was smiling."

He wraps his arm over Ada's shoulder, steering her toward Connak and me. "On Earth we call it talk and die syndrome... Some patients don't show any outward signs until it's too late. You healed her injuries; her family will be grateful for that. But you can't heal a weak heart."

"Her grandfather was sickly, too," I report to Ada and Raf. "We couldn't save him either."

"You have to separate yourself, Ada," Raf softly instructs. "As much as it hurts, you have to look at the medicine and leave the emotions for later."

"How do you do this every day?" she whispers.

"We don't," I enlighten her. "Raf did on Earth; he worked in the trauma department. But here? This doesn't happen every day."

Ada looks at each of us before settling the weight of her worried hazel gaze on Connak and me. "It will, though... Won't it?"

"Why would it?" Raf asks, head tilting as he tries to understand her question.

“When war starts—” Ada wipes her cheeks dry with a clean cloth on the counter and snuffles, attention lost over my shoulder. “This is what it will look like.”

“But more,” Selmar adds from behind me. “We won’t be able to save everyone, and that is a reality we must all face. We will lose both family and strangers, young goddess. It’s time to think about how we will keep track of who is kin to who, so it’s easier to reach out in times of despair.”

“We don’t know who these Mongrels are?” I ask.

“I know them,” Selmar tells us. “They’re fishermen, but between trips, they stay a few houses away from me.”

Ada takes a step closer to the good doctor. “Their family—”

“They had no one else,” he explains. “The elder man’s daughter died a few years back from a mysterious illness that has lingered in their family lineage. All he had was his granddaughter and her father.”

“He was sick, too,” she states, her lips tilting in the most mournful frown I’ve ever seen.

Selmar gives her a sad smile. “He knew. We had spoken about it on many occasions. He was prepared.”

“Did she know?” Ada inquires.

“She knew as well, but she never let it stop her from the adventures.” Selmar steps forward and takes Ada’s hand. “Death comes for us all, my dear. The young are no exception. They lived a full life with little contrition. It’s a lesson we should all take to heart.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SIXTY-EIGHT

My mind has been a cyclone for two days. I need advice, but I'm pretty sure I know what Isolde and the guys will say. So, I start my morning looking for the queen's consorts, but something keeps pulling me toward the clinic.

As soon as I see Selmar and Raf, I know this is where I need to be, who I need to speak with.

"Ada," Selmar greets. "Imryll isn't here."

"He's meeting me here in a bit," I explain, fidgeting with the hem of my sheer skirt. "Actually, I came hoping to talk to one of you. I'm happy you're both here."

"Is something wrong?" Raf asks, setting a basket of supplies on the counter to give me his full attention.

"No. Well, yes," I backtrack, untangling my fingers from my skirt to run them through my hair. "But not medically. I mean, maybe not at all. I'm just —"

Raf points at a chair. "Take a seat, unless you would prefer an exam room?"

"No. Here is fine," I say, dropping into the closest chair in the waiting room with no grace.

"What would you like to talk about?" Selmar inquires slowly, observing my body language.

I flounder for an eloquent way to ask my question, but I just can't think of an approach that doesn't make me feel like a lost puppy trying to verbalize what I don't quite understand.

“Ada?” Raf prompts, taking the seat beside me.

He twists on the edge of his chair so he can see Selmar and me with his back pressing against the armrest. His leg bounces for a moment before he stills it and widens his expectant eyes.

I blow a raspberry with my lips, then wonder if these men remember what horses sound like. When I take a deep breath, they glance at each other, sharing concern.

My eyes fall shut as I murmur, “I don’t know if I’m making the right decision.”

“About what?” Raf gently inquires.

“War?” Selmar not-so-delicately suggests.

I nod. “I’m trying to consider other options to avoid a full-out war where the people are harmed... Like spies or a sniper or special ops.”

“Spies, maybe, for research,” Raf agrees. “But there are no guns here, Ada. No special ops like you’re thinking.”

“Right. I’m just trying to look outside the box. I know Nesta has to go, but—” I take another deep breath, filling my lungs until they’re near bursting. “Experiencing death from attacks has given me this... I don’t know what to call it. I wonder if—”

“You’re second guessing yourself?” Selmar speculates, his brow knitting together.

I frown back at him. “Not exactly. I’m confident in what I know of my abilities, but is this right? Do I really want to involve the entire island, Mongrels and all, in war? What of the casualties it would cause? Can it just be Madigan and me?”

“You will not stand alone,” Selmar states, his conviction palpable. “Most wouldn’t let you, even if you wanted to.”

Raf tilts his head as he studies me. “This is the right decision, Ada. The Mongrels know death, but the Shades see it every day. Nesta is greedy and awful. It’s not just something your friend is experiencing.” He turns rigid and stares at the wall. “It’s one thing to be an asshole to enemies or even the woman meant to replace her... But she’s like that with her people, too. The Shades are terrified of her.”

“Even for a doctor, Nesta was horrible.” He rubs his hands across his thighs as if wiping his sweaty palms before curling his fingers into fists. “Especially for a doctor. You see, nothing comes without a cost. She takes everything from them. That entire village is so far into poverty that I fear it

will take hundreds of years to fix the damage, if it's even possible."

"What do you mean when you say she takes everything?" I ask, though I feel I already know the answer.

Selmar sighs. "Nesta has enforced a tariff."

"Taxes," Raf adds. "She takes half of everything the Shades grow or make. Even if it's food that will go to waste. She doesn't care. Half of everything is hers, end of story."

"What the fuck?" I whisper.

"I had to watch people die," he murmurs, anger clipping his tone. "All because she wouldn't allow them basic treatment until they had paid her tax. Do you know what it's like to be a healer who isn't allowed to heal? I do. I've been within arm's reach of dying Shades who I couldn't touch, couldn't heal, because they were too poor to pay."

My breath rattles through my chest. "She controls—"

"Everything," Raf snarls. "And there's nothing *we* can do about it, Ada."

He turns to me, eyes bloodshot and glossy, as the temperature in the room rises to a stifling degree. A tear slides between my lashes, drying before it rolls past my lips.

"I love being here with the Mongrels. This is my home," he reveals. "But I think about the injustice within the Shade village every single day. When I walk through town and smell the fresh bread from the bakery, I remember the stench of rot and decay in the Shade streets. When the Mongrels laugh and their children play... All I can recall is a Shade woman weeping in her doorway as Nesta took her son away as punishment for not having a bountiful crop."

Raf takes a pained breath, settling his emotions. "You've made the right decision, Water Goddess. The Shades are already at war. They fight more than they live. Every breath costs them, and they're ready to give up... If they haven't already."

I wipe my eyes as Raf continues. "The Shades no longer feel pride in being Shades like the Mongrels do. Why would they when no one has been willing to fight and show them what pride looks like?"

"Have you met Madigan?" I ask him.

Raf shakes his head. "I haven't yet."

"She will fight, and I'll fight with her," I reassure him. "She'll show the Shades what it's like to be a proud people again. I will teach the Mongrels that one wicked Shade does not represent them all."

“They will be appreciative,” he mutters on a heavy exhale, his shoulders finally relaxing to their natural position. “Once they escape their fear.”

“Does that answer your question, Ada?” Selmar asks.

“It lit a fire within this water elemental,” I say.

And I mean it.

I will hold on to Raf’s emotion, keep it close to my chest, and remember that this war isn’t just for Isolde or Madigan or me... It’s for the Shades. The people on this island who fear because injustice has made them terrified to speak up for themselves. The tribes that will suffer at Nesta’s hands if we don’t stop her.

Raf pats my knee as he stands. “You’ve renewed my faith, Ada. I’m ready to aid when you need me.”

“Thank you, Raf,” I mumble, as the door to the clinic pops open.

“Have you seen Ada?” Imryll begins talking before he spots me. Then he rushes out, “Ada. Come on. We’ve got to go.”

He takes my hand and tugs me from my seat as if he’s in a hurry and can’t wait for my shorter legs to catch up. Imryll drags me along the path, his pace never faltering as we pass through the village square.

“Why are you running?” I finally ask.

“We need to hurry,” he calls over his shoulder.

I roll my eyes. It’s not like I didn’t gather that much on my own. “Where are we going again? I don’t recall you mentioning that before you pulled me away from Selmar and Raf.”

“I didn’t mention the destination.”

“Please don’t make me ask anymore questions,” I grumble. “Just tell me ___”

“No,” he interrupts, tossing me a playful smirk. “We’re almost there. You’ll see.”

“Why are you so excited?”

He doesn’t answer me, instead stopping at the house next door to the Battlerains. I begin to argue about his manners as he walks in without knocking, but I hear Shyla giving directions before we completely cross the threshold.

“That’s it, darling,” she praises. “Nice and steady.”

“What the hell?” I whisper to myself, covering my mouth as we step into the room.

It’s cleared of furniture... Mostly. There’s a bed, a bath-bowl-thing, and

three chairs. A pale and petrified man sits in one, staying out of the midwife's way. His voice is lost until his wife shows pain.

"My love," he murmurs, his lips pressing against her damp strawberry hair. "You're almost done."

Shyla bends to look under the woman's sleeping gown. "I'm going to check you. I suspect it's about time to start pushing."

I quickly turn my back to the scene and glare at Imryll. "Give her some privacy."

"I'm the attending doctor, Ada," he states matter-of-factly as he grins. "I'm not here to be creepy."

"That's not what I said," I retort, rubbing my forehead. "Why are you attending? And why did you bring me?"

"This is her fourth child. The risk goes up with each subsequent birth, so Shyla likes to have someone on hand," he explains. "And I brought you with me to show you the circle of life. Death hurts us all, but new life follows on its heels."

"That's it," Shyla repeats in excitement. "I can see hair."

I take a peek over my shoulder and immediately regret it. On Earth, so many people say childbirth is beautiful... But it's not. It's gory and traumatic. My stomach sinks to my toes as tingles swirl through my limbs like miniature whirlpools.

"Would you like to see?" Shyla asks, and I squeeze my eyes shut, facing the wall once more. "Ada?"

I sigh as I turn slowly. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

It's the worst distraction ever. There are fluids and some blood... and the baby is covered in white stuff that looks like—I don't even know. Maybe damp flour? Or drying lip balm that's been smeared over its skin?

I fight not to gag. Imy chuckles at me as if my comedic flair is the perfect *welcome to the world* gift.

"We don't know yet," the man tells me, anxiety strangling his voice.

Shyla pulls the baby once the elbows are out, and then she turns it to face the floor as she rubs on his back.

"What are you doing?" I hear myself ask, though I most definitely don't want the answer.

I don't even want to watch.

She grins at me, then turns to the father. "Helping him breathe."

"It's a boy?" he inquires, shock and elation warring in his tone.

“Congratulations. You have your boy,” Shyla informs them.

“I’m going to pass out,” I mutter, stretching my hand out to find the wall.

“Ada?” Imryll asks, but he sounds so far away. “Ada?”

The baby cries softly, and that eases the pressure in my mind, if only a little. I still plead to Imy. “Distract me.”

“From what?” Imryll places his hands on my cheeks, bringing my focus to his glimmering, grass-green eyes. “It’s over.”

“Was she numbed?” I ask, though I’d rather have the answer to my earlier question than this one.

I have to stop being curious about things I don’t want to know. It’s like my sudden move to a new world has made me a masochist for this shi—

“Uhm, no?” Imryll says, cutting off my train of thought.

The baby drowns out all my errant worries as he wails for his mother. “She did that with no pain medicine?”

“Yes, Ada,” Shyla answers, placing the little guy in his mother’s arms. “That’s how we all give birth.”

“It’s not as bad as you let yourself believe,” the woman tells me quietly, helping her son satiate his hunger. “It looks troubling, but we’re okay.”

I try not to watch as she assists him in latching onto her breast. It feels too intimate a scene while being the stranger in the room.

“Congratulations,” I sincerely reply. “I’m so sorry to intrude and also freak out. I just wasn’t expecting to watch, and I get a little squeamish in certain situations.”

“It’s okay,” the woman says, tipping her head at her husband. “He normally hits the floor. That’s why there are so many chairs in here. This is the first time Shyla hasn’t needed to drag him out of her way.”

Imryll grins from her bedside. “Well, you both look fine to me, so I’ll let Shy take it from here. I’ll stop by tomorrow to check in, unless you need me before then.”

I tip my head to the beaming parents as we exit the room, and Imy walks me back through the front door. We don’t get far, though. I stop him on the stoop of their home.

“How do you watch that without feeling nauseated or panicking?”

“Not everyone can do this job, Ada,” he patiently replies. “I chose it with great care.”

I nod, having nothing left to say. Every time I watch him in the clinic, or even here, it’s plain to see that this is his calling. Helping others makes him

feel whole and happy.

He tilts his head toward the Battlerains' home, once again dragging me behind him. "Let's grab some food."

"I'm not hungry," I retort. Not that my words change his mind or stop him from barging into a house that isn't his. "Don't you know how to knock?"

"Will?" Imryll calls into the Battlerains' home. "Will, are you home?"

"Yeah," he yells. "In the kitchen."

"Good," Imryll whispers to him, tugging me along behind him. "Ada needs a snack. She was feeling lightheaded."

"I was feeling lightheaded because childbirth is gross. I wasn't prepared to watch, and you didn't forewarn me," I gripe as we enter the cottage-like kitchen. "I've had plenty to eat today."

Will shudders. "It is gross, isn't it? Couldn't even watch my own kids being born, much less anyone else."

"Right?" I agree. "Now imagine being dragged into a birth with no warning."

"Imy," he drawls, disapproving despite his small smile. "You didn't tell her?"

"No." Imryll shrugs. "She doesn't get lightheaded when she's in the clinic, so—"

"There is an enormous difference between a crisis situation and... and..." I fling my hands in the air. "And a not crisis."

He squints at me. "A *not* crisis?"

"Yes," I snap.

"Have some fruit, Ada," Will kindly offers.

"Fine," I grumble, conceding when I see the slices of grapefruit-in-disguise.

Will props his hip against the counter. "Did the neighbors get their boy?"

"They did," Imy declares, washing his hands. "Everyone looked healthy, so I left them in Shy's hands. But I'll stay close for a few hours, just in case."

"I've been telling her for weeks that baby was a boy," Will says, grinning at me. "I'm glad you were there to witness history. The man has three daughters, and they desperately wanted a son."

"It wasn't my place—"

"Nonsense," Will argues without letting me say my piece. "They'll be over the moon to know our next queen was there, bringing them luck on their

special day.”

I full-body shiver as I swallow. “Please tell me I won’t have to witness every birth on the island.”

“You won’t,” Imryll answers, rubbing small circles on my lower back. “I wanted to show you something positive about being a healer. We’re all impacted by the loss of loved ones and strangers alike, but we’re also fighting to bring people into the world. We’re fighting for people just like the Battlerains’ neighbors and their children and their children’s children.”

I cast a quick glare at the ceiling before sighing in defeat. “It’s sweet, but a little warning would have made it sweeter.”

“So, war, yeah?” Will asks, his tone unreadable.

“Yes.” I shake my head as I finish chewing my fruit. “I wish I could say when, but I can’t. It’s just a feeling we all have right now.”

He whistles under his breath. “Best not to tell anyone else.”

“I assumed Rin would have told you.”

“She did,” Will divulges. “But don’t tell anyone other than me.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” I frown at the half-full bowl in my hand. “There are so many things floating around in my mind right now that I don’t even know how I would begin to tell anyone.”

He nods and changes the subject. “How’s the—”

“Don’t tell me what it’s called, Will.” I hold my hand out, palm facing him. “I’m not ready to have my food illusion shattered yet. Just let me keep this ignorance for a little while longer.”

Will snorts. “That’s what you choose to turn a blind eye to?”

“Yes,” I reply with a grimace. “I’m far too active to stop eating right now, so I don’t want to know what the food is until I can handle not eating for a week.”

“Why wouldn’t you eat?” Imryll inquires, leaning against the counter beside Will.

“Do you know what a cow is?” I ask him.

Imy shakes his head, brow knitting together as Will covers his mouth to stop his incoming laughter.

“A pig?” I continue.

“No.”

“A chicken?”

“Yes.”

I purse my lips at Imryll, then turn to Will. “They’re not like Earth

chickens, are they?”

“A bit bigger,” he says, pinching his thumb and index finger together.

“Naturally,” I quip.

“Still produce eggs,” Will explains. “But they’re sort of pink-ish.”

“On the inside or the outside.”

Will raises an inquisitive brow.

“Right,” I agree with his silent question. “Don’t answer that. Are we eating the chickens?”

“No,” Imryll drawls, squinting at me. “You’re eating fruit.”

I bite my lips together and close my eyes for a brief moment. “Do we ever eat the chickens?”

“Yes,” he responds, scratching at his jaw. “One chicken can feed a family of five for three days. And they reproduce—”

“Okay,” I cut in, shaking my head. “Don’t tell me anything else about the food.”

Will cackles at me. “I wish I would have waited a bit longer than I did, but I had to know as soon as I tasted the pastries.”

“Don’t ruin that for me, Will,” I fuss, pushing my empty bowl across the counter. “I’ve just eaten.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he drawls, sounding so much like my father that I feel a prickle of pain in my chest. “Rinya will do it for us.”

Imryll chuckles as he nods in agreement. “Or Connak.”

“What did I do?” Connak asks from the archway of the kitchen.

“Nothing. Yet,” Will slyly says. “You’re just in time to help cook dinner. Ada refuses to look at the food until it’s done.”

“Still?” Rin complains as she shoves Connak out of her way. “Come on, Ada. It’s been weeks.”

“And it will be months before I change my mind,” I inform them all. “Maybe even years. So, don’t ruin it for me.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SIXTY-NINE

While I adore spending time with the guys, I seriously look forward to these stolen moments of girl time with Rinya. And Madigan, now that she's on board with mending our burned bridge.

"Why are you grinning?" Madi inquires, raising a curious brow at me.

I shrug. "I was just thinking about our burned bridge—"

"Why does that make you smile?" she asks, suspicion thickly lining her voice.

"Because a bridge is typically over water," I describe. "And ours was on fire. Get it?"

Rin squints at me. "I feel like we keep asking you this, but have you hit your head or something?"

"My answer is the same as it's been for weeks," I say, leading them through the palace. "No, I didn't hit my head."

"She just has this weird sense of humor," Madi explains. "Sometimes she's funny, and sometimes you want to walk away, shaking your head."

I open the door to the catacombs, walking backward as I speak to her. "I wasn't trying to be funny. I was pointing out the irony in our newly budding friendship-two-point-oh."

"No," Madi simply says, following me in.

"What?" I drawl. "You don't think it's ironic?"

