

VOLTAIRE PACK RISING 2



HIS  
ROYAL  
MATE

LINDSEY DEVIN

# His Royal Mate

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*A Forbidden Shifter Romance*

The Voltaire Pack Rising

Book 2

Lindsey Devin

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# Chapter I

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## *Aria*

I tumbled down into a cacophony of sound and heat. Lava bubbled from the Genesis Pit I had voluntarily jumped into, spitting up from the depths and searing my skin.

I was determined to unlock the mage within me. While I was driven to take that jump, falling into molten lava with the magma burning every inch of my body suddenly felt like a bad decision as pain seared every nerve. I was buoyed on the sounds of screaming and song.

The wailing came from people who wanted me back among the living, and the songs came from those who were already dead. A vision flashed before me, but it wasn't my life I saw. It was their memory of the moment Warlord Zonas marched his troops into the Onyx Rah kingdom. People fled their homes in distress as the Crypt Claw soldiers fought Onyx Rah's Royal Guard. Black wolves battled fiercely to protect their people and their homes, but the Crypt Claw army were too many in number and too ruthless in temperament to defeat.

As my bones cracked and broke and my skin blistered and peeled in the lava pit, the mage within me was slowly awakening and infusing with my wolf. She was timeless and crafted from the ether of all of those who had died. She was me, and I was her, and yet we were of two separate worlds and identities. Like the wolf that laid dormant inside me until she was summoned, my mage was a part of both of us. She wanted to show me how our kingdom fell so that I would know what our people went through.

My mage showed me the death of the Midnight Moon Pack. The alpha king and his beta fought the soldiers capturing their people and ushering them out of the war-torn city. Their ingenuity and brute strength was no match for

Warlord Zonas's brutal Crypt Claw warriors. I watched as they impaled, burned, and annihilated everyone.

The Crypt Claw were trained to kill at all costs because Zonas had proposed a trade agreement with Onyx Rah and the king was reluctant to sign it. My mage showed me the moment when the king and his beta watched as their citizens were struck down and killed.

"You broke your treaty!" the king roared as Warlord Zonas materialized before him out of the blood and ash.

"Treaties are for the weak," the warlord returned. "No paper will hold me back from claiming what I desire! With your mage gone, what better time to strike?" An ugly smirk crossed Zonas's face, and though my body was nothing but ash, the remnants of sensation still swirling within me were sickened by his callous disregard for life and the liberty of those he destroyed.

Warlord Zonas took great joy in his devious work as he himself impaled man, woman, and children on his sword before the defeated king. The last image my failing eyes could see was of Warlord Zonas commanding his officers to kill any survivors they could find. Following his orders, soldiers began scouring the city for anyone still left. The soldiers marched all the citizens they found into the Genesis Pit, including the king and his beta. I watched them perish under ash, lava, and flames as a voice whispered, *Only a descendant of the lost royals can resurrect a kingdom from the dust.*

I continued to burn as my body fell through lava to the air below until I splashed into something cool and soothing. Unable to process my surroundings, I let the waters chill my inflamed skin until I realized that I was floating in an underground spring.

My head dipped under the water, craving its refreshing revival, and the voices around me magnified and echoed, beckoning me to unleash the hidden part of myself. Charred pieces of my flesh fell away as flashes of my childhood danced across my consciousness.

"I bet you can't," Lex taunted when I was young, perhaps only eight or nine.

"I know I can." I squared my jaw and faced him as I looked down at the brook that ran through the forest.

The rains had been high, and the water level had swelled to that point that the tiny creek where we caught frogs and watched trout dart through coursing water was now a raging torrent. Lex was daring me to jump across it,

avoiding the logs that had been laid over the divide so we could cross it safely.

“If you fall in, Aria, I’m going to have to come save you,” Lex boasted, as only an arrogant young royal would.

“If you fall in, I’ll let you drown,” I shot back, crossing my arms over my chest.

Without any warning or preparation, I jumped across the rapids. My foot struck the muddy bank, and I unlaced my hands to grip the gritty soil, holding on with all my might.

I hadn’t quite cleared the bank, but I was across the stream. All I had to do was scramble to safety, but the bank was soft and muddy. Rocks and clumps of wet dirt tumbled away from my feet on every step. I did make it across, but my clothes were ruined by the mud.

Laughing, Lex cleared the jump without incident. Not a single thread of his pristine tunic and trousers were soiled by the muddy ground. Yet, despite my state of disarray, I felt triumphant.

“See?” I said with my hands on my hips.

“You are one of a kind, Aria,” Lex said, taking off his shirt. He looked muscular, but lanky and pale. He had yet to start his military training, so he had the physique of a teenage boy who wasn’t yet a man.

“What are you doing?” I asked, incensed as he draped his shirt over my shoulders.

“Saving you from an ass-whooping,” he said, still laughing. “If Lady India sees you in this state, she’ll thoroughly tan your backside.”

And he wasn’t wrong; I’d been beat for much less than sullyng the clothes that were generously loaned to me by the Bevata family.

“Thank you.” I bowed my head, grateful for the long shirt to cover the mud and mess I’d made of my clothes.

“You cleared it,” Lex reminded me with a look of adoration in his eyes.

“I told you I would.” I smirked as we took the log bridge back across the creek toward home.

Another memory overlapped with the last. I was in the garden with Cheyenne. He was showing me the herbs and flowers, taking his time to explain what each plant was, having just studied them with his tutor.

“And that is a Lilac Daisy,” he said with a note of authority. “Not only is it beautiful, but it smells good. The stem and petals can be ground up into a medicine that will combat headaches and joint swelling.”

“Fascinating.” I feigned interest to appease him because he was so excited about the most minute things.