"You're not going to turn this into an elemental joke about fire and water," she states, cutting her blue eyes in my direction. "I will turn around and march straight back to my room. I'd rather sit in absolute silence for the rest of the day. Or even get my ass kicked in the arena... But I refuse to listen

to your irony.”

“Grouch,” I mumble, grinning at her annoyance.

Rin chuckles at us. “Were you always like this?”

“No. We used to be giggling brats,” Madi retorts.

“Used to be?” Rinya quips, closing the door behind us.

“I’m ignoring that too,” Madi snarks, then looks around. “Where are we?”

I hold my arms out away from my sides as I spin in a circle, mocking the beach destination commercials that we used to dream about as young teens.

“The catacombs.”

“Creepy,” she murmurs.

Rin snorts. “It’s not meant to be pretty. It’s where the guards convene and all the war strategy happens.”

“And why are we down here?” Madi asks.

“Maps,” I reply, giving her a pointed look.

Madi nods, falling silent as we traverse the maze of corridors. I’ve only been down here a few times, but living skylights never cease to amaze me.

Two trips in particular play on a loop in my mind.

Day one on Spiran, when Ecaeris dragged me through these halls and accused me of being a Shade. And that time with Talodus in the meeting room... Which is where we’re heading now.

Rin tips her head to the guards outside the heavy wooden door and ushers Madi and me inside. One look at the gigantic, ornate table, and all I can think about is the way Talodus had me stretched out and bare over the surface.

“Please tell me you didn’t?” Rinya sighs. “It was here, wasn’t it?”

“What?” I shake my head to clear my thoughts. “What was here?”

“You’ve been here with one of the guys,” Rin accuses with no judgment.

She does wear an expression that I acknowledge as disgust. The same kind of disgust you feel when you hear about your sibling’s romps in the sheets.

My native bestie is in a really tough predicament. She enjoys our girl talk, but she has to pretend I’m talking about literally anyone else now that she’s over the introductory period of all her friends being in a relationship with me.

“Well, yeah...” I say. “We’ve already had this conversation. And—”

“Just tell me which chair it was so I can not sit in it. I don’t care how childish it sounds. The last thing I want to think about is a bare ass—” She stops talking when I raise a brow. “Don’t joke.”

“I’m not.”

“Where?” Rin’s eyes bug for a moment. “If not the chairs, then where? And who? Not Imryll, but after that, I can’t even begin to guess.”

Madigan grimaces. “Why would you want to know?”

“So I can punch whoever it was,” Rin deadpans, pointing at me. “She won’t focus while we’re here, and neither will I. There’s no telling whose body fluids are where, and—”

“Rinya,” Madi interrupts. “You’re getting yourself worked up. Just don’t touch anything, and Ada will give herself away in a minute.”

I scoff as I move toward the cabinets housing the maps. “I will not.”

“Sure,” Madi sarcastically declares. “Where are the maps?”

“Cabinet,” Rin says, nodding toward me.

“I like it when you escort us,” Madi says absently as she examines the room. “The guys hover too much.”

“They do, don’t they,” I agree, grabbing several large rolls of parchment.

She takes the first map from my hand, stretching it over the table. “Lyell wouldn’t even dare let me open the cabinet. It’s like he’s worried something will jump out and bite me. I don’t even know how to explain *chill out* to him without him scoffing like I’m dense.”

“It’s kind of sweet, though,” I mention, grabbing the corner weights to hold down the map.

“Gross, Ada,” she playfully snaps, fake gagging. “Who the fuck are you?”

I shrug a single shoulder as I place the weights on each corner of the map to keep it from rolling back up. “The guys I... Saw? I can’t say I dated because I didn’t date... They never even opened a door for me, so sometimes—not all the time—I find it sweet when they do little things like that.”

“Right,” Madi hesitantly admits. “But I can run my own bathwater. And wash my own ass.”

“So, no sex in the bathtub,” I tease, leaning my hip against the table.

“No.” She holds her hands up, stopping the conversation. “It’s just plain old washing, because while they can’t keep their hands to themselves, they don’t want every touch to lead to sex.”

I flutter my lashes at her, pretending to swoon. “See. That’s sweet.”

“It’s fucking exhausting,” Madi argues. “Either fuck me or stop touching me like you’re going to fuck me.”

Rinya leans forward, a frown on her face. “Why are you telling—”

“She’s not telling me to stop,” I clarify. “She’s saying she wants—”

“I know what she’s saying,” Rin cuts in, rolling her eyes at me. “I want to know why she doesn’t just say it to them.”

“You try telling those fucking assholes anything,” Madi complains, throwing her hands in the air. “Like I love them, but god, do they know how to ruin a mood.”

I snort. “I’m sorry. It’s not funny. But it’s funny.”

“It’s not funny, Ada,” she whines as she glares at the maps. “When I say I want a back rub, I don’t actually mean I want my back rubbed for two hours.”

I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter. “Just tell them it’s a euphemism.”

“No,” she drawls.

“Why?” Rin asks.

Madigan sighs like this is the most complicated thing in her life. “Because sometimes I do want my back rubbed for two hours without someone sticking something inside me.”

“I’m so confused,” Rinya whispers. “Just tell them when you’re done with the back rubbing and want sex. They can’t read your mind. They’re not Mongrels.”

“Wait,” Madi sings, eyes wide as she looks at Rin and me. “You can read my mind?”

“No,” I reply, though I scrunch my face to show my hesitance. “But reading the water in your body is close.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, huffing a humorless laugh. “What?”

Rin shrugs, her lips twisting to the left as she explains, “Certain emotions or reactions raise your temperature, which we can sense in the water in your body.”

“So…” Madi narrows her eyes at us. “Everyone in this village knows when someone else is mad or horny?”

“No,” I answer quickly, trying to placate her, as Rin says, “Yes. Not everyone, but all those with enough connection to the water element.”

“I’m in fucking hell,” Madi snarls to herself. “She’s joking, right?”

I fidget with my skirt, not loving the implications either. “I don’t know. But I hope so.”

“I’m not,” Rin says with a shit-starting grin. “Best kept secret. Some are better at it than others.”

Madi huffs, mumbling under her breath, as Rin presses her ear to the door.

“Did you hear that?” the pixie of a guard asks.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Madigan replies, observing the closed door.

“Does the air feel thinner to you?” I inquire, my chest aching with every breath I take.

Madi rubs her chest as she takes a deep breath. “It feels like I’m climbing a mountain, like the altitude just dropped.”

Rin jumps as something massive hits the door. It’s not a knock, no rough rapping of knuckles. It sounds like a body colliding with the surface.

“Someone is here,” she whispers, her hand around her neck. “Why is it so hard to breathe?”

“Slow inhales. Keep your breathing calm. Don’t struggle,” I advise Rin, then turn to Madi. “You can hold your breath. If you don’t think about the burn, it won’t hurt as badly.”

I don’t know if she can do what I’m asking, but I know she can’t die. Even if Madigan doesn’t believe herself a goddess yet, Spiran won’t let anything happen to her chosen fire bearer... But I’ve seen Madi have a panic attack, and I need her to stay calm right now.

Both of them.

I push Madi behind me and motion for Rin to move before the air becomes too depressurized for her to breathe. I need her behind the door once it’s open, so she’s out of harm’s way. She takes two steps to the left just as the wooden door is shoved so hard it splinters at the center, the hinges popping off the frame.

I block the debris with my forearm over my eyes. The slivers of wood sting, but they don’t stick.

Calm, Madi. Stay calm.

“No men with you today?” a familiar voice inquires as the smell of ginger and jasmine floats into the room.

“Fucking patriarchal bullshit,” Madi gripes, sounding fine. “I’ve not heard one single Mongrel make a comment like that until today—”

“He’s not a Mongrel, Madi,” I cut her off, tilting my head as I watch him. “Are you, Cotear?”

“I’m not a water elemental, if that’s what you’re asking,” he announces. “I was raised in this village, though. I’m as Mongrel as any who doesn’t command water.”

“Now, now. Exaggerating the truth can be seen as a lie,” I point out as I rub my fingertips together.

Rinya shifts on her feet, silent but not unfelt. Of course, air would work similarly to water. He'll feel every move in the room.

A wicked grin crawls over his lips as he tilts his head to speak over his shoulder. "Don't even think about—"

She doesn't wait for him to finish. Rin launches herself at Cotear's back, locking her arms around his neck. Sweat beads on the surface of his skin as she fights element-to-element, but she's already feeling the effects of the thinning air.

Cotear pries her arm off his neck and bends as he throws her forward. Rin slams onto the ground, and I grab Madi's hand, stopping her from rushing forward.

"Wait," I whisper so low I barely hear myself.

"She's hurt, Ada," Madi mumbles.

"She's been through worse," Cotear responds, turning Rinya's face with the toe of his boot. He casts a fond gaze at her. "This isn't the first time I've seen her unconscious or the first time I've touched her. But it is the first time she's returned the favor."

I push down my unease to keep him talking. "Why did you come in here?"

"This is where all the war strategies are made." He raises his hand to bring my attention to the cabinet. "They're all documented and tucked away in there. I want them."

"No." I give him my best *fuck you* smile, one I learned from the Shade at my back.

He laughs, mocking me. "Now, now, Ada. Telling me no can be seen as defiance."

Madi's fingertips brush against my elbow, the heat a warning that she's ready. But I don't know if she can call her fire without oxygen in the room. And that's Cotear's next move. I feel him pulling it from the room already. He may know I'm strong—we're strong—but he doesn't know I'm a goddess.

He can't kill me.

Plus, Indigo has taught me just how long I can hold my breath... I'm guessing it's a lot longer than he can.

I have faith in Madigan and myself.

I just need a little more from Cotear.

"You have us cornered." I hold my arms away from my sides, palms

facing the living skylights. “Take what you want.”

“Give me the documents,” he demands.

“I can’t,” I drawl, frowning at him. “I don’t know what they look like. I’m only here for the maps of the beast attacks.”

“Find them,” he growls, his voice five octaves lower than before.

I pat the air in front of my chest, subservient to his request. “Okay. Okay. Give us a moment to check the cabinets. We’ll find what you’re looking for.”

Madi turns, opening the first door. I go to the one beside her as I plan on the fly. I hope she can still read me like a book.

I flip through a pile of parchment in a drawer and find a stack of previous guard rotations. Madi cuts her eyes at me, holding the stack he wants... Or at least, she thinks she’s got it.

I purse my lips like I’m going to say no, and spin on my heel to show Cotear a heap of papers in my hands. Madi brushes against my elbow once more, burning my skin, but I keep my face straight.

“What will you do when I give them to you?” I ask, breathless.

My lungs ache with the need to take a deep inhale, but the room lacks enough pressure to push the oxygen through my system. It won’t kill me, but it is uncomfortable when I’m not distracted.

“Politely take my leave,” Cotear replies, hands spread as he slightly dips his head.

Madi touches the pad of her index finger to the center of the parchment, spreading embers that rapidly burn through the flammable parchment.

“Sorry.” She simpers at him. “My finger slipped.”

Cotear’s face hardens into something savage and vengeful as he pulls the last of the air from the room. Madi’s fire doesn’t stop, but without taking a breath, there’s not much left we can say.

Rinya gasps, stuck somewhere between clawing at her throat and pulling herself toward the door. Cotear kicks her in the stomach.

I launch myself toward the Howler, sliding over the top of the table and knocking us both to the floor. The moment he’s distracted, the oxygen returns in a rush, giving me a strange high. We scramble on the floor, and I briefly notice Madigan drag Rinya out of the meeting room, into the open room beyond.

He’s not as strong as he thought. Cotear seems to only have control of the area around him. There’s a limit to his distance. But not mine. Or Madigan’s.

The Fire Goddess-in-denial enters the meeting room in a rush, creating a

wall of thick flames to block the doorway.

Cotear can't escape unless he wants to burn.

I doubt Madi's flames are as easily doused as his campfires.

He grabs a handful of my hair, smashing my head onto the stone floor. Then he grunts as Madi curses under her breath. I push up, standing in time to see him swing at her. She dodges the face hit but takes the brunt of the force to her shoulder.

I jump on Cotear's back, attempting to get my arm around his neck like Rin did, but he shoves backward into the wall.

"Let go," Madi shouts. "I can't light him up if you hold on."

"Not yet."

I reach for the water within his body, pulling his life force to the surface. It's difficult to tell by his movements alone, but the water forms above us, out of reach and unwilling to return to its source. He doesn't gasp like Poko did. He uses his element to fight back, blowing Madi with a gust of wind. The more he fights, the weaker he's becoming, but he doesn't give up.

"Now?" she whispers, though it looks like she's screaming.

I shake my head and look up, silently begging her to follow my gaze.

Cotear slams his head back, clipping my chin and throat. I'm pinned between him and the wall. He pushes against me with all his might until he finally finds purchase on my arms, prying them apart. I drop to the floor before he can attempt to flip me.

He shuffles away from me and into the sights of his second opponent. Madi runs up and kicks him square in the chest, pushing him through the wall of fire in the doorway.

She drops her curtain of flames, and we follow him out. He climbs to his feet but drops back to his knees as he stares at us. His clothing is in tatters, singed and falling off his frame. Pink patches of raw skin litter his arms and face. The foul scent of burning hair floats in the air.

"This is a little more dramatic than Poko's death," I whisper to him. "I hate getting my hands dirty, but you deserve nothing less."

I twist my hand so he knows I'm doing something... And water seeps from his skin, drying him out. He claws at the droplets, but they're no longer in his control. They belong to me now.

"Ada!"

Shouts from the corridor beyond ring through the air as it thickens in Cotear's death. Yet another thing he no longer controls, though he wastes his

last bit of life still trying to fight.

“Rin?” I inquire softly.

“Fine,” she mutters, rubbing her neck.

“Would you like to take over?” I ask, giving her a gentle smile. “This justice can be yours since I took the last—”

“No. Finish him,” she instructs, casting a deadly glare his way.

Madi snorts, then coughs. “Sorry. It’s not funny. I was just thinking about ___”

“Mortal Kombat?” I smile at her, knowing she’s thinking of her brother.

“Harrison used to say it all the time,” she murmurs.

Connak and Imryll slide around the corner just as Cotear falls to his side, a husk of the man he once was. His jaw locks, wheezing filling the room. I drop the sphere of sullied life force over his head, cutting off the sound of his gasping breaths and drowning him the same way I did his friend.

Rinya stands at my side, watching as Cotear’s body tenses into a mummified version of the fetal position. For only a moment, she takes my hand and squeezes, seeking comfort at the end of her nightmare. Then she lets me go, straightens her shoulders, and stares down at the last of her demons.

Madigan takes one look at the pixie of a guard and nods at me. She takes a step forward and kicks the husk of Cotear, the top of her foot burning so hot it melts through her sandal and leaves nothing but dust on the floor where a man once lay dead.

ADELAIDE

DAY SIXTY-NINE

A stunned silence permeates the air as Imryll and Connak stare at the three of us. Rinya, Madigan, and I simply stare back, waiting for them to get their thoughts in order. I wish I could say it doesn't take them long, but I swear ten minutes pass before they acknowledge us.

Madi rocks back on her heels. "So, this is awkward."

"Is everyone okay?" Imy asks, snapping to attention.

"My headache is gone," Connak mumbles, leaning against the wall like he's suddenly dizzy from the relief.

"Not you," Imryll growls. He kneels to check the two guards who were stationed at the door. "They're dead."

Rinya sighs. "There was nothing we could do to help them."

"This isn't our fault, Rin," I reassure her, tipping my head toward the pile of ashes. "It's his. Cotear did this."

Imryll stops in front of her. "Are you okay?"

"I've acquired Nook's headache," she teases halfheartedly. "I'm just a bit sore."

"I'll take you to the clinic," Madigan murmurs. "You need to have your head looked at."

"Go with them, Connak," Imryll instructs. "We'll be right behind you after we find someone to move these men and locate their families."

Connak nods, ushering Rin and Madi out of the meeting room and disappearing from my sight. Only a breath passes before Imryll's concerned green eyes fill my vision.

"Are you okay?" he inquires, though he gives me no time to answer

before he touches me.

His hands roam over my shoulders and arms as he checks for nonexistent injuries. I don't say a word to stop him. He knows I heal faster than the average Mongrel, and he knows I'm the water goddess.

My body—and the lack of wounds—is no longer a concern of mine.

It's my mind that worries me, frightens me... Why am I not feeling guilt or remorse after killing Cotear? It's the way my hands don't shake that bothers me, nor do tears bloom in the corners of my eyes anymore.

Why is killing them so much easier than simply punishing them? Perhaps that's my version of mercy. A quick death without all the bullshit.

Imryll takes my hand and pulls me from the meeting room. He must have heard the guards walking down the corridor, because as soon as we round the doorway, we're face-to-face with them.

"There's been an incident," Imy informs them. "I need you to stay at this door until Prince Ecaeris or Talodus gets here. Do not let anyone else in."

The first guard frowns at us. "We have shift change in—"

"Two of your own are dead because there was an intruder in the catacombs," Imy snaps.

I step up, drawing their attention to me. "Your general won't be mad that you were late when he sees you were guarding our heroic fallen. I will explain as much to him."

"Of course," the second guard agrees, elbowing his partner. "We would be honored to watch over them."

"Thank you," I sincerely reply as Imy drags me away from them.

We walk down one corridor before a quick turn puts us in another, heading toward the palace entrance. But I can't handle his emotions any longer. He's frustrated. I get it, though right now, it feels more like hostility.

"Is something bothering you?" I ask, tugging him to a stop.

"No." He shakes his head. "Yes," he then corrects.

I wait patiently for him to reveal what I already know.

"I'm frustrated. We were trying to protect you, but we're always late."

"You weren't late," I tell him. "You got there before I needed you."

Imryll huffs, obviously annoyed with himself. "After you had already fought him off. We should have been there before he attacked. Every time this happens, failure weighs on me. What kind of soul am I that cannot protect my own heart?"

"Protection is not what I need from you." I frown, squeezing his hand

before I release him. “When I do things like that—when I’m forced to take life, it is you who brings me back from the dark abyss. I need you to bring me back to *me*. That is what you always do, and what I always need from you.”

“That is not near enough what I need to be doing for you.”

My frown deepens even as I try to wave him off. “Your role is critical after these things happen, Imryll. You give me hope. I don’t need protection, though I do appreciate the thought behind it. You must remember, I can’t die —”

“You appreciate the thought behind us trying to keep you out of danger?” he interrupts, his tone low and slow as if he didn’t hear me properly and wishes to confirm.

“Yes,” I simply state, shrugging as I struggle to articulate what I want to say.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better—make *this* better?”

Now, I’m the one getting annoyed.

“I’m not looking for safety, Imy. Your ego may want to protect those you care about, but as I stated earlier, that is not what I need. Your healing ability is there to fix what’s already damaged.”

He places his hand on his chest as if I’ve injured him, though I suspect he may just feel a tad emasculated. I can’t help him with that. I don’t have the time or energy to worry about his self-esteem.

I need him to be the strong, confident man I know he is, not this simpering lover who can’t stand that his girlfriend can protect herself from the bullies of the world.

“Then what is it you want?” he asks as if I haven’t just spent the last five minutes saying it.

Jesus, Neptune, and Osiris.

I sigh and pray for patience. “Just you. Just Imryll Stoneheart, quiet and patient, with his glittering green eyes and—”

“And what, Ada?” Imy cuts in.

“And you make me feel safe when I’m feeling vulnerable,” I explain. “You might not realize it, but you do.”

“You—who doesn’t need to be protected—are vulnerable?” he growls.

I contemplate violence for the very first time with Imryll. Rocks or a sharp punch to the throat so he’ll be quiet long enough to listen and comprehend what I’m saying.

“I’m not scared to fight, but I’m scared of myself—scared that I lose a

little more of myself in every battle. But you—you look at me like I am your soul, and I tell myself that I am the woman I see through your eyes. You speak, and my spirit finds peace. You touch me, and I find my hope.” I grasp his face and look deeply into his eyes. “You’re never late because it’s after the battle when I need you most.”

“But—”

“Fucking stop.” I shake my head, his frustration mixing with my own as I repeat, “I need you to make me feel like *me* again. There is nothing more important in the world or the next than that. I promise you. Because I cannot imagine who I would be if I were this powerful without a conscience, without you here to make me remember that I am a good person worthy of love and protection.”

Imryll studies me, and for the first time since I met him, I see a flash of uncertainty in his grass-green eyes. It’s almost as if he didn’t believe he meant something to me until this moment, and now, he doesn’t know what to say.

“Look, the point is, you’re allowed to be angry at yourself and the situation,” I whisper. “But I can’t take any more time and energy trying to comfort and convince you of what you mean to me. Not right now. Not when I need you to comfort me.”

“Why am I the one you choose to find comfort in?” he asks.

“That’s the role you’ve been playing for me since day one. You heal what’s damaged and broken, and I was so broken when I got here. You’re not on the front line. You pick up the pieces. And that’s all I need you to do. Just talk to me, make sure I’m okay.” I give him a sad smile. “You’re a healer first, and mine second. I don’t expect you to put me above everyone else. It’ll drive you crazy. Just be here for me when it’s all over.”

It’s a shitty thing to do, though I try not to think about it as I turn away from Imryll and walk down the corridor of the catacombs toward the palace entrance. The conversation has sapped what little energy I had left, and I can’t keep beating this dead horse.

Either he gets it, or he doesn’t.

Perhaps I just don’t have it in me to say the things he needs to hear. I know my tone will only convey a bone-deep weariness that will do neither of us any good.

Imryll’s footsteps echo through the corridor as he rushes to catch up to me. “Where are you going?”

“I just want some space,” I tell him as the exhaustion sets in. “I’m going to my room.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“No,” he repeats, rounding in front of me and gently cupping my cheeks. “It’s already making me feel crazy. I don’t have to be on the front lines to know I didn’t pick up your pieces.” He pauses for a moment, searching for the right words. “Two dead bodies, a pile of ashes on the floor... The room was on fire. Rinya was bleeding and likely concussed. Madigan looked shaken and agitated.”

I scrunch my face. “We had a busy afternoon.”

Imy nods. “And all I can think about now is how you didn’t answer the question, how I didn’t direct it to you. Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I purse my lips and give him the truth. “I have some bruising, but it will be gone before I make it to my room. Perks of being a goddess, I guess.”

He chuckles, though it’s lukewarm, nothing like his normal rasp. “I don’t understand how you can move on so quickly. I’m still stuck on that being the second time we were too late.”

“The others will be mad for a minute, but they’re coming to terms with what I am. Even if you’re on time, there’s nothing that I’ll need other than this,” I explain. “I don’t need you during a fight or to help me kill a foe... It’s after the adrenaline fades and when the delayed triggers set in that I need you to be here for me.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, pressing his forehead against mine. “I should know you better by now. And if I couldn’t be what you needed in that moment, I should have left you with Connak—”

I put my hand over his mouth to stop him. “Imy?”

“Hmm?” he hums, sounding more like himself.

“Will you just kiss me already? Stop talking and replace all these memories with something worth thinking about later.”

Imryll leans forward and removes my hand. He softly takes my lips before he licks the seam of my mouth. I don’t give him access quickly enough to appease him, and his demands become more insistent until I open up to him. His tongue duels with mine as our breaths mingle, our kiss becomes harsh the deeper we fall.

Gentle hands trace up and down my sides. I gasp as his fingertips dig into my hips as he scoops me off my feet. Imryll walks us toward the dark corner, through an archway I've never seen. My back bumps against the stone wall of an alcove.

He releases me, and I reluctantly slide down the front of his body. Searing lips find the sensitive flesh under my ear, and I let out a low moan as he sucks against my tender skin. Every pull has a wave of pleasure crashing into my core, causing my pussy to throb in anticipation.

Imryll shifts, stepping between my legs, his knee widening my stance. I shamelessly grind against his thigh as if I'm in high school again, and dry-humping him is the answer to all my problems.

But I no longer want the flow of a garden hose.

I want the destruction of a cyclone.

"I need more, Imryll," I beg. "Take me upstairs."

Imryll's usual control evaporates, as if my plea has flipped a switch in his mind. He nips at the sweet spot where my neck and shoulder meet. I shudder against him, the slight pain leaving me a wanton mess.

His fingers deftly work at the buttons on my blouse, and mere seconds pass before he slides it off my arms to drop on the ground. I peer around him as he cups my breast. He leans down, but stalls when he glances at me.

"Stop worrying," he quietly cajoles. "No one will see us."

"I'm not worried about someone seeing us," I tell him. "I'm worried about them hearing us and then coming to find us."

"Do you want to be caught?" he purrs, looking at me through dark lashes.

"No," I snap, but I'm too breathy to show my attitude.

I feel him grin against the globe of my breast, though he adjusts to stand in front of me, blocking any would-be passerby's view.

Imryll doesn't have the same reservations about being caught in a compromising position in the catacombs. He actually seems to enjoy the prospect of someone catching us.

I grasp the bottom of his cream-colored shirt and pull it up his chest, reveling in the muscles he keeps hidden beneath. He releases me long enough to discard the linen obstructing my view and toss it to the side.

Imryll rains kisses down my chest, causing butterflies to take flight in my stomach. When he gets to my waist, he slides his hands between the slit of my skirt and roughly yanks at my shorts, popping the jeweled buttons off the fabric.

He taps the back of my thigh. "Lift."

As I comply, he pries my shorts away from my body and tosses them behind his back. He leaves my skirt in place, gathering the excess material and tucking it into the waistband. This bears me to anyone who should pass us, but I'm almost to the point where I don't care. He pulls my leg over his shoulder to bury his face against my hot center.

And I no longer care who sees us... So long as they let me finish before they interrupt.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer as he swipes his tongue along my outer lips. My hips tilt of their own accord, giving him better access while begging for more. I arch off the stone wall when he laps at my clit as if this is the only meal he's ever craved.

"Imy," I whimper, grinding on his tongue. "I won't last long."

"Just imagine," Imryll murmurs, his voice vibrating against my tender skin. "Anyone could walk around the corner and see you about to orgasm on my tongue." He grins up at me from his knees. "But that's the point, isn't it?"

Imryll toys with my entrance before dipping two fingers inside me.

He works my body, finding my hidden depths like he holds the treasure map to my G-spot. He's a magician, licking and sucking my clit while he brings me to the precipice of life and death with a mind-shattering orgasm.

I cry out my release and fall apart in his arms, barely managing to stay upright as he rings every last wave of pleasure from my body.

"You taste divine," he says, running his tongue along my inner thigh as he cleans me.

Imryll removes my leg from his shoulder, steadying me before he gets to his feet. He encircles his arms around my waist, pulling me flush against his chest to deliver a devouring kiss. I suck the taste of myself off his eager tongue, moaning at our combined flavors.

I've barely caught my breath, but I haven't had my fill.

I need more.

I push my hand between our bodies to find the ties on Imryll's pants. The lace-up fronts are fun to look at, but I loathe them right now. I fumble with the strings until they're loose, and I push his pants beyond his hips.

Imryll groans as I wrap my hand around his cock, stroking him while altering my pressure.

"Enough," he growls in warning. "I'm going to come inside you."

I yelp in surprise when he lifts me off my feet. My legs go to his waist

automatically, my ankles locking behind his back. I rest my forearms on his shoulders, weaving my fingers into his hair as he shoves me against the wall.

He lines me up, and I slowly sink onto his thick cock, gasping through the stretch...

And someone clears their throat from behind us.

Imy glances over his shoulder, a smirk crawling across his lips.

“You know,” Talodus begins, his voice full of humor. “The catacombs aren’t for—”

“We know,” I breathlessly reply.

“I don’t care,” Imy says with a chuckle. “If you come over here, you’ll get a better view.”

I want to argue... But only for a moment.

Talodus steps into the alcove.

Imryll hits the perfect spot inside me.

A hand covers my mouth as I scream...

And I surrender to the maddening waves, letting them carry me under the surface into the current of pleasure until I black out.

TALODUS

DAY SEVENTY-ONE

As the days fade away, each morning becomes increasingly more difficult to leave Ada. I feel as if I should be there to protect her, but she's also made it abundantly clear that she doesn't need us to hover over her, acting as if we're helicopters.

I don't know what a helicopter is, but when Connak asked William, the Earth native, had doubled over in laughter.

Madigan was the only person who would explain it to us... And I was the first to admit we have been hovering. A bit. Not all the time. But a lot of the time...

It's a strange situation to be in. Ada appears so fragile, delicate by Mongrel standards. But she's incredibly strong, intelligent, and unkillable. Immortal. Even more so than Isolde, according to the queen, though the guys and I aren't sure what question to ask to get Isolde to elaborate on what she means.

I wander to the far edge of the catacombs, waiting for my patrol partner to show up. I stop beside Garben, bumping him with my elbow.

"Are you waiting, too?" I inquire, knowing he is.

"Yes. For you," he gruffly replies. "Did you want to skip through the forest and pick flowers for your lover? Or can we get to work?"

I chuckle. "We can just walk, but I'll save the flowers for our return trip."

He snorts, grinning. "Pick some for my love while you're at it. I'll tell her you helped me."

"Are you in trouble again?" I ask as we begin our trek to the barrier.

We've extended our rotations and doubled our patrols since the rise in

beast attacks. Not that the number is significantly higher than the busiest time of year, but the attacks have become more brutal. Ada's theory of cycles and the months makes sense when we take into account the major attacks. But when she factored in sightings and escapes, it made less sense.

"I'm not her favorite today," Garben tells me with a wry smile. "But I've always been the trickster in our household, so I don't know why she's mad."

I glance at him as we cross over the stone wall. "What did she say?"

"This is no time to be out at the tavern all night, Gar," he mocks, pitching his voice too high.

"Anything interesting going on there?" I ask, trying not to sound too interested.

I don't want him teasing me about not socializing because I have a lover. Being in the crowd still doesn't appeal to me.

He shrugs lazily. "Just the old fisherman spinning his tale of a beast attack that cost him his daughter and her grandfather."

I nod. "That did happen."

"Aye. We know," he states. "We've been keeping a check on him. He feels as if he's the reason they're dead. It was he who was injured on the boat that led them to shore earlier than planned."

"I'll take Ada by to see him," I mention. "She has a way with devastation that makes you feel like you're not alone."

"We've heard about her, too," he retorts, gracing me with a sly grin. "Seen her around. You should bring her into the tavern for the men to meet."

I cough. "Ecaeris is worried she'll start a fight."

"With who?" Garben asks, voice full of humor. "We're all well behaved."

"No one said she was," I mutter.

He full-belly laughs. "Kerr has said as much. The consorts enjoy her company."

"They like to watch her make their son squirm. She has a way of challenging the prince as well," I inform him. "She gets under his skin."

"And he's worried about her?" Garben huffs. "She'll find more friends than foes in the tavern. Especially after breaking the hearts of every single woman in the village."

I roll my eyes, a terrible habit I've picked up from Ada. "No one is heartbroken."

"He's handsome, and he's humble," Garben snarks, and I'm suddenly not sure if I want Ada to befriend him or not.

I shake my head at Garben, not knowing what to say. I haven't ever considered how anyone else would feel about me courting Ada, or the other guys, for that matter. It isn't like I've spent my time leading women to believe I have an interest in them. I also understand that Garben likes to tease, so this could be that.

If anyone was heartbroken over us being with Ada, they would be heartbroken over Ecaeris and Connak. The former giving them the chance to be royalty, and the latter being ridiculously flirtatious. Imryll and I have always been more reserved.

Garben sighs as he looks around. "How far out did you push the barrier?"

"We're going to circle three." I point into the distance as we pass the markers for circle one, our usual patrol route.

He whistles. "Circle three? That far?"

"We've added more guards to patrol, so we won't have gaps in the route," I explain. "But we felt it was needed for the next few weeks, just to be safe."

"The guards talk, you know?" he tells me. "They're expecting peace with all the Shades in the village."

I tip my head in acknowledgement. "It will come."

"But not soon?" he guesses.

"I don't have an answer for you."

"Not knowing is answer enough. On the horizon is better than never." Garben regards me as we match our pace. "You've come a long way from that scrawny teenager I met so many years ago."

I scoff. "I'm sure you're well aware, but it hasn't actually been that long."

"And I'm sure you're well aware that a decade feels like two days and forever at the same time," he snarks, his reply reminding me of something Ada would say.

I grin at him. "That it does. I'm thankful it was you who trained me and not—"

Garben spits. "Like I was going to let Noctis step away from the tavern long enough to get his hands on you."

"Because he's such a good host?" I suggest.

"Because he's a poor teacher." Garben glances at me. "What is it like to be in the favor of two queens? Will you take up your lover's royal detail or stay in the field with the rest of us?"

"We haven't talked about it." I scrub my hand over the top of my head. "Ada doesn't need as much protection as you think."

“She’s a fragile thing,” he points out.

I can’t help but chuckle at him. “She is anything but fragile. You should come by and train with us one day.”

“Fight with the future queen?” he asks, unsure if I’m joking.

“Aye. She won’t take it too easy on you.”

He nods thoughtfully. “When does her new reign start?”

“In the coming months, I suspect,” I tell him. “Queen Isolde is mentoring her until they’re both ready.”

I stop near the arrangement of orange mushrooms that signal our post at the third circle. The humidity in the air has their sweet aroma tingling my nose.

“I hate the way these things smell,” one of the guards greets as he points at the mushroom. “The red ones smell better.”

“We don’t have anything to report to you. It’s been a quiet night, other than his complaining,” the second guard says, tipping his head. “We’ll be off now.”

Garben watches them curiously as they leave. “They were in a hurry for two chaps that had a quiet day.”

“They’re probably sick of each other,” I comment. “We switched up some pairings.”

“I see,” he says, bouncing his finger between the two of us. “Haven’t worked with you in a while.”

“I thought you might enjoy my company,” I tease.

We start our route, heading east along the invisible line we’ve mapped out. Other than the mushrooms, there are no markers to let anyone know where the path is.

We walk for only a few minutes before Garben grows uneasy.

“The forest is quiet today,” he mutters, observing the trees with suspicion.

I tilt my head, listening for sound, but there is nothing. No animals mewling. No bugs buzzing. No birds chirping.

“Do you feel anything?” I inquire, pushing my senses beyond us into the forest. I can’t project my power as far as Connak can, so I draw back and focus on what’s closest to us.

“Just unease.” Garben replies.

He stops walking mid-step and turns toward the west. I follow his line of sight, squinting into the forest.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’m not sure,” he mumbles. “Where are the hunting parties today?”

“Far east,” I answer. “Closer to the Dwellers’ territory.”

Garben casts a quick glance in my direction. “And Connak?”

“Connak isn’t out today,” I tell him. “Do you think it’s a beast?”

“No. Someone is coming,” Garben whispers, leaning forward. “Can’t you hear them?”

I strain to hear even the faintest snap of twigs or crunch of decaying leaves... But I can’t hear what Garben hears. I don’t share his abilities.

“Should we double back?” I inquire, resting my hand on his shoulder. “You feel something. I don’t want to dismiss that.”

“Yeah,” Garben responds, his brows creasing with concern. “Just a little ways up. Not far.”

We move down the path, not twenty paces from where we started our shift, when I hear the first sound. It isn’t something usual for the forest around our territory. A slight whooshing sound carries toward us. It reminds me of the way Ada’s skirts sound when she’s briskly walking.

A long moment of silence passes between us before Garben straightens his shoulders, tension tightening his muscles.

Out of the thick underbrush, a woman glides our way. Her short, dark blonde hair flows around her face, illuminating vivid green eyes. There’s something about her that is familiar, though I can’t immediately place where I’ve seen her.

She stops abruptly, glancing from Garben to me several times. It appears as if she wasn’t expecting to meet anyone on her journey, like... seeing us in the middle of the forest is possibly a problem for her.

It takes her mere seconds to recover, but I’m keenly aware that the smile plastered on her face is an illusion.

“I seek passage to speak with Queen Isolde,” she states, her tone regal.

I study her behavior, from her flaring nostrils to the hard set of her eyes, and I don’t like what I see.

I twist my head toward Garben without letting her slip from my sight. “Go get Prince Ecaeris.”

Garben nods, and without another word, he bolts through the forest, weaving his way between the trees until I can no longer hear the direction in which he’s running.

The woman narrows her eyes, glaring at me. “I asked to speak with the queen.”

“He will escort her out here,” I reply.

“You won’t take me to meet my dear friend?” she purrs, her left cheek lifting in a smirk.

And that’s all it takes for me to know exactly who this woman is. Her son has been in our village for nearly two weeks now, hiding his future queen and lover from his mother.

She was taken aback by Garben and me being so far from the village, which makes me wonder how long she’s been watching our patrols. We’ve only just switched our routes up, so she isn’t caught up on the internal workings of our guards. Cotear has been dead for three days, and Poko has been dead for a month... Which means she hasn’t had anyone within the village to give her information.

What did she think she was going to do? Walk straight through the forest and enter the palace?

I give her my most polite smile. “No, Nesta. You have no friends here.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SEVENTY-ONE

I awake wrapped in the warmth of a charming Mongrel, but the noise is ungodly. Why is someone always knocking on the fucking door? The rap of knuckles has become the bane of my existence.

“All right,” Ecaeris groans, taking his body heat with him as he rolls out of the bed. “What is it?”

“Talodus needs you,” a man says.

Ecaeris swings the door open. “The morning patrol has barely started. What’s wrong?”

Isn’t that a million dollar question?

“There’s a woman at the third circle route asking to speak with the queen.”

“Let me grab a shirt,” Ecaeris mumbles. “I’ll be right behind you.”

He shuts the door, and I climb from beneath the covers to begin dressing. I have my blouse buttoned and my linen pants tied at the waist before Ecaeris even realizes he’s also supposed to be putting the rest of his clothing on.

“What are you doing?” he inquires.

“What does it look like?” I counter. “I’m coming with you.”

“No,” he quips, too quick with his response.

I snort. “That wasn’t me requesting permission. I can walk with you, or I can follow quietly behind you. Take your pick.”

He sighs as if I’m killing him. “Fine. But we don’t know who she is, and —”

“Oh,” I sing. “I know who she is.”

“You do?” Ecaeris raises a curious brow, waiting for me to reply to the

question he hasn't asked. "Who is it?"

"Nesta."

"Why do you think that?"

I motion to his discarded shirt still haphazardly lying across the end of his bed. "I don't think it. I know it, feel it."

Ecaeris grabs his shirt and turns for the door. He stomps down the hall as he pulls the fabric over his head, mussing up his already sleep-rumpled hair. I just grin at him because he's kind of cute when he's pouting. And quiet. God, is he hot when he's quiet.

"I know what you're thinking," he grumbles as we descend the stairs.

"No, you don't," I snark.

"How are you so sure?"

"Because if you did, you wouldn't have opened your mouth to speak."

Ecaeris gives me a wicked grin that says he most definitely knew what I was thinking, and later, I'll pay for acknowledging those thoughts aloud. I'm not upset about it at all. My favorite crime of passion is being a snarky bitch who gets tortured orally. But I'm keeping that to myself. If he knew, he'd stop, and I would graduate from throwing pebbles at him to actual boulders.

If I can even pick them up.

We round the corner into the catacombs, and weave through guards who've just gotten off duty. They're exhausted, but all smiles as they chat with each other. It strikes me again just how much I love the sense of community within the Mongrels tribe.

A man waits at the forest exit of the catacombs, impatiently tapping his foot. When he sees us, he gripes, "What took you so long? You and Talodus would keep the entire village on their toes—"

"It's her fault," Ecaeris claims, nodding his head at me.

"Do I look like an idiot to you?" the man snipes at the prince, then turns to me. "It's lovely to meet you, dear. My name is Garben, and I'll be your escort. We can leave him here to pick flowers with Tal."

"I'm Ada," I greet, grinning. "Ecaeris would rather stomp on the flowers than pick them, but if it keeps him quiet, I'll be happy to leave him standing here."

Ecaeris sighs obnoxiously as Garben bellows with laughter.

"I like you," the guard tells me as he leads us into the forest. "We'll take him today, but next time, we'll leave him."

"Garben," Ecaeris scolds. "Don't instigate. She doesn't need to be in any

more trouble.”

“Aye,” he agrees. “She’s got enough of it with you lot.”

“It’s not us you have to worry about,” Ecaeris mumbles, only falling quiet when Garben laughs at him once more.

I tuck my hands in my pockets and enjoy the company. Garben is an older man with salt-and-pepper hair, though I can only tell he’s up in age by the way he acts toward the prince. When simply glancing at him, I swear he looks barely older than his early forties.

The farther into the forest we travel, the more my mind whirls with my subconscious thoughts of the past days. I latch onto one thing in particular.

“I have a question,” I state.

“Of course you do,” Ecaeris mutters.

I roll my eyes at him, and then gnaw at my lip as I try to word my concern correctly.

“How do I continue to protect myself and still help other people when I’m triggered by the situation?” I inquire.

“Triggered?” he asks, needing clarification. “I’m not familiar with that term.”

“Uhm. Bothered?” I guess, shrugging. “Sometimes it means offended, but not in this case.”

Ecaeris nods as he mulls over my question. “You just have to remain calm. There’s a time and place to show your emotions, but meeting someone new isn’t it.”

His answer churns in my mind as I walk beside him through the forest. There isn’t really anything I can say to that, other than he’s right. It’s what I’ve done for as long as I can remember.

We reach the orange mushrooms that signal the third circle route, and Garben motions for us to keep following him. A short trek away, Talodus stands, his body tense as he stares at the woman before him.

Nesta appears unbothered, dirty blonde hair flowing in the slight breeze. Her light eyes are striking, even from our distance. Lyell looks like his mother, though I don’t think he will appreciate me saying that to him.

Her indifference melts into semi-concealed ire as she spots us. The temperature around her rises slightly, tinting the apples of her cheeks with a pink flush.

“Let me do the talking,” Ecaeris murmurs.

I shake my head and hold my hand over my mouth to hide my words as I

whisper, “You’re not in a position to bargain with her. Nesta knows Isolde would be the first to step down and let a new queen reign. Your mother has explained as much to me. I’m well aware of what she’s about to say.”

“It’s getting difficult to argue with you,” he grouches under his breath.

“Then stop,” I snark, grinning at him.

My grin morphs from sarcastic to disgustingly polite as I make eye contact with the green-eyed enemy. Isolde predicted Nesta would show her face soon, though only one of our scenarios had her waiting patiently.

The others were much more devastating.

The fact that she stands here, looking prim but pissy, tells me more about her than she would like. Nesta can’t find Madigan, so she’s turning her bully tactics toward Isolde... Only Isolde won’t be coming today.

“Welcome to the Mongrel territory, Nesta,” I greet, my voice dripping with fake pleasantries. “What business brings you to our tribe?”

“I’ve come to speak with Isolde,” she claims. “And I was told her son would escort her here.”

“I said he would escort the queen,” Talodus tells me. “I gave her no other insinuation.”

I nod, smile still firmly in place. “I understand the confusion you must be feeling; however, Isolde is busy. She isn’t coming. I’m the new Mongrel queen. You can speak directly to me.”

Nesta’s brow raises in surprise, her left cheek twitching. “That’s adorable. You’re a child playing a role you can’t possibly fulfill. Spiran has persuaded you that you have a purpose here, and that may be the case, but it isn’t to rule.”

“That’s a very kind observation of you to make. I may appear young, but I can assure you I’m no child.” I clasp my hands in front of me, channeling Isolde. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I seek favor with Isolde,” she declares.

I give her my more innocent expression as I ask, “Is this about the errant Shades who came into our territory unannounced?”

“No,” she grinds through clenched teeth. “I have been—”

“Very specific about who you want to speak with,” I interrupt. “Yes. I heard you. Isolde knows where you are, but it’s no longer her place to speak on behalf of the Mongrels. It’s mine. Whatever business you have here can be discussed with me.”

“You expect me to believe she’s already given control to you so soon

after your arrival?” Nesta laughs humorlessly. “I feel as if you think me stupid, child.”

I shrug a single shoulder, feigning a lack of interest. “You’re going to feel how you feel, but don’t let what you *think* you know mislead you.”

“I know you’re not the Mongrel queen yet. You haven’t the power or knowledge to step into Isolde’s shoes so soon.” Nesta turns to Ecaeris. “Where *is* Isolde?”

I hold up my hand to silence him and pray he takes the hint. “I imagine she’s probably having a stress-free breakfast at the current moment. But as she no longer has royal duties to attend to, I’m sure she would rather relax than deal with your problems. So, your visit falls upon my shoulders.”

“While Isolde may trust you to handle menial and uncomplicated tasks, I’m sure this wasn’t what she had in mind when she sent you to cover her duties,” Nesta explains, her tone condescending. “Had she known I was coming, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Why *are* you here?” I inquire curiously. “Do you need help with something?”

“Not from you,” she snaps. Then she takes a deep breath and straightens the sleeves of her blouse. “I won’t lower myself to speak with a child over royal matters which should be discussed between said royals in private. The only person with the knowledge I need is a queen. Yours, to be exact.”

“You are a queen, too, are you not?” I narrow my eyes and smirk. “The only reason I can gather from this visit is you’ve lost control of your people and need the Mongrels’ assistance to gain order amidst chaos.”

“Ada,” Ecaeris whispers quietly from behind me, shifting closer to my back.

I don’t need to see him to feel the worry rolling off him in massive waves. I can’t exactly explain to him I’m purposefully poking the bear, either. And while I wish I could reassure him, even just a quick touch, to let him know I have a plan... I would be lying.

It’s not that I don’t know what I’m doing. It’s just one of those situations I’ll have to play by ear. Isolde and I have discussed this very scenario. Nesta isn’t completely unpredictable, but she’s also not an open book.

“I’ve been ruling the Shades for over a thousand years,” she snarls, losing her temper and radiating heat. “How dare you think me too weak to control my people. Has Isolde taught you nothing of our history? Nothing of who I am?”

This reaction is what we were hoping for...

I just have to poke her a little more.

“Now, now,” I patronize, holding my hands up as if placating her. “We’re a peaceful village. I don’t take kindly to your unwarranted attitude. You can see yourself home until you compose your temper.”

Nesta’s jaw ticks as she takes another deep breath. “We’ve clearly gotten off on the wrong foot. I’m not an enemy here.”

Well... She is. But I won’t explain the definition of an enemy to her.

I have another plan, now.

One Isolde and I stewed on, though we weren’t sure it would be the right course of action.

Clearly, it is.

I’m going to piss her off.

I need Nesta to attack me so we can gauge her limits while angry. Then we can multiply that by two or three and alter the way Madigan and I move forward.

Elemental math, if you will...

The biggest issue I’m going to run into will be Ecearis and Talodus.

If they don’t trust me, this won’t work. If they don’t believe me to be as resilient as Spiran claims, they’ll ruin this one chance to get inside knowledge on Nesta’s reflexive power—that move she feels the most confident in making without thought.

“If you were an ally, none of this would be happening right now,” I inform her.

It’s slightly cryptic, but it’s enough to get my point across. We both know more than we’re telling the other.

Nesta shrugs a prim shoulder. “If you don’t stand with me and my cause, then you stand against me.”

I glance at Ecaeris and Talodus on my left. The former touches my lower back, his fingertips digging into my skin as a warning to tread carefully. The latter gives me a perplexed brow raise, hand poised and flexing toward his sword’s hilt.

I turn to Garben on my right, and I can only call his expression a *fuck you* smirk. Though I doubt he has any clue what’s really happening, he appears entertained and ready for action.

I hope that’s the case.

Because I’m about to make this situation worse.

And I need to know that he's light on his feet and ready to move.

"It is what it is, huh?" I smile at Nesta, my voice as calm as a resting pond on a chilly winter morning. "Then so be it. I will not blindly follow anyone."

ECAERIS

DAY SEVENTY-ONE

*M*y insides rage like a storm floating over a warm ocean. Nesta can't come any closer to the village. She won't walk in and try to take her son back to the Shades' territory. She's here for my mother, and then she'll seek out Madigan. Lyell will stand in Nesta's way, and then war will decimate our unsuspecting tribe.

We have to be careful with our words.

Nesta shrugs, like keeping up her lies has finally become exhausting. "If you don't stand with me and my cause, then you stand against me."

I dig my fingertips into the skin of Ada's lower back, begging her to speak delicately until we know how Nesta will react to the rejection she's going to receive. Talodus is ready to pull his sword and swing the very moment the unstable Shade queen gets too close to our Mongrel menace.

The way Ada looks at us tells me she's going to be just that... A menace.

And I have no way of stopping her without undermining the authority she has just presented to Nesta.

Garben's fingers twitch as he prepares to defend his queen. He is as loyal as they come, but I can't predict his reaction. Will he grab Ada and remove her from the situation to keep her safe? Or will he attack Nesta to protect Ada?

"It is what it is, huh?" Ada gives Nesta an uncharacteristically dark smile, her voice holding layers of icy shards. "Then so be it. I will not blindly follow anyone."

"You would choose to stand against me?" Nesta chuckles in disbelief. "You do know water has historically been the weaker element?"

Ada glances at the sky, and panic creeps along my spine at the familiar movement of exasperation. She's going to pass the point of no return. That's an Earthly saying Will uses all the time...

But I never quite understood it until now.

"I don't know shit about you," Ada eloquently states. "So why would I stand with you?" She sighs at Nesta's stunned silence and continues, "You know what I *do* know? I left some fucks on the beach when I got here... You can take as many as you need."

Nesta's face betrays her emotions, splotches of red and pink appearing as her anger spikes, raising the temperature around us to staggering degrees. "Pardon?"

My stomach flips, nausea overtaking me as Ada smiles once again. Everything in me wants to cover her mouth, take over this conversation, and hope I can repair the damage. I don't want to overstep, but—

"Get fucked," Ada politely says before I can utter a word of my thoughts. "And see yourself out of my territory."

Between one breath and the next, purple fire rises from Nesta's hands. She stretches out her arms, releasing the flames in a pressurized blast that slices through the surrounding area like a white-hot knife.

Talodus and I drop to our bellies, avoiding the brunt of the attack. I peek to my right, and Garben furiously pats at his chest, dousing his burning shirt with weeping hands, though his efforts don't stop the blisters from appearing almost immediately. Trees blaze around us, the stench of thick smoke searing my nose.

Through it all, Ada still stands on her feet, doubled over at the waist with her arms wrapped across her midsection. Just when I convince myself she's hurt, injured too badly to fight Nesta off... The Mongrel Menace peers up at Nesta through her lashes and grins.

The unstable Shade queen gives a frustrated growl and lobs a ball of dark fire at Ada. She quickly follows it with another slice of the same unnatural power.

Ada barely has time to fully stand before she's hit again. She doesn't counterattack or defend herself against Nesta. She simply waits for the onslaught to end, her smile only growing brighter, more suspicious, as the old queen loses her mind.

I've never seen Ada appear so confident in the face of chaos. This isn't like being in the clinic or training in the colosseum. Or the way we found her

after Poko's attack.

This is a furious goddess confronting a queen with too much power and too little respect for the changing times.

"This is Spiran's fault," Nesta screams at Ada, panic and paranoia edging into her tone. "If I can't get to her, I'll take it out on everyone else. The island, too, will feel my pain and loss. I will burn everything to the ground."

Nesta pants as her tantrum fades, but her eyes are wild as she takes in Ada's appearance. The burns on her cheeks and chest heal before our eyes, leaving behind rosy patches of raw skin.

"There are other goddesses here," Ada murmurs, ever so slowly shaking her head as she steps forward. "It's not just Spiran anymore."

My chest tightens as Ada invades Nesta's space. It becomes difficult to breathe, and my throat threatens to close up completely with each meager inhale I manage to take. I feel as if I'm suffocating, like I'm experiencing everything Ada has explained of her fight with the darkness.

A dreadful odor overtakes the burning forest as Nesta swings her right hand across her chest, twirling until nothing but a cloud of gray mist hovers in her place. Ada reaches toward it, and it vanishes before our eyes.

I stretch my senses through the forest to feel for more Shades. It's a trick Connak taught me when we were young, though I'm not nearly as good at it as he is.

After a moment, I relax. It appears the unstable Shade queen came alone.

"She stinks," I absently comment, still trying to process the last few minutes.

"It's sulfur." Ada mumbles.

She doesn't move. She just stares at the spot where Nesta once stood, her brow knitting low over her eyes while lost in thought.

"Did you see the gray cloud?" I ask softly, not sure if I want to pull her from her mind.

"The mist?" she inquires, glancing my way. Her cheeks and chest are still raw, but the edges are returning to normal. "Connak and I have seen it before, but you couldn't see it when we were in the forest with Poko."

I nod, remembering that day more clearly than I care to admit. It was the first time she threatened me with rocks. "Why were you smiling at Nesta?"

"She did exactly what we wanted," Ada answers, shaking her head. "But she isn't just using fire."

"He's dead," Talodus mutters, hanging his head. "Garben is dead."

Ada takes three long strides to his side and drops to her knees. She touches Garben's forehead before hovering her hand over the hole in his chest.

"Don't touch it," Talodus snaps. "Please, don't touch it. That's the last thing I heard him say."

The edges of the blast mark are slowly decaying. He didn't have a wound when I last looked at him, but where his shirt was burning was now a festering hole, oozing dark sludge instead of blood.

"Where did this come from?" Ada leans closer to look. "He didn't have —"

Talodus grabs her arm and pulls her away from Garben as he says, "Whatever Nesta hit us with is eating him from the inside out."

"So why aren't we experiencing the same?" I wonder aloud.

Ada touches Garben's leg, her eyes closing as she focuses on... I'm not sure.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Trying to heal him. He's not dead, but he's dying." A frown creases her brows, raw skin tightening across her face as she whispers, "It's water that heals. He needs me to survive."

It's a promise that comes with a cost too high to pay. Garben is suffering, and no amount of healing will put him back together. She may be a goddess, but some things are beyond even her reach. This is a lesson that will take more time to learn.

Garben gasps as if he can't inhale.

"No." Ada scrambles closer, but I grab her, banding my arms around her chest and waist to stop her from intervening.

Talodus touches his mentor's forehead and murmurs quietly to him, moisture brimming over his lashes. As swiftly as possible, Tal pulls the last bit of life force from Garben's body and slams it into the ground, silencing the fires with his heroic sacrifice.

"He's gone, Ada," I whisper in her ear, resting the side of my head against hers. "You cannot heal the damage that was done. Talodus chose to end Garben's misery. Let him find peace in his last moments with us."

Tears stream down her face as she takes a fortifying breath. A warm calm spreads through my body, and I can breathe easier. My heart beats in tandem with Ada's, though she doesn't seem to notice what she's doing. Talodus looks up and tilts his head as he watches her.

“How did you do that?” he quietly asks, eyes rimmed red.

“What did I do?” she inquires, relaxing in my grasp.

“Soothe my heart, my emotions. You took the anger away.”

Ada hangs her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was going to jump between—”

“No,” Talodus gently stops her as he climbs to his feet. “That’s not what I mean. I was angry with Nesta for killing him, but now I just feel aggrieved. You have nothing to apologize for, Ada.”

“But—”

He cups Ada’s still healing cheeks between his palms. “Garben was a warrior, and he died a noble death. Knowing you can’t die wouldn’t have changed anything. Letting Nesta attack you without stepping in would have gone against his morals. He knew there was something special about you, but more than that, he knew what you mean to me.”

She nods, and Talodus releases her. I squeeze his shoulder, my eyes burning as reality sets in. Ada was right. The Mongrels can’t fight against Nesta. And neither can any of the other tribes.

This war will be fought by Ada, Madigan, and the other two goddesses...

The question is: whose side will they take?

Talodus gives me a grim smile as he pulls away from us. “I have to tell ___”

“Let’s just get him home, Tal,” I suggest. “We can take care of everything else when we get there.”

CONNAK

DAY SEVENTY-ONE

William laughs as we step out of the cellar, our hands full of empty crates. I stop midway to his house, my mind fully focusing on Ada, though she's nowhere in sight. The floral scent of her soap ensnares me, and I hunt for the direction in which it's coming. My search ends all too quickly when I see distant clouds of smoke rising from the forest.

"I've got to go," I tell Will, frantically dropping the crates.

"Go, go," he urges, fixating on the thinning smoke. "That doesn't look good."

A rush of fear takes over me, and I run down the path, finding myself weaving between Mongrels in the village before I've even noticed how far I've gone. I follow the footpath all the way to the guards' barracks when I spot Imryll. He motions for me to follow him, but I shake my head.

"Ada—"

"Is this way," he cuts me off. "Come on."

Once I get to his side, I struggle to slow my racing mind. Why aren't we running? Other than being told as children not to run through the palace...

I repeat my thoughts aloud. "Why aren't you in a hurry?"

"Ecaeris said Ada is fine." Imryll frowns at me. "But we lost Garben today."

"Oh, no," I breathe. "Is Tal..."

"He's okay," Imy says. "He told Garben's family. They're in the dining hall, taking a moment to grieve before they're escorted to the catacombs to see him."

I pick up my pace, hoping he'll take the hint. "Were you waiting for me?"

“I was on my way to get you,” he tells me. “How did you know?”

“Will and I finished early,” I explain. “When we walked outside, I just knew. I could smell Ada’s soap in the air, floral sweetness mixing with burning woods. I didn’t even have to see it to know something was wrong.”

“Magnolias,” he comments. “She says the soap reminds her of her father and the magnolia tree that she had at home.”

“You know what that is?” I inquire.

He shrugs. “It’s a tree.”

I roll my eyes, a bad habit we’ve all picked up from Ada. “I mean what it looks like... Or where that scent comes from here.”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you.” He chuckles and raises a brow. “Just guess.”

“What is it?” I gripe, not in the mood for games.

Imryll casts me a humorous glance, though his usual mischief is missing. “The star flowers—”

“No,” I drawl. “Really?”

“The petals aren’t poisonous. When they’re dried and crushed...” He grins. “That’s where the scent comes from.”

“Please, don’t tell her that,” I mutter. “She’s already fascinated by them. I know she’ll figure it out on her own, but I don’t want to romp through the fields.”

He sighs. “They won’t hurt her.”

“We don’t know that yet. None of us know what will affect her or won’t,” I argue, hoping he’ll understand what I mean. “Just because she can’t die doesn’t mean she won’t have the symptoms for days at a time.”

“We now know she’s fire resistant,” he mentions, like it’s no big deal. “That’s all they told me.”

I squint at him. “Repeat that.”

He opens the door to Isolde’s office, and Ada holds her hand toward Madigan, her middle finger extended. I only know what that gesture means because of William, though I don’t quite understand why Madi laughs.

“Aww, Ada,” the new Shade queen playfully teases. “Pink is such a good color on you.”

“Care to explain why you’re pink?” Lyell asks, rolling his lips between his teeth as if he doesn’t want to say anything else.

Ada turns, and Imryll goes rigid at my side. Her cheeks and chest hold splashes of raw skin, the top edges of her blouse tattered and burned. Imy is

across the room before I can blink. He tilts her head to one side, then the other, examining her injuries.

She grins, humoring him. "It's healing. I'll be fine in a bit."

"Fine?" he inquires. "How bad were they?"

Ecaeris purses his lips like he knows Imy won't like the answer. "The spots were bigger, darker. No blisters or open wounds, though. She's healing."

Isolde glides into the study and behind her desk before taking a seat. "So, all went well?"

"Yes," Ada replies. "And no. She isn't just using her element. She's channeling the darkness, too."

"You saw it?" Isolde's back goes rigid as she gets a good look at the healing burns.

Ada points at her face. "I felt it. We can't take anyone into battle with us, Isolde. Nesta will kill them all in a single attack."

Madigan sighs. "She's getting stronger."

"Can we stop for a moment?" Lyell asks, blinking rapidly at the women. "Are you saying you knew she was coming?"

"Yes," Isolde answers.

"You expected this attack?" the Shade prince continues.

"Yes," Ada and Madigan answer in unison.

Ecaeris steps forward, his jaw ticking as he addresses his mother. "You didn't think to tell us?"

"I thought it," Isolde says coyly. "Then I thought better of it."

"What the—"

"Ah-ah," she chastises her son. "I had a good reason."

"Which was?" I prompt.

She glances from face to face, her study brimming with the next generation of guards and royals and goddesses... She smiles at each of us.

"Had you been prepared for Nesta to show up, you would have wanted to intervene," Isolde explains to us. "Ada knew she was the only one who could provoke Nesta and remain calm."

"I would have fought back," Madigan says quietly. "As I've done the entire time I've been here. It almost feels like an impulse I can't control. She attacks, and I strike back, but fire against fire gets us nowhere."

"How did you know she was channeling the dark goddess's power?" Faldron asks, leaning on the back of an armchair as he observes the room.

Madigan shrugs. "I knew she was using more than the fire element I have."

"After speaking with Madi, I wondered if the old rumors were true," Isolde says.

"And we confirmed that today?" Talodus guesses.

"Yes," Isolde murmurs. "In the most unfortunate way, I'm afraid. Had Nesta only used her fire, Ada could have healed Garben without issue. That is what the water goddess has always been known for."

Pyris steps around Ada to look at her wounds. "Are you healing yourself now?"

She shakes her head. "No. Not actively."

"But you're healing," the Shade doctor points out.

"Of course she is," Madi interjects. "Did you just hear Isolde say the previous water goddess was a healer?"

"Madi can do it too," Ada points out. "Haven't you ever noticed?"

"That she heals quickly?" Pyris clarifies. "Yes. But not this quickly. It should have taken you days to heal those burns. Most of us would have taken longer."

Madigan points at Ada, annunciating slowly, "Water."

"Can I see your arm?" Ada asks.

"You see with your eyes," Madi snarks.

Ada rolls her eyes and drags her index finger over Madigan's forearm.

"Ouch," the new Shade queen says, though she's clearly not hurt. "Warn me first."

"What did you do?" Pyris asks.

"I cut her open with my element, used it like a knife..." Ada claims. "Like Nesta just did to us."

The Shade doctor leans closer to Madigan's arm, and we all watch as her skin knits itself back together.

"This is part of being a goddess," Ada declares.

Madi huffs. "Or just the next queen. You keep saying goddess like that's suddenly going to change my mind."

Isolde chuckles and shakes her head at Madigan. "Back to our topic. How close did she get?"

"Nesta didn't pass the third circle," Talodus replies. "But she didn't try to go around me."

"If she hadn't allied with the darkness, she could have walked right into

the palace.” Isolde plucks at her bottom lip as she stares at her bookshelf. “She was looking for weak spots.”

“Well, she’ll find them,” Ecaeris mutters. “If she picks off the guards, we won’t have a patrol.”

“That’s too much work for her,” Lyell comments. “She’ll look for an easier way.”

The Shade prince may know his mother better than most of us, but I doubt he knows her as well as Isolde does. The queens have been ruling their tribes for a thousand years. It’s difficult to overlook the Mongrel queen’s knowledge.

“She left in a state of panic,” Talodus mentions.

“Nesta?” Madigan asks. “What the fuck did you do?”

“Ah. Language,” Isolde scolds.

I can’t recall one single time we’ve cursed in front of Isolde and not gotten in trouble. Madi still hasn’t learned that lesson.

“I threatened what she knows,” Ada replies. “Nesta has never fought a goddess. Not even a green one.”

“Green?” Faldron inquires. “What do you mean?”

“New.” Madigan wobbles her head. “It’s an Earth term.”

Imryll scratches at his jaw. “What move will you make next?”

Isolde motions for Ada and Madigan to speak up. The girls glance at each other, then turn to the corner of the room where Rinya suddenly stands.

“When did you get here?” I ask, deeply concerned with how quiet she’s become.

Rin being a silent guard doesn’t bode well for us while she’s still staying in the room on the other side of Ada.

“I’ve been here the entire time,” she replies, bored.

“I didn’t even see you,” Thinik, the Shade hunter, argues with her, though it won’t do him any good.

We gave up arguing with Rinya years ago.

“I know. It’s my job.” Rin weighs her next words before speaking to Ada and Madi. “There are options, but the two of you can’t go after Nesta alone.”

Ada nods. “We need to alert the Howlers and the Dwellers.”

And that is what Ecaeris wants to avoid. None of us want to travel so far from the village and the Mongrels’ territory. But if we have to, then we’re going to need to split up to cover more ground. One group will have to visit the Howlers, and the other will go to the Dwellers.

I don't care where we go... As long as we're not going to Dweller territory. Ecaeris is more likely to fight Prince Zaroth than listen to Ada and keep his mouth shut. They don't dislike each other, but they also don't mix well.

"How are we going to do that?" Madi asks. "It's not like we can send a text message."

"We can," Lyell responds, raising a curious brow at his lover. "We send them all the time."

Ada narrows her eyes at Ecaeris. "How do you send messages to each other?"

The Mongrel prince rubs the back of his neck. "A few centuries ago, a man came to the island with homing pigeons. That's what we use. They're quicker and safer than sending people."

Madigan snaps her attention to Ada. "Is he fucking kidding?"

"Madi," Isolde warns. "Language."

"Is he freaking kidding?" Madigan asks, eyes wide. "We're to trust pigeons? Pigeons, Ada. As in sky rodents?"

"I don't love the idea... But whatever gets them the message is what we'll do." Ada sighs. "Maybe tell them we're coming for a visit, too. The Mongrels will go to one tribe, and the Shade will go to the other."

Lyell grins at Ecaeris. "So, you're going to visit the Dwellers, right?"

"There's not enough at stake for me to deal with Zaroth." Ecaeris rubs his temples. "You talk to him, and I'll speak with Ellisar and your brother."

"You'll have a great time," Isolde purrs. "Just let ladies do the talking."

ADELAIDE

DAY SEVENTY-ONE

The meeting with Isolde draws to a close, and everyone lingers in the study... Except for Talodus. He's hurting. I can see the grief written on his face, but there's nothing I can do to ease that pain. We only grow numb to it over time, though I don't believe it ever completely goes away.

I follow Talodus up the stairs to our wing of the palace, and pause in the doorway of his room. He sits on the end of his bed, kicking his boots away before he discards his shirt. The blonde brute is glorious to admire from afar, and he normally lights up a dark space...

But in his sadness, the walls don't shimmer in his rays of sunshine. They weep as he mourns his mentor and friend. The windows around us seem to show overcast weather, though there isn't a cloud in the sky.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask, moving to the end of his bed.

Talodus glances up at me. "You know how you're always looking for a distraction when things aren't going right?"

I nod.

"I need that distraction now."

"A distraction won't make the grief go away," I comment, stepping between his legs.

"No, Ada, it won't," he murmurs, his bright blue eyes boring into mine. "But it will give me a moment of reprieve."

Talodus pulls me atop of him, and I'm more than willing to do whatever I can to take away his pain. Even if it's only for this moment.

He skims his hands up and down my sides as our mouths meet in a soul searing kiss. Our tongues dance against each other. I suck his lower lip into

my mouth and bite gently before pushing against his chest to sit up. I crawl down his body, lightly running my fingertips across his abdominal muscles as I go.

When I get to his pants, I make quick work of untying them. I part the material as if I'm unwrapping a birthday present. The visual proof of his desire for me is almost as glorious as the actions that prove he's fallen in love with me just as fast as I have for him.

I grip his shaft and lean down to rub the head of his cock against my lips, smearing the bead of precum as if it were my favorite gloss.

Talodus growls deep within his chest as I suck him into my mouth. His warning thrills me, and I waste no time taking him farther into my throat, ignoring the slight burn as I hum against him. I've barely started moving when Talodus pulls me off.

"Come here. I want to taste you," he murmurs, tugging me upward as if I weigh nothing.

Once I'm straddling his chest, he grasps the bottom of my shirt. I swat his hands away before he rips it. That seems to be a common thing between my guys. I work the buttons open for him, freeing my breasts as he unties my skirt and tosses it to the floor.

He rolls me onto my side to pull my shorts down my legs. As they go sailing across the room, he flips, picking me up, so I'm straddling his chest once more. But then he drags me higher up his body. I hover above him until he grasps my thighs and jerks me closer.

The first swipe of his tongue has me melting against him. He devours my pussy like he intends to drown within me. I squirm above him, breathing harshly as his beard tickles my sensitive skin. His moan rumbles against me, and the primal sound travels straight to my core. Shivers race through my body as he sucks on my clit, the perfect amount of pressure propelling me into an ocean of pleasure.

"Talodus," I whimper as my hips gyrate against his eager mouth. "I'm going to come."

He shifts my weight to pull my thighs further apart so he can plunge two fingers into my pussy. In and out, he works me over until I writhe against him as the orgasm I've been chasing finally crashes into me. He doesn't stop, even as I pant through my prolonged release.

I shove at his forehead, too sensitive for him to keep going. He flips us over and lumbers to his feet at the end of the bed, using his thumb to wipe at

the corner of his lips. That one move is sinful, leaving me so transfixed on the smirk he wears that I miss the opportunity to watch him shed his pants.

His knee hits the bed as he gazes at my rumpled state, appraising each inch of me like he's mapping out where he should start his torturous touches. I motion him closer, and he obeys. He slides his hands up my thighs to grip my hips and pull us closer together.

Talodus leans back, guiding his thick cock between my slick folds before easing inside me. I flutter around him, my pussy overly sensitive to the heat of his skin. He grips my ass, keeping me exactly where he wants me as strums the water within my body.

And all is lost.

We're a tropical storm hovering in warm water... The instant we touch, we speed up, a devastating hurricane leaving nothing but wreckage in our wake.

Every smooth pump forces me to gasp. The friction of the stretch is an addictive feeling that I crave. He pushes against my knees, peering between us as if savoring the sight of me taking this greater depth. Sweat beads across my chest as he manipulates my body temperature, heating me until every nerve ending is a fragile glass button waiting to be swept away under his weight.

Nirvana crashes into me as massive waves with no warning, my orgasm riding on the crest. I bite down on the muscle of his chest, trying to quiet my desperate plea for more. All I can do is hold on and take what he chooses to give. And I would swear him a gracious Mongrel until he pulls away.

"Roll onto your stomach," Talodus orders, his voice a rugged rasp, betraying his difficulty in parting from me.

I flip over, getting my knees beneath me for much-needed traction, and he places my hands against the cool wooden headboard.

"Keep these right here," he whispers before releasing his grip on my hands and feathering his fingers down my spine, over my hips. I pant, a shiver of anticipation causing goosebumps to pepper my skin as he warns, "Don't move."

Talodus roughly grips my thighs, dragging his palms to my cheeks, spreading me open as he delves within to teasing my tender flesh with his silken tongue. He dips his fingers into my dripping pussy, then slides them out and up before easing them beyond the tight ring of muscle in my ass. I moan unabashedly as he works a second finger inside, stretching me to take

him.

“Settle, Ada,” he coos. “I won’t hurt you. Just relax.”

I almost scoff at him. It’s not that I haven’t ever done anal... It’s just that he isn’t small. But I trust Talodus with so much more than my body. I trust him with my heart, and that’s a beautifully fragile thing.

Physical pain will pass quickly.

Emotional pain is another story.

I will my tense muscles to loosen, to relax as he’s asked. I don’t even pay mind to where lube comes from. My breath is nothing more than shallow pants as he removes his fingers, replacing it with the slick head of his cock. For a moment, I struggle with my body’s instinctive need to fight against the invasion.

Talodus pushes in, inch by inch, relentless as he works past the tight ring trying to keep him from his goal. Once he’s fully seated, he pauses, allowing me precious seconds to adjust to his size. He kneads at my breasts, lightly pinching my nipples as he slowly pumps into me. I finally push back, silently requesting he pick up his pace.

“That’s it, Ada,” Talodus praises when I moan. “You’re doing so good.”

Talented fingers find their way to my clit, and he begins rubbing small circles. Talodus pulls out quickly, almost to the tip, before plunging his entire length back inside my hot center oh-so-slowly. He keeps his left hand on my hip to steady me as he repeats the motion. Over and over. In and out, he thrusts, gaining speed.

I’m left breathless, holding onto the headboard like it’s the one thing that can keep me from drowning in the ocean with this hurricane. His strength is my saving grace and my undoing.

“Tal,” I plead. “I’m going to come again.”

“Not yet,” he growls, tightening his grip on my hip.

His thrusts become erratic as his palm lands hard across my ass, adding pain to my already overwhelmed senses.

“I can’t—”

“Now, Ada,” Talodus commands.

He groans his release, the savage pleasure in his tone hitting me like a cyclone, sending me over the edge. My voice cracks and arms shake as the orgasm swells within my body, crashing through my senses to leave me numb and unable to hold myself up.

I collapse on the bed, and he tumbles beside, tugging me against his

chest. Our panting breaths are loud in the quiet room, filling the space with the sound of our satisfaction and exhaustion.

Once I've regained my wits, and feeling in my legs, I twist out of his arms and drag myself off the bed.

"You won't get far on those," Talodus teases, pointing to my shaking knees.

"I feel like a lamb learning to walk," I admit, rolling my eyes. "I don't care if I have to crawl. I'm taking a shower."

He chuckles as he climbs to his feet. "I don't know what a lamb is. The least I can do is help you there."

I playfully scoff, though I don't stop him from picking me up and cradling me against his chest as he carries me to the bathroom.

"Do lambs need help turning the water on? Or would you like to do it on your own?"

"Lambs are baby sheep, and they don't have thumbs to turn anything. But I'm guessing we don't have those animals here..." I trail off, nodding at the stone basin. "Care to shower with me?"

Talodus grins, biting at his lower lip. "I can't promise you'll stay clean."

"I didn't say I wanted to bathe."



*S*lip into a cream-colored shirt made of the softest material I've ever felt, courtesy of Talodus. My obsession with stealing their clothing amuses him, though he hasn't asked why I take them yet.

The material falls to the middle of my thighs, and that always shocks me. On Earth, I'd be lucky if a guy's shirt covered the bottom of my ass.

I've never really paid much attention to just how much taller, bigger, Talodus is than I am. All of my guys are... But they don't make me feel small or breakable.

I crawl under the blanket with Talodus and entwine my legs with his. "Tell me a story."

He readjusts his arm so my head lies on his chest, over his heart, and then he chuckles. "You're going to fall asleep."

“I know, but tell me anyway.”

Talodus strokes his fingers over my back, the soothing motion causing my eyes to get heavy much quicker than I intend.

I'm not sure how the story begins, but the last thing I clearly hear is him scoff as he spins an elaborate tale of a near-death experience he and Connak had with Garben when they were teens. My heart swells as I listen to his voice, not really comprehending his words.

And I drift into a peaceful sleep... But it only lasts mere seconds.

My blank mindscape morphs into inky darkness as my dream turns into an invasion. Waves of sludge batter me like an angry ocean, only this isn't water. It's thick, sticking to my limbs until I can barely move. I try to jerk, though I get nowhere. I see nothing as I wiggle to free myself.

“Water will always be the weakest element,” a voice calls from behind me. Beside me. In front of me. “You don't have the logic of air, or the strength of earth, or the passion of fire.”

“I may only be water, but we each hold pieces of the other elements within us,” I acknowledge. “Even darkness, Sfeare. You're just mad because you can't control us. We fight back.”

Laughter echoes, reverberating off the gelatinous substance I'm stuck in. “I don't need to control you, Mongrel. You will blindly follow me.”

“You were present when I spoke with Nesta,” I speculate, though I don't say it as a question. “I will tell you as I told her; I will not blindly follow anyone.”

“You will,” she calmly remarks. “This I know.”

“You are mistaken,” I inform her, matching her tone. “I don't need you as you need me.”

“I need no one,” she snarls.

I sigh and rub my forehead with my free hand. “You're such a dehydrated bitch.”

“Such language,” she scolds, almost mocking Isolde.

“Yeah, well...” I try to shrug, though only my right shoulder moves. “Welcome to my time. We're a little more crass.”

“You cannot leave,” she tells me, and despite not being able to see her, I hear the smile in her voice. “Sink quietly into my abyss. It's where you belong.”

“I would agree,” I drawl, grinning to myself. “But I don't do anything quietly. And we both know I'll leave, just like I did when you last visited

me.”

The pitch black void above me claps with thunder, lightning striking closely behind. In the illumination, I see the fullness of pregnant clouds, though I doubt they hold water.

This is an illusion.

Sfear deals in death and trickery. She can't kill me, and her tricks come with a loophole. I'm not sure if she's aware of that, or if she prefers to ignore it... But it's there. I just have to find it.

“Send me home,” I shout into the abyss. “You cannot contain me.”

“I have learned from my failures,” she mentions, though it doesn't sound like she's replying to me. It's more like she's switching the topic. “Have you?”

“Fine,” I grumble. “Let's do this the difficult way.”

I begin searching for any water surrounding me. There has to be some sort of moisture here in the sludge or in the air. As I call my element to me, I'm relieved to see the liquid respond, even if I can't visually keep track of it in the dark.

Finally, the gelatinous substance hardens around like black glass. The more water I draw from it and the atmosphere, the stronger I feel within this dreamscape. I'm able to break away from the sticky hold and climb atop the craggy mountain I've partially created.

Only partially, though.

Sfear did the rest.

As I walk across the jagged surface, a shadowy figure moves toward me, mimicking my visit from Spiran... Except Sfear is the absence of light.

“You won't win,” Sfear comments with a sigh.

“I never said I would defeat you,” I point out. “But I can keep you busy.”

She gives me a rasping chuckle. “You've become arrogant.”

“Maybe,” I concede. “Or maybe you've grown careless in your old age.”

“A true goddess has no age,” she informs me.

And that leaves me wondering...

“Humor me,” I suggest, weighing my words. “Did you kill the others because they were more powerful than you? Or did you do it out of malice? You remind me of the boogeyman, hiding under my bed, lying in wait for me to dangle my foot off the edge.”

“I killed them because they stood in my way,” she patiently explains. “My sister thought them more important than my plans.”

“What plans?” I ask, still pulling water from the far reaches of my dreamscape. “The best way to gain an ally is to be truthful.”

Sfear tsks. “Your petty Earth thoughts will not sway me.”

“Tell me...” I trail off, trying to figure out how to push her. “Are you covering yourself because you’re really a hag? That’s what all the books say about you.”

“You insult me in my domain?” She laughs, like a full-on belly laugh.

I can’t see the water I’ve drawn from my surroundings, but I feel it floating all around me, patiently waiting to be of use. I just don’t know if I need it.

“You called me petty,” I acknowledge, though I’m a little confused. “It seemed like you wanted to speak truths. The books on the island paint you as a creature of the night, incomprehensible and filled with jealous rage.”

The dried substance folds in on itself, like walls in a Tomb Raider movie. Clearly, I touched the wrong button. It’s not that I want to make an enemy out of Sfear, though I still haven’t figured out if she’s bad.

We’ve fought, yes. She didn’t want me to leave... But did she mean the nightmare she created or this world? I haven’t spent much time pondering her motives.

I just assumed.

And I hate how hazardous assumptions can be.

Is Sfear using Nesta, or is Nesta using Sfear? I can’t find out if we keep arguing and fighting.

“There’s no need for this,” I tell her, exasperated by her visit. “Each of us is showing a weakness right now. You keep popping up, but you aren’t clear as to why. And you’ve yet to introduce yourself to me in a way that doesn’t feel like an attack. I don’t know if I’m supposed to help you or fight you.”

Sfear grows quiet, and the darkness disperses in a sudden implosion. It leaves me stunned, blinking at the bright light left behind. Which part of what I said made her leave? Or did she find something better to do with her time?

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with all this water?” I whisper as I glance around at the sea I’m drifting in.

But rather than let it go to waste, I kick my feet up, turning my face to the illusion of the sun as I float on my back. I love swimming, and sometimes I think I forget just how much it relaxes me.

“It’d be really nice to talk to you without feeling threatened,” I shout into my dreamscape. “I think we could get along. They could call us the petty

water witch and the emotional demon.” I snort. “Yeah. We could be friends.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SEVENTY-TWO

I discard my sandals as soon as we touch the warm sand. The shore between the twin boulders has quickly become my favorite place to visit, though I don't come as often as I'd like. The mixture of forest and beach is almost as enticing as swimming with Indigo and Jade.

"So, what's a familiar exactly?" Madigan inquires, untying her skirt so she can use it as a towel. "Like a witch's cat?"

"It's a creature who is connected to us. I'm not sure how to explain them to you because I don't fully understand it." I grin to myself. "Jade scared the shit out of me when I first got here. The storm dropped me way out there, and I had to swim to the shore."

"Who?" she asks, walking into the water until it wraps around her ankles.

"Isolde's kraken," I reply. "Her name is Jade. My kraken's name is Indigo."

Madi looks at me as if I'm losing my mind. "A kraken?"

I nod, but I don't say anything else. Indigo makes her own introduction as the tip of her tentacle twists up the future Shade queen's calf.

Madigan screams so loudly that birds scatter in the forest, their massive wings breaching the canopy in a flutter of motion. She scrambles away from the water, falling onto her ass and rubbing her leg like Indigo's touch burns her.

I double over, laughing until my cheeks ache.

"What the fuck was that?" she screeches.

"This is Indigo," I happily reply, sweeping my hand toward the ocean where the top of the kraken's head, up to her giant purple eyes, greets us and

excitable clicks echo beyond the water. “She’s my familiar.”

“That is?” Madi asks, pointing a shaking finger at the deep purple mound floating before us.

I turn and smile fondly at Indigo. “Yes.”

“It’s huge, Ada.” She climbs to her feet and dusts the sand off her skin. “How do you take it anywhere?”

“Her,” I correct. “And I don’t. She’s not a dog. I believe they guard the island, though it’s just a guess.”

“And you think I have a kraken too?” she continues questioning me.

“Uhm, no,” I drawl. “I think you likely have something a little more adept to fire, whether the element itself or the trait, I can’t be sure.”

She scrunches up her face. “And the queen’s get these?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“Where do they come from?”

“I don’t know.”

She frowns at me. “How long has it—Indigo been here?”

I stare at the sky, cycling through weeks and weeks of information I’ve stored away for later. “Isolde told me she appeared shortly before we got here. I think.”

“I bet she knows exactly when the kraken showed up.” Madi snorts to herself. “How could you miss something that big moving into your territory?”

“She wasn’t this big,” I absently comment. “She was actually rather small when I first met her.”

“Ada,” she pleads, pointing at Indigo once more. “Make this make sense. What does *rather small* mean?”

“I wish I could, but I can’t.” I grimace and shrug. “Indigo was tiny when I first saw her. She scared me much like she just did to you, except I was in the garden, and she was in the stream beneath my feet.”

Madigan’s eyebrows hit her hairline. “The little stream in Isolde’s garden?”

“Yep,” is all I can say.

“How the fuck did that—” she jabs her finger toward Indigo and the ocean. “—fit in there?”

“I could hold her in my arms, Mad,” I try to explain. “She’s only grown this big over the last month or so.”

“Holy shit,” she mumbles. “Talk about growing pains.”

Indigo looses a string of low and slow clicks, making me smile at her incoherent grumbles.

“She agrees with you,” I mention, hooking my thumb over my shoulder.

“You can talk to her?” she inquires, stuck somewhere between shock and excitement. “And how do you know it’s a *her*? And why did you name her after her color?”

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. “Yes. She told me. And she told me.”

“Don’t fuck with me,” Madi scolds. “You’re telling me—”

“I’m not fucking with you,” I promise. “I believe Isolde and Jade have a deeper connection, but of course they would. They’ve been together for a thousand years. Indigo speaks to me in clicks and bubbles and emotions. I can hear them in my mind, feel them in my heart. It’s difficult to understand, much less explain.”

“Uh-huh...” my Shade friend drawls, disbelieving. “And what do you do with Indigo?”

I throw my hands in the air. “Play. Swim. Collect shells. What the hell would you do with an adolescent kraken?”

Madigan turns to the forest, brows knitting together as she loses interest in our conversation. “Did you hear that?”

“No.” As I answer, Indigo releases a steady stream of clicks in my mind. “I can’t understand you when you talk so fast.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Madi remarks.

“Not you. Indigo,” I tell her. “We’re not connected enough for me to understand everything she’s trying to say. I get the simple stuff.”

“Something is out there, Ada,” she whispers.

“In the forest? Are you sure it isn’t Connak and Think?” I inquire. “They said they would keep their distance, but I wouldn’t be surprised if your scream of terror brought them running.”

Madi grunts at me. “I wasn’t ready. Next time, warn me.”

She eases closer to the treeline, leaning over to peer between the low-hanging branches and undergrowth. But I spy the intruder before she does. The streak of burnt orange races from the treeline to the boulder, working its way behind Madi.

“I don’t think it’s there anymore,” I quietly acknowledge.

“I heard it.”

“I see it.”

Madigan spins on her heel and stops when she comes face-to-face with the little copper fox.

Little may be an understatement. It looks like a pup, but it's the size of a Golden Retriever, which is huge by Earth adult fox standards.

"I've never seen a fox here," she murmurs to herself. "Where did you come from?"

It creeps forward, its tail in the air as it curiously observes us.

"That's a long way to travel all by yourself," Madi says quietly.

I smile as Indigo wraps her tentacle around my leg. She clicks quietly, as if not to scare the fox. Her emotions feel soothing and patient. And what I misunderstood of her clicks a moment ago finally sinks in.

"Whose fox is that, Madi?" I ask. "I don't believe they're native here."

"She's..." Madigan pauses, tilting her head as she reaches for the creature. It touches its nose to her palm, then steps in to nuzzle. "She's mine. But I don't know why she's just now found me."

"Let's go talk to Isolde," I suggest. "I'll be back to see you soon, Indigo."



Isolde meets us at the gate to her garden, though it isn't intentional. She's trying to leave. She greets us with a smile, but I can tell she's trying to get to some other task on her schedule.

"Ladies," she purrs. "What brings you to the garden?"

"You," Madi blurts, pointing at the fox at her feet. "What is this?"

"Is this your familiar, Madi?" Isolde asks.

"That's what we're wondering," I mention. "She found Madi on the beach after a freakout over Indigo. And she's been attached to her hip ever since."

"And you can hear her?" Isolde inquires.

Madi nods. "It's tripping me out."

"Indigo can, too."

Isolde breezes past us, through the gate. "Then she must be yours."

"That's it?" Madi shouts at the retreating queen's back. "What do I do with her?"

The fox bolts through the gate before it closes, leaving us no choice but to follow. I secure the latch behind me as Madigan ventures forward into Isolde's garden of wonders.

It's a beautiful place to spend the rest of the day, anyway.

"What's her name, Madi?"

She rolls her eyes. "How the fuck should I know?"

"Uhm, ask her," I snark.

"Where did she go?" Madi shakes her head. "I don't want to lose her on the first day."

"I think I saw her go left, but there's no need to worry," I reassure her. "It makes one big loop, and I'm pretty sure she's too big to fit through the gaps in the fence."

Madi huffs. "How are you so at ease all the time?"

"It could have something to do with my element. But it could also be that I had a better welcome than you did," I confess. "Isolde has done everything in her power not to overwhelm me or drop too much information in my lap. It's been a lot of learning and growing. Less survival and running."

A moment passes, and I worry I've said too much. But Madi smiles as she turns to me.

"I'm happy I came here. I should have come sooner."

"You're here now. We'll get this island sorted."

She snorts. "You grossly overestimate my organizational abilities."

"No. I don't. I know your slob."

We laugh at old memories, and though we end on a sigh, it doesn't feel heavy with tension or regret.

The little fox darts from under a bush, chasing a caterpillar. All we can see is the tip of her tail as she weaves through Isolde's garden.

"Hey, come back," Madi calls.

We follow her to the other end of the stream where she has stopped to drink from the crisp, clean water. I hang back as Madi approaches her new familiar. They need time to bond.

"Hey," she softly repeats. "What's your name?"

Madi sits on the ground beside the fox, leaning her back against the only plantless section of the fence.

I wander away, focusing on the bugs in the garden to find the anomaly. The butterflies are all gigantic and multicolored, shining in the sunlight. But there's always that one that isn't quite like the others.

I lean in, whispering as quietly as possible. “We need to talk soon. It’s past due.”

“Ada,” Madi yells, laughter in her voice. “Where’d you go?”

“Over here,” I tell her.

She rounds the small bend, her lips bright red. And I freeze as terror sweeps through me.

“Don’t eat that, Madi. The crab berry fruit is toxic.” Though even as I say it, I begin to wonder...

She rolls her eyes. “It’s fine. I’ve eaten them before. They’re actually kind of sweet, like a super ripe strawberry. But all they really do is turn my tongue red.”

“And your lips,” I point out. “Didn’t anyone tell you that the seeds will kill the natives?”

“You mean these?” she asks, sticking her tongue out to show the candy-red stain and several seeds. She swallows them. “I already died, Ada.”

“When?”

“I died to get here to the Mongrels,” she quietly admits. “Nesta killed me. I know she did, but yet, here I am.”

I study Madigan as she offers a bit of her snack to the nameless fox. It sniffs her hand and tentatively takes the last bite of the sweet fruit, minus the toxic seeds...

And I have an idea. I mean, we’ll have to run it by Isolde. I don’t know if it will work. But now I’m wondering if it’s just the goddesses that can handle the toxic and poisonous things on this island, or if the last set of queens can, too.

Because if they can’t... Then maybe we can make wine with the crab berry fruit and seeds.

Would Nesta fall for a peace offering, one I brought as a gift under the guise of wanting to talk about joining her side?

Do we even have that kind of time before she destroys the Shades?

“We need to talk to William,” I ramble. “I have an idea, but I’m not sure if he can help.”

“Who is William?” Madi inquires. “And why do we need to talk to him?”

“He’s Rinya’s dad,” I tell her. “And because he makes meades and spirits. I’m hoping he can make wine, too.”

“Pyris can,” she says with a shrug. “He’s like a mad scientist without the tech of an Earth lab.”

I stare at her for a moment. “That... doesn’t shock me as much as it should. Do you think he’ll make something for me?”

“What are you thinking?” Madi sings mischievously.

“Help me collect the crab berry fruit.” I gnaw at my lip. “I think we should consider poisoning Nesta. Even if it doesn’t kill her, it might give us an edge if we have to fight her on our own.”

Madi raises a brow at me, flourishing her hand to the right so she can lead me to the crab berry plant. I consider tasting the spitting star flowers to see if we can mix the two, but I think at least one of my guys would have an aneurysm.

I’m going to do it anyway.

We flip the ends of our skirts up and collect the berries in silence, each caught in our thoughts. I watch Madi from my peripheral, and I become more angry with Nesta.

Madigan is clearly the fire goddess, yet she doesn’t believe it. How can that be possible? Did Nesta beat her confidence down so low she doesn’t see how different she is? Or is this left over trauma from Earth?

Either way, the next step for Madigan is crystal clear... Well, for me, it is. It’s time we talk with Spiran.

But how does one summon a fellow goddess?

Obviously not by pigeon... Though after that, I can’t even begin to guess.

TALODUS

DAY SEVENTY-FIVE

*T*ry to listen as Lyell speaks of maps and transfers and travel... But neither of us are focusing on the task at hand. We attempt to pretend as if we aren't watching them, though it's a struggle to look away.

Ada and Madigan lean together, giggling hysterically at the end of the dining table. Pyris rubs at his forehead, his hand positioned so the women can't see his grin. Imryll glances at me and points at our goddess like he can't believe what he's seeing.

I share his sentiments.

Adelaide Stormbrave—our Ada—is drunk.

It's quite a sight to behold.

Ada's hazel eyes brim with a light from deep within her, and her cheeks have a pink tint to them that isn't normally there unless she's embarrassed. Her laughter floods the room, giving us all a sense of calm.

I love when she's happy.

"So, I've made copies of these to take with us," Lyell says, pulling me from my thoughts as he waves at the maps. "One for the Shades, and one for us to take to the Dwellers. This one is your's to travel with, and this one is for the Howlers."

"He's so organized," Madi whispers to Ada, though she isn't quiet.

I suppose she's trying.

Ada snorts. "You're the perfect example of opposites attract. Clean and dirty. Broody and bubbly."

"You mean I can be messy because he's so... Not." Madi peers over at Lyell. "He's the bubbly one, right? It's not me."

Lyell coughs to cover his chuckle and turns to Pyris. “How much have they had to drink?”

“Only two.” Imryll jumps forward to catch Ada as she nearly tips out of the chair. “What are you doing?”

“Taking my sandals off,” she sings, kicking her feet like she’s swimming. “They’re like bondage fashion. Do you know what bondage is? I’m sure you do. But is it the same thing here?”

Imryll covers his face as he laughs at Ada. He doesn’t offer her an answer, but she doesn’t wait for him either. She and Madi start mumbling to themselves as they sip their drinks.

“What did you put in it?” I inquire, giving Pyris a curious glance. “I’ve never been that drunk off two drinks.”

“They haven’t drank spirits since they got here. I asked them before we began this experiment,” he tells me. “It’s mixed with crab berry and star flowers among a few other things. Madi and Ada helped speed the fermentation process along.”

“Why?” Lyell drawls, as if he can’t understand the reasoning.

Pyris throws his hands in the air. “Ask them. I’m merely spectating.”

“Was that Ada’s idea or Madi’s?” I grin and shake my head. “Never mind. The star flowers are Ada’s newest obsession.”

“Hit me,” Ada demands, holding her glass out to Pyris.

“I’d rather not,” he retorts.

Madigan bursts with laughter. “Oh my god.”

“I didn’t mean for you to really hit me.” Ada squints at the Shade doctor. “I meant pour me another drink, please.”

Pyris takes her glass, brows knitting in confusion. “Why didn’t you just say that?”

“I thought I did,” she mutters.

“What does it taste like?” the Shade doctor asks, passing Ada’s glass back to her. “You’ve yet to answer any of my questions. Both of you.”

Ada swirls the drink, and then sniffs it, which causes her equally drunk friend to giggle again. “This tastes like sangria.”

“I’d rather have a margarita.” Madigan sighs wistfully. “A watermelon margarita. Or raspberry. Or maybe just tequila.”

“Of course you would,” Ada snarks. “I’m not surprised that it’s still your favorite.”

“Sangria is like...” The new Shade queen stares at the wall for a moment.

“Fancy hunch punch.”

Lyell rubs his temples, cheeks twitching as he tries to fight his smile. “I thought you were going to taste test and help us with the maps.”

Madi props her elbow on the table and smirks. “You look like you have it all under control.”

Ada nods. “All you have to do is lay the clean map on the old one and trace the marks I’ve made. I even put a legend on the side so it’s easier to differentiate the marks.”

“He just made a bunch of dots.” I pump Lyell’s elbow. “You might need to fix his work.”

“You did not,” Ada says with a gasp. “It took me weeks to sort out all that information.”

“Seeing as how I’m not in charge…” Lyell trails off, acting as if he’s using the charcoal to make another circle. “I just transferred everything over the easy way.”

Madi pats Ada’s arm. “He’s fucking with you.”

“Who’s messing with her?” Ecaeris asks, walking into the dining area. He doesn’t get further than the threshold before he stops to survey the scene. “I have so many questions.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Ada snarks. “Is he fucking up my maps?”

Ecaeris narrows his gaze on our goddess. “Are you intoxicated?”

She swirls the liquid in her glass. “Maybe.”

“Probably,” Madi adds.

“A little,” Ada continues, pointing at Pyris. “It’s his fault.”

“Wow. Really?” The Shade doctor shakes his head. “Thanks, Ada. I’ll remember that.”

“No, he won’t,” Madi whispers. “He’ll forget in a few days.”

Ecaeris glances at Imryll. “What are they drinking?”

The Mongrel doctor holds his hands up. “No idea. I’m just here to oversee the medical—”

“Why?” the Mongrel prince interrupts. “What’s in it?”

“Not the grapefruit in disguise,” Ada interjects. “But I would love one of those, whatever it’s called, but don’t tell me.”

“Grapefruit in disguise?” Lyell mumbles. “What is that?”

“Well, it tastes like a grapefruit, but it’s fuzzy like a peach and hard and green like an apple,” Ada explains.

Madi quickly leans toward her. “Oh. I know those. They’re so good. Can

we go get a snack?”

“Connak and Faldron went to get snacks,” Imryll answers, turning the women’s attention to him.

Ecaeris stops beside me, his eyes wide as he grins. “Were they supposed to get drunk?”

“They were supposed to taste test,” Lyell informs the Mongrel prince.

“How many drinks have they had?” he asks.

“They’re on their third,” I reply.

He scratches his jaw as he inquires, “That strong?”

“Toxic,” Lyell responds. “We would die if we drank it.”

Ecaeris watches the women as we flip between maps. Imryll does a decent job of keeping them contained at one end of the room... Until Connak and Faldron walk in with snacks. Thinik is close behind, carrying a pitcher of water and two new glasses.

“Finally.” Madigan groans. “What took you so long?”

Faldron brushes his thumb over her cheek as he casually remarks, “We had to kill it.”

“It’s fruit,” his lover retorts, giving him an unimpressed look.

“Are you sure?” The Shade guard laughs when Madigan swats his hand away from her food.

Ada frowns at the bowl in front of her. “Do not play with me, Faldron.”

“He’s joking,” Connak says, sitting on the arm of her chair. “But it is fresh. There wasn’t any opaidish in the kitchen, so we went and picked some from the garden.”

“That’s so sweet,” Ada murmurs, leaning her head on Connak’s thigh. “What’s opaidish?”

He runs his fingers through her hair, then nudges her to eat. “The fruit, though William calls them cave mangoes.”

“They are nothing like mangoes,” she argues. “That’s a terrible name.”

“It’s better than grapefruit in disguise,” Lyell snarks.

“Oh, go color your circles,” Ada pops back.

That one takes all of us a minute to comprehend, but Madigan seems to understand it immediately. She chokes on her bite of opaidish, though she tries to recover before anyone asks her what it means.

Ada offers no explanation. She only smiles politely at Lyell. He’s suspicious, but I don’t blame him. I know enough Earthly terms to know that was a nice way to say something rude. Despite that, Ada and Lyell get along

well, which is good for us.

Ecaeris leans over the corner of the table and plucks Ada's glass from her hand. She rolls her eyes as he sniffs at the liquid... But we all freeze when he takes a sip.

Imryll hovers for a moment, and I hold my breath, though nothing happens to the careless Mongrel prince. Connak is the only one who doesn't share our shock.

"It's good," Ecaeris tells Pyris. "Sweet, but subtle. I can smell the flowers, though."

"Uhh, thank you," the Shade doctor says, a bit of concern in his voice.

Ada suddenly looks too sober. "Why did you drink that?"

I grimace as Ecaeris glances from the glass to Ada before he shrugs. He isn't the only one who has thought about drinking it just to see what would happen, but I didn't expect him to be the first one to give into the risky urge.

Connak, maybe.

But not Ecaeris.

"Talodus and I withstood Nesta's attack, too," he tells Ada. "I was curious."

"That could have killed you," she points out.

"It hasn't."

"There's a silent *yet* in that response."

Ecaeris walks around the table and trunks her chair as he kneels in front of her. "Ada, haven't you wondered if we're even half as invincible as you are?"

"I have," she quips. "But I haven't spoken to Spiran in a while, so I haven't been able to ask her. I've just been praying you wouldn't put yourself at risk."

"I have no cramps." He holds his arms out, quickly glancing at his stomach. "That would have been the first symptom, especially with the star flowers."

Ada glares at him, though her frustration is fading. "How do you know that's what's in this?"

"I can smell the floral aroma." Ecaeris smirks. "And I know you. There was a book of toxins in my mother's study, but I dropped it in your room before I came here."

"Do you think it will work?" Ada cringes and turns to Lyell. "I'm sorry. Would you rather we didn't talk about this in front of you?"

“Don’t be sorry,” he says. “She needs to go, and I’m not enough to kill her on my own. Neither is Nesterin, which is why he left the Shades years ago.”

Madigan sets her glass of water down. “Because he tried to kill her?”

Lyell smiles grimly at his goddess. “Her favorite son because he looks like the lover she lost. Then he tried to kill her... She’s not forgiving at all. She almost killed him, but we were able to get him out before she came back to finish the job.”

“Will this be enough to weaken her, at the very least?” Imryll asks, twisting the dark glass bottle in his hand. “That’s what we need to know.”

Ada nods. “If it’s not, then we need to know what our other options are.”

“You’re really invested in this, aren’t you?” Madigan whispers, as if the realization has just hit her. “You just came in and never stopped rolling with the punches.”

Madi has a point.

Ada washed up on our shore with dozens of questions, but she didn’t really panic. Not like one would expect. She’s had her moments of disquiet where she was worried about inadequacies, though it almost feels as if she was meant to be here. Designed to be here.

“You should be, too,” Ada claims. “You’re a queen, Madi, whether you want to be or not. That’s the decision you made when you stayed.”

“I know,” Madi acquiesces. “I just wasn’t expecting you to be so prepared. And ruthless.”

“Something needs to be done with Nesta,” Ada declares with such conviction we all straighten our posture.

Madigan nods as she bites at her lip. “Yeah, but you’re talking about more than just poisoning her. We’ll be attacking her in such a way that she might retaliate against her own people, Ada.”

“They aren’t her people,” Ecaeris snaps. “They’re yours.”

“You’re right,” Madi says to Ecaeris before turning to Ada. “I know what you need from me.”

Thinik speaks up from where he’s propped against the wall. “She didn’t say anything.”

Madi squeezes Ada’s hand. “She doesn’t have to. I’ll be ready to get it done.”

“And we’ll end this,” Ada tells her. “With or without the other queens.”

ADELAIDE

DAY SEVENTY-SEVEN

On Earth, there's a saying about sleep being for the weak. I'm not ready to give it up. I don't care how strong I may be. A sleep-deprived Ada is no good to anyone.

So, why do these ancient goddesses keep interrupting my few restful hours? Why can't they visit in person during daylight?

Regardless of my wants, I find myself walking circles around the fountain outside the palace... In my dream. It's a wonder to behold. I won't complain about that. And even though I have a decent understanding of my element, I still can't comprehend how water sits like it's inside an invisible bowl.

Blinding white light floats toward me from the forest, and I need no introduction. As she gets closer, the lumens dims, allowing my eyes a precious reprieve from the burn. Her face is just barely recognizable, though she's too bright to really make out her features.

"I usually enjoy these fountains from afar," Spiran absently comments, dipping her fingers into the water.

"I've marveled over them since I arrived, but I rarely have time to enjoy being in their presence."

I observe as my statement causes Spiran's eyes to glow an ambient blue before returning to her normal shade of bright light.

"Do you know how they were created?" she asks, the thought of that blip in time turning her voice reverent.

She waits patiently for my answer, though she turns away from me as if she's hiding sudden shyness. It's almost like she wants to talk about it with me, but maybe I'm projecting.

“I would love to know how they were created,” I admit, running my hand through the side of the invisible bowl.

Droplets fly from my skin back to their home. They don’t belong anywhere else. I know this, but it’s a strange thought to have because it isn’t really mine.

“The original goddesses created them with great power and care. They act as temples of protection for the elementals who carry their likeness.” She looks over her shoulder at me. “Should the people leave, they would lose their protection.

“What about the people who can’t control an element?” I inquire.

“On this island, even if they can’t control an element, they’re still connected,” she tells me, tipping her head to stare at the clear night sky. “They can feel it deep in their bones, and so they adapt to being near water or plant life or what calls to them. If you put a Dweller in your village, he would still grow a garden despite all the work he would have to put in.”

Spiran circles the fountain, gaining a better view of the moons. “We goddesses were lonely, tired of each other’s company, and we became fond of the people who spoke to us. But we didn’t know our favors would lead to prayer and more difficult tasks to fulfill. When we couldn’t deliver, they not only turned on us, but each other as well.”

“They started a war?” I speculate and sigh. “My goddess is better than yours, and I’ll show you by killing you.”

“Exactly,” she replies. “The fountains were built during a grand world war fought between the species before we split from the dark island.”

“We who?” I ask. “What other species?”

“The original natives were enchantresses who protected our altars until they were forced to flee,” she explains. “So many others had already perished while we worked tirelessly to keep them safe. We couldn’t save them all. And that is the origin of these fountains. They’re all over the island, protecting the natives from dark influences.”

I sit on the ground and watch her for any kind of reaction. “It’s going to happen again, isn’t it?”

Spiran nods. “War comes with a cost, Ada. Are you prepared for that?”

“I don’t know.” It’s the only truthful answer I can give her. I’m unclear on what the price will be, and I fear there are some things—people—I’m unwilling to sacrifice. “But something has to be done.”

“This is why I chose you,” Spiran murmurs, as if this is her secret to

confess. “I knew you would lead the others to do what was necessary. Right and wrong does not exist for a goddess. We are both simultaneously.”

I nod my understanding. “And some of them will die?”

“Yes,” she agrees. “Some will.”

“What about my lovers?” I inquire, fearing the answer more than the question itself. “Are they as invincible as I am?”

Spiran turns to face me for a moment, though I can’t read her expression. “The queen’s reign is meant to be around a thousand years. Their lovers, true lovers, stay with them through that. After they step down and end their dynasty, they are free to live their lives how they choose, but they are no longer limitless in life. Just like the other natives, injuries will kill them. They will begin to age with their peers.”

“And in a thousand years, when I step down as queen and pass my dynasty on to the next, will my true lovers have the same fate?” I ask, repeating my question in a more specific way. “Or will they live with me for as long as I serve as the Water Goddess?”

“I don’t know the answer to this question, and I would rather not make assumptions,” she states. “I haven’t successfully made a goddess until you. After you, I was able to turn the other chosen queens. The previous goddesses didn’t have lovers, so this is new territory. What I have noticed is your lovers seem to carry more power than they did before you arrived.”

I shake my head. “I’m not prepared to lose them if they are the cost of war.”

“I gave you the skills you need to keep them alive,” she informs me. “You simply have to hone them, mold them into what you need as the Water Goddess and the Mongrel Queen. These are the same skills that will help you win the war.”

“What happens after the war?” It doesn’t really matter right now, but I’m curious, and I don’t know when I’ll speak with the goddess of Light again.

“Settle down.” The glow of her shoulders bounces as she shrugs. “Build your dynasty.”

That isn’t enough of an answer, not when I’ve read about Isolde’s struggles. The failed experiment to make Isolde the water goddess is what made her barren. What if the same has happened to me?

Sure, Spiran spent a millennium trying to work the problem out... And she created them the opportunity for children before she picked out new queens and goddesses.

Is the difference that Spiran went into our selection process knowing that she was looking for goddesses, not queens?

Or is there a difference at all?

I'm the first human to handle the water element at the goddess level, and this surprised Isolde... Which makes me wonder if it also surprised Spiran. And was that emotion driven by excitement because she had all the kinks worked out? Or worry because she wasn't expecting it to happen and she doesn't have any idea what this means?

"Am I barren like Isolde is?" I blurt after a moment. "I need to know this."

"Don't you have a lover with a father from Earth?" she counters, no longer looking at me.

I lean forward and stare at her. "What?"

"He can give you a child. This I know," she says. "But your other lovers? I do not know. If you wish to have children with them, I will do everything in my power to help, though I cannot make promises to you on this matter."

"You sound like Isolde." I huff. "You give me a sufficient answer that answers exactly zero of the things I want to know about."

"You mean, Isolde sounds like me." Spiran chuckles, then sighs. "Is Madigan willing to talk to me?"

The way she asks this has me wondering if she's tried to reach out to Madi before. It's not something we've talked about yet.

Can Madi absorb this conversation with Spiran?

I don't know. That isn't my call to make. But I hope she's ready. She can't put it off for much longer.

"She needs guidance," I mention. "Guidance that I can't give her." I stand and walk toward the palace entrance, sensing our time is up. "Just send her to the dining hall when you're done. I'll be waiting for her."

"You're a good friend," Spiran quietly comments. "She needed you."

I pause, but I don't glance back. "She was like a sister to me when we were young. Sometimes we have to remember that with every dispute, there are three sides to the story. Yours, mine, and the absolute truth."

I push through the ornate doors of the palace, and my dream fades, leaving me lying in bed with Imryll. The moons beam through the window, basking the room in an ethereal glow that makes my heart feel full.

Indigo's soft clicking echoes in my mind as I sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed.

Imryll catches my hand. “Where are you going?”

“To check on Madi,” I tell him softly. “We’ve just had a visit from Spiran, and I’m not sure how she’ll process the confessions of a lonely Light Goddess.”

“Do you want me to walk with you?” He sits up in bed, rubbing at his face.

I kiss his cheek. “I’ll be in the dining hall. We’re just going to get some tea.”

“Let me make it for you,” he says, climbing to his feet. “I won’t linger. I’m just not sure you want to go hunting around the kitchen for the tea when you don’t actually know what you’re looking for. You may find something —”

“Fair point,” I interrupt, trying to keep those thoughts out of my mind. “I would love it if you made us some tea.”



I sit at the back corner of the table, blowing steam from my tea cup as Madigan drags herself through the door.

“Do you want a cookie?” I ask in greeting.

“No,” she grumbles.

“Fine. We’ll get to the heart of our late night rendezvous.” I slide her a tea cup and take a sip. “Have you talked with Spiran before tonight? Something about the way she asked for you made me think you’ve been ignoring her.” I hold up my hand. “No judgment. I’m just curious.”

Madigan twists her fingers together. “It’s not that I wasn’t willing to talk to her. I was living to survive, Ada. I didn’t see her the same way you did.”

I frown. “You didn’t see the bugs?”

She takes a sip of her tea, grimaces, and then drinks more. “All I saw were the things and people trying to kill me.”

I hate that she had such a difficult time before she got to the Mongrel village. But if there is one thing I know about Madigan Wilde, it’s that she’s the strongest person I’ve ever known. Stubborn, too.

Fire is a fitting element for her.

While I like to flow around the rules, searching for technicalities to get through... Madi burns straight through the rules like a wildfire.

This is important for the coming war. We don't know how the other two women will react, though my guess feels solid.

Air will sway one of two ways, either disregarding the rules completely or following them with too much logic.

Earth will be steadfast, rooted in her beliefs. So, I hope Madi can get her on our side.

It's not that this war—or any war—will have rules, but the way one chooses to overcome obstacles they don't believe in shows a lot about that person's character.

Madigan's brother, Harrison, once described this thought process to me using the analogy of a coloring book.

I like to stay inside the lines, but I will fight to pick my own colors. Madi scribbles over the entire page and says fuck the lines.

And that is why our friendship was so well-balanced. She made me take risks, and I kept her out of trouble.

It's funny how so many things stay the same but so many others have strayed from their course. Now, I'm the one pushing her to take a risk while she tells me to chill out.

Madi looks up from her tea cup. "I'm a goddess."

"I know," I gently reply.

"I don't know how I feel about this," she admits, taking a cookie from the plate.

"Let's unpack it," I suggest.

She scoffs as she chews. "It's a mindfuck."

"Yep." That I will agree with wholeheartedly.

"We're immortal, Ada," she acknowledges. "Do you know what that means?"

I nod.

"Have you tested it out?" Madi inquires, eyes wide as she waits.

"Yeah. Unintentionally with Nesta," I reply. "But you keep eating toxic shit, so you've been playing with your life longer than I have."

Madi chuckles, finishing her cookie before propping her elbows on the table and lacing her fingers together. "All jokes aside, how do you feel about being a goddess?"

"It's a lot of responsibility, but I don't hate it." I circle my fingertip

around the rim of my tea cup, making the liquid dance as I contemplate my answer. “I’m learning what balance means. Respecting the cycle of how things grow and change here. I’m a major part of this world now, and I can feel how unbalanced it is. Every part of me wants to repair it, heal it... Whatever it takes.”

“It’s a big world,” she mumbles.

“It’s bigger than we realize,” I divulge. “It’s not just this island, Madi. There’s another civilization on the dark island that has been praying to goddesses that haven’t answered them in several millennia.”

She sighs and leans her head back. “So what do we do?”

“First, you accept who you are,” I tell her, waiting for her to look at me before I continue. “Second... We take on one problem at a time.”

“Nesta?” she asks.

“Yes,” I affirm.

We sit in silence, finishing our teas as we stew in our thoughts. Madigan glares at the tablecloth as if it holds the answers to our problems, but it doesn’t... And just like the ceiling I’ve been staring at, it only mocks us.

Finally Madi looks at me and grins. “Hey, super intrusive thought here —”

“No,” I interrupt. “Just. No.”

“I wonder if we can play roulette with like...” She wobbles her head, dark blue eyes gleaming in the dim light of the dining room. “Bows and arrows or swords or something. Don’t you have a spear?”

I rub my forehead, snippets of my shaft conversation with Talodus and Connak rolling through my mind. “I’m not playing that.”

“Why?” she challenges. “I wonder if we like die and come back... Or if we can just pull the spear out and keep going?”

“I can’t with you right now,” I gripe, standing from the table. “Let’s just go to sleep.”

Madi follows me to the staircase. “I wonder if it’s incapacitating pain, or if it’s like removing a splinter?”

“Jesus, Neptune, and Osiris,” I whisper to myself. “Madigan, are you serious? Of course, it’s going to hurt.”

“Oh yeah?” She raises a questioning brow. “But did Nesta’s fire hurt you?”

“Well, no,” I backtrack.

“Right...” Madi drawls, her grin turning devious. “So when I shoot an

arrow at you tomorrow, just remember, you wanted me to talk to Spiran.”

She bounces up the left staircase, and I trudge up the right side to the wing I share with my guys... And I crawl back into bed with Imryll, snuggling into his warmth.

The last thought I have before I fall asleep is that I’m not even sure if she’s joking. She was on the archery team in school on Earth, but I’ve gotten really good with my spear.

ADELAIDE

DAY EIGHTY

I lay in bed, staring at the wall until Ecaeris tugs me from my nervousness with a gentle kiss behind my ear. He rolls away from me, sprawling on his back. I turn to face him, teasing my finger along his jawline. He's still not fully awake, so I take the quiet minute to bask in his silent, naked glory.

I snuggle against his chest, my arm draping over his waist, and he strokes a hand down my back as he becomes more alert. Neither of us are particularly excited about leaving today, so sleep was difficult to find and even harder to keep through the night.

"Everything will be okay," he rasps, reassuring me much like he did yesterday.

"I know," I whisper, not quite ready to start the day. "It's still a big step to take when I haven't been outside the Mongrel territory."

I glance up at him, falling into his mismatched eyes. He brushes his lips against mine, soft and tender and slow. I deepen the kiss, tangling my tongue with his until he sucks my lower lip into his mouth and bites me. I grin against him, and he groans, rolling me onto my back.

Ecaeris trails his left hand beneath my shirt, grazing the side of my breast with each swipe. I buck, impatiently rubbing against him. The evidence of his arousal courses through me like a tidal wave.

It hits him with just as much impact.

He tugs at my t-shirt, eager to remove any obstacle keeping him from feeling the warmth of my skin. We break our kiss long enough for him to pull the material over my head, and then our mouths meet once more, practicing a

very precarious battle of wills.

One we've been dancing to since the day we met.

I let my fingers roam his toned back, his muscles flexing beneath each feather-light touch. The need to be skin-to-skin has become a craving that devours me whole, leaving me a wanton wreck if I don't comply. It feels instinctual, some inherited behavior that I cannot place, though I don't fight it either.

I simply gave in... and stopped sleeping in undergarments.

He slides down the length of my body, his eyes rolling back as he takes in the naked sight of me.

"I'll never grow tired of seeing you spread out before me. You were always meant to be mine."

Ecaeris kisses and nibbles his way up from my ankle to my inner thigh, as if he says sweet nothings to me every time we're in bed together. Usually, he has me bound and unable to move, but this change of pace has me panting in anticipation.

This Mongrel loves to torture me.

I have to force myself to be patient, fighting my need for instant gratification, so I can enjoy the tender way he worships my body.

His hot breath fans across my cooling skin as he strums at the water within me. I moan at the first flick of his tongue, my pussy weeping as he plays with my senses.

He never disappoints. I don't believe he has it in him.

Ecaeris takes his time, driving me mad as he treats me as if I'm his favorite drink and not a drop of me is to be wasted. Every stroke of his tongue is fire and ice, building me up like a rogue wave, only to draw away from my shore before I can reach a crest.

He climbs over me, a wicked smirk titling his lips as he takes in my frustration. I'm ready to scream at him... Until he gives me what I want. He teases the head of his cock through my wetness before pushing into me with agonizing control. I attempt to lift my hips to meet him halfway, but he presses his weight into me, keeping me from moving.

"How do you always feel like home?" he asks, leaning his forehead against mine as he breathes in my air. "Like everything I've ever wanted, even if I still don't believe I deserve you."

I don't have an answer for that, though I feel every word like each one is a brand to my heart.

Each languid pump of his hips is akin to the ocean's waves, pushing and pulling until I'm lost in the current. The tsunami of pleasure builds within me, but each time it nears its crest, he rolls back, taking the wave with him.

He finally begins to move, pulling out right to the tip before gliding back in. Over and over. Agonizingly slow. I'm ready to scream in frustration, and then he lifts my legs, placing them over his shoulders.

"Oh god," I cry as his dick slides even further into my pussy, bottoming out inside of me. He bumps my cervix, hitting the end of me, and I'm totally unprepared for him to go that deep.

"Am I hurting you?" Ecaeris murmurs, coming to a stop.

"I'm okay," I breathe. "Keep going."

He rubs his hands down my thighs as if to soothe me. "Is it too much?"

"Don't stop," I plead.

With every gentle thrust, pressure builds throughout my body, blinding my senses. Ecaeris digs his fingers into my hips, the touch a stark juxtaposition to his movements. I rake my nails across his thighs, the tang of copper filling the air as I break his skin.

Our currents don't cross, they collide, battling against one another where the estuary meets. Only this time, he is the sweet river water, and I am the uncontrollable ocean storm.

"Breathe, Ada," Ecaeris reminds me, but I'm too lost at sea to care.

Wave after wave, pleasure batters my core, flooding me with sensations until I'm overwhelmed by each new touch. Tingles run through my body in an unending orgasm, and I arch off the bed as I gasp. All I can do is hold on and ride out the storm we've created.

Ecaeris tumbles after me, his strokes becoming faster as he spills his release inside me. He growls low in his chest as he stills above me, refusing to break our connection while we're both shuddering in the aftermath. We stay like this for seconds or hours. Time simply freezes until he lowers my legs and pulls out of me with a hiss.

He drops onto his back beside me, tugging me tight against his side, and we rest in the silence for as long as we can. Once the sun fully illuminates the room, this bubble ceases to exist.

"It's time to go, isn't it?" I inquire.

I feel him nod before he speaks. "Yes, but it won't be as dreadful as you're expecting."

"Sure," I drawl, then chuckle to myself. "I've been camping before. It

wasn't exactly the time of my life."

"You'll be with us," he tells me in that confident tone I've grown to love so much. "We'll have some fun while we travel."

"You're very pretty when you lie," I snark, batting my lashes at him.

He gives me a dazzling smile. "I'm your favorite kind of liar."



Departing from the Mongrel village is more difficult than I anticipated. I've not felt this at home in a very long time, and that makes me feel vulnerable. It's become a comfort zone for me, so venturing this far away, through the foreign edges of the forest, is equal measures of adrenaline-inducing and nerve-wracking.

Our last bit of duties included Talodus and Ecaeris turning over their daily tasks to Rin and Marren... The strangely adorable couple leaned into each other, seeking comfort as they prepared for their friends to leave. I was not expecting them to fit together like missing puzzle pieces finally reunited, but they do.

We also had a long discussion with Isolde and her husbands, making them promise to stay close to the queen and pay extra attention to the guards' reports. And we asked them to make sure there wasn't anything odd happening in the forest or on the routes. They couldn't afford a surprise visit from Nesta without us there.

Rinya and Isolde pulled me aside, hugging me tightly as they said their goodbyes. I almost cried twice this morning. And then Madigan happened... She shot me with an arrow, much to everyone's shock... Except me. And the Mongrel queen, who simply giggled while we argued.

The consensus is... Yes, it hurts. But not for long.

Hugs help heal it.

Not really, though that was the apology Madi gave me.

I'm going to miss everyone while we're gone, and that's a surprising feel that I'm not really used to.

Madi and her Shades have their own tasks to accomplish. And as badly as I wish we could stay together, that just isn't possible. They're heading to the

Dweller's village in four days' time. Ideally, the Shades and the Mongrels will end our trips at the same time, reaching the contact point within a day or so of each other.

I can't say I'm not a little peeved that they have to account for less travel time. But Connak has assured me countless times that this trip will be less treacherous than the Shades' trip. I don't know that I believe him after really studying the map. There's not much else I can say, though.

We have to make these trips and speak to the other queens.

If we don't, we risk going to war with more than just Nesta.

Madigan and I didn't share a goodbye, only good luck. If all goes well, we'll meet in the Howler's village to plan our attack on Nesta. And we have to plan for every possible scenario, leaving no stone unturned as we plot our steps for war.

I won't risk bodily injury to my Mongrels... Not when our relationships already potentially have an end date.

It's taken me this long to realize that if I lost them, I would lose my spirit and direction, my compassion and home. Each man means something to me that I've only just learned to articulate.

Together they are my sun and moon, my laughter and tears, my joy and sadness. But separate? Well, that's different.

Talodus is my strength. He's my rock, holding me steady through growth.

Imryll is my hope. With him, I know new beginnings are always around every turn.

Connak is my reason. He embodies everything that makes me want to lead.

Ecaeris is my faith, proving to me that people can change and find the right path to walk.

Knowing what I know... I can't help but question Spiran's ultimate motives. How can she let these men fall into my life and not expect me to ask if they'll be with me forever?

But more importantly, how can I be the Water Goddess this world needs without the people who make me feel whole?

There has to be more that I can do to keep them with me, keep them out of harm's reach. I doubt they would appreciate me locking them away in disaster-proof bubbles, though I'm not opposed.

I don't get much further in my thoughts. I'm completely derailed, blindsided, by an invisible attack.

Thin, sticky string clings to my skin, and every hair on the back of my neck stands on end as I squeal, “Did I just walk through a spider web?”

“Depends on how you’re going to react when you get the answer,” Ecaeris casually replies, peeling threads of silk off my arm.

“The bugs are fine. I mean, I wasn’t expecting to see ants that big...” I trail off, shivering as I glance around. “As long as it’s not spiders, then I’ll be good. Totally fine.” I shake my head. “But no. Are there spiders here?”

Ecaeris snorts. “Yes.”

“No,” Imryll argues, giving the prince an *are you stupid* look.

“Not right here where we’re at,” Connak explains, pointing at the ground. “And not nearby. Anymore.”

Talodus rubs the top of his head in exasperation. “There are spiders on the island, though.”

“That’s literally all the ways that you could answer my question,” I grumble. “So, where are the spiders?”

“Not here,” Tal assures me, shaking his head.

“I can see that,” I quip, readjusting the satchel on my back.

Connak smiles sweetly, as if he’s trying to make me feel better about this situation. “Just around the Howlers border. They pretty much stick to one area.”

“And in their village,” Ecaeris mutters.

Imryll glares at the prince. “You really don’t know when to be quiet, do you?”

“If I see a spider...” I shudder just thinking about it. “I will expire. You have to tell me before we get to wherever they are.”

“Mongrels territory is too wet for most of them,” Connak tells me, sweeping his hands around us. “And that’s where we are—”

“But we’ll probably see some tomorrow,” Ecaeris cuts in.

I lean forward, turning my head like that will help me clarify what he just said. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Tomorrow,” he repeats.

“Imy, I need a rock,” I say quickly. “Get one out of my satchel.”

“You packed rocks?” Imryll inquires. “Never mind. Of course, you did.”

“Ada,” Talodus murmurs, wrapping his arm over my shoulder as he steers me away from the prince. “You don’t need a rock. You need to relax. We’ve been traveling this island since we could walk, so there’s nothing to worry about. Besides, Connak has already killed a spider, and you had no idea.”

I nod, exhaling a breath as deep as the mariana trench. “This is how I die. Like an actual death. It’ll be you guys telling me to chill out while a giant spider greedily gorges itself on my brains.”

The guys laugh as I glower at them, though it only takes me a moment to break, a smile stretching across my face as I sigh.

“We had a good run, though,” I continue, distracting myself with nonsense. “I’ve enjoyed traveling this great distance with you all, but I’ll be returning home now.”

“Sure, you will,” Ecaeris retorts. “And will you be making that trip alone? Because we’re going this way.”

I peer up at Talodus. “I thought you said he would grow on me.”

Connak chuckles. “Biggest lie we’ve ever told.”

“I think he likes the threat of rocks being flung at him,” Imryll teases, brushing his fingertips down my arm as he passes me. “You won’t get rid of us that easily, Ada,”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I mutter, stopping to take in my surroundings.

Spiran’s words still hang heavy in my heart. They float atop my every thought as if they are the purple monstrosity, luring fish to their early end with its shimmering appearance. Though it serves its purpose, it doesn’t actually teach the fisherman anything about his task.

Or her task, in this case.

The shining lure acts as a crutch, attracting your split attention and giving you something to chase, only to tell you that despite your power and control... You can’t stop what’s already in motion.

You can only act upon it.

I look back one last time as the canopy of swamp trees disappear from my view. That’s my home, and I’m coming back to it, whole and prospering. I’ll stop this brewing war before it takes any more natives from their families.

Before it takes my Mongrels from me.

EPILOGUE

Greer

Day Ninety-Four

The people who stand opposite me could be anyone, but Ellisar and Nesterin appear delighted to see the man with the different colored eyes. It's a trait I haven't seen in person, and it makes him stick more than the others.

"Ecaeris," Nesterin greets, pulling the man in for a rough hug. "Took you long enough."

"We're thankful you made it safely," Ellisar says, nodding his head to me. "You asked to speak with the next Howler queen. Well, this is Greer Moonwalker."

Ecaeris steps aside, revealing a beautiful woman with fiery red hair. "This is Ada Stormbrave, Mongrel queen in waiting."

"Thank you for welcoming us," she says to me, smiling kindly.

"You look like a Shade." I turn to Nesterin. "Is she a Shade?"

She snorts in amusement. "I'm not a Shade."

"She's not," Nesterin agrees. "Water feels similar to fire. Though they're opposite elements, they share more likeness than most realize."

"And you know the men with her?" I inquire.

"We've known Ecaeris and Connak since we were boys," Ellisar explains. "Their mother is Queen Isolde."

Ada turns to the second man, Connak, and quirks a curious brow.

"Is Queen Isolde not your mother?" I ask, watching his reactions to gauge

if he's lying.

"She is in all the ways that matter," he admits. "I was raised under her care for most of my life."

I don't know why, but that softens me a little. "She adopted you?"

"We're not here to talk about me," he retorts, grinning.

"I'm not letting anyone into this village," I confess. "Not until I know you aren't here to—"

"We're here to talk about Nesta and the war she's just started," Ada interrupts, struggling to remain polite. "If you don't want to convene with us in a more private setting, free of potential dangers and eavesdroppers, then you're wasting my time. I'll just inform the Shade prince that I'm going to kill his mother, and we can be on our way."

I scoff. "You traveled for two weeks to admit to murder?"

"We traveled for two weeks to warn you in person and share our information," she clarifies, glancing at each of us. "The new Shade queen should have arrived at the Dweller's contact point with Lyell this morning. We're splitting this task in hopes that we can stop Nesta before she kills the rest of the Shade village."

Nesterin steps forward. "She's gotten worse?"

"She's gone mad," Ecaeris murmurs. "Lyell has been in the Mongrel village for weeks with the next Shade queen and a few other men. If he fears —"

"Then we have to kill her," Nesterin completes the Mongrel prince's sentence, his expression grim. "Greer, we need to bring them in."

"What can we do to help you?" I ask. "I want to know what you're expecting of us."

Ada peers so deep into my eyes I feel as if she can see my soul, and I don't like it.

"Have you spoken to Spiran?"

I bristle. "Once."

She frowns. "Then I'm expecting a hell of a lot more from you than I am from anyone else in this village."

"Excuse me?"

"We have too much to discuss, and exactly zero of those topics should be talked about in the open." She takes a step forward. "Do you understand?"

"Ada," a green-eyed man warns.

She holds her hand up. "I know, but she can be hesitant and unfriendly

anywhere.” She flips her hand over, a ball of water suddenly sitting in her palm. “I can prove to you I am a Mongrel and so much more. However, I will not ask again to speak with you in private. That storm isn’t the only thing we share in common. I have people I’m trying to protect, too. Yet, I left the comfort of my home in hopes that I could save more than my own village. May we talk somewhere less open?”

“No,” I reply, keeping my expression neutral.

“Yes,” Ellisar states over me. “I, the Howler prince, welcome you into our village by authority of my mother, Orianna Warsong, the Howler Queen.”

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MF Adele resides on the outskirts of the Rocket City in Alabama. She lives in her overactive imagination, often fueled by caffeine and no sleep. When she isn't writing, MF is outdoors with her family or obsessing over spicy margaritas and cigars.

MF writes what she connects with. Her heroines are often emotionally challenged while remaining strong-willed. They're snarky, chaotic, and refuse to be damsels in distress. She has a flair for misdirection, keeping her readers guessing until the end. Within the complex worlds she builds, her stories feature epic battles, murders, and graying the lines of morality.

If you're looking for MF Adele, you can find her being consistently inconsistent across social media platforms. She likes to keep people on their toes... So you never know when or where she'll pop in with news.

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