“Don’t you think the flower is lovely?” His face melted into a wide smile when he looked at me; I must have been almost sixteen, and he, nearly fifteen.

“I do, Cheyenne.” I gave him an appeasing grin in return.

We were only friends, but he had such a sweet demeanor. I cherished our time together. I’d fallen in love with Lex. He was a bully and a tease, but we were also too similar in our bull-headedness. Having strong opinions, we were often at odds, choosing opposite sides of a fight where no winner could be declared. We tied more times than we won or lost.

Suddenly, the memories I was seeing cascaded forward in fragmented pieces. Kissing Lex for the first time in front of the rose bush topiary. Sparring in training when I pretended to be the Oxclaw Prince of Solbrook. Making love for the first time in his bed, then hiding from Amadeus and the king. I saw Lex killing Ulryk Bevata to save me from being raped during his brutal attack. Lex going over the falls, and the anguish I felt when I thought he was dead. Me diving into the lava pit, defying his gut-wrenching cries.

I stayed under the water, submerged, remembering as my skin had sluiced from my body like a snake in shed. The spring breathed me in and out of its waves while it caressed and held me like a mother cradles her child. The pain pulsed within, but no longer tormented me. I felt like I was in a deep sleep from which I wasn’t sure I would wake, and I rested and recovered from all the trauma I’d endured in my life. The water kept me safe from my own thoughts and memories when my mind finally cleared and calmed.

After what felt like an eternity of rest, my body no longer burned. The pain had fully subsided. I wasn’t sure if I was still alive, but as I lifted myself from the water and gazed down at my reflection on the glassy surface, I saw no injury. Gone was the charred and mangled skin; it was now smooth and soft. My face had the same look, and yet was also very different. It radiated a beauty I’d never seen before. While I was not vain, my features were more refined and regal than they had ever been.

Voices of the souls that had brought me to this place were but a distant hum now. I didn’t need to listen to any more of their cries. I understood them, felt their pain, knew their anguish, and because of it, was tasked with their salvation.

As I exited the pool, I shifted into my wolf and was surprised to find that

she, too, had been made more beautiful by the ordeal. She was black with a trail of blond diamond fur patches down her back and on the tips of her ears and paws. She was massive, much bigger and stronger than before.

I could feel magic pulsing through the air as it filled my body with an undeniable force. I'd unlocked my mage, yet beyond that, I carried with me the power of all those souls who had perished. I was their voice, their beacon, and their chance for resurrection.

I wanted to tell Lex I'd found my mage, but then I remembered I'd jumped into the pit with him screaming and wailing for me to stop. He must've thought I was dead. I had to get to him and let him know that not only had I survived, I was thriving in a way I'd never thought possible.

I looked around me to find a way out. Magma and lava flowed everywhere. Above me, in a pool of bubbling lava, was the Genesis Pit. The air was hot and thick with the smell of sulfur, yet the spring gave off a misty floral scent. The warring aromas made a heady mix. Beside the spring were tunnels that coursed next to the fiery pits, but were not touched by them.

I considered the mages who must have made those tunnels. Were they a way for survivors to escape? I wouldn't know unless I ventured forth. With the surge of power coursing through my veins, I pawed my way toward an underground tunnel, one of many that had been carved into the base of the active volcano. I had to find Lex.

My wolf sniffed the air to see if she could catch his scent on the wind whipping in from above. By instinct, she followed the magnetic pull Lex and his wolf had over us. Strangely, the draw to be near Lex was stronger than it ever had been. It was as if he were a missing limb, and my wolf ran through the dark underground tunnels, driven to be reunited with Lex.

There was a lightness in my soul I'd rarely ever felt. As we ran toward Lex, I could sense our happily ever after. He was undoubtedly my mate, and now that I'd found my mage and my wolf was so powerful and strong, nothing would ever get in our way or defeat us. Joy was but a breath away. My wolf raced along the path, following the scent on the breeze swirling above us.

While the distance was long and arduous, our goal was steadfast. My wolf stayed focused on Lex. We followed the wafts of air for miles and miles as the tunnels twisted and winded through the bowels of the volcano.

Suddenly, after so much time spent in the dark, there was a pinprick of light ahead. I didn't know how long I'd been in the pit, but time had no



measure there.

My wolf ran toward the light, and I felt time solidifying again, a sign that I was leaving the magical realm and entering reality once more. Finally, my wolf saw the opening looming ahead of us, and with a burst of strength, she dove for it, eager to rejoin her mate.

Bursting through the entrance, we were bathed in daylight. I was shocked to discover that we reentered the world only a few yards away from where I'd jumped into the Genesis Pit. The distance felt endless, and yet it was only a few hundred feet down.

For a moment, my wolf stood and got her bearings, perhaps also realizing that magic had made us believe we were deeper in the pit than we really were. When my wolf regained her senses, we realized there was a group standing before us, arguing amongst themselves with urgency and panic.

"Please, don't do this. It's not worth the risk!" Sir Vanoire implored in a stern and commanding tone. "If she survived the fall, she will return to you."

"It's been too long. I can't live without her!" Lex cried out frantically. He was so beside himself with worry, it looked like he was about to jump into the Genesis Pit after me.

It wasn't like him to consider taking his own life, but he was in a crazed, desperate state of mind. I immediately shifted out of my wolf and ran as fast as I could toward him. I didn't care that Polonius was there with Sire Vanoire and an entire army of Crypt Claw warriors—I had to get to Lex. I wasn't sure what the extent of my new powers were, but I didn't care. I felt stronger and more able to handle whatever would come.

"Stop!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Please stop!"

I raced to where Lex was perched on the edge of the lava pit. The sound of my voice made him freeze, and he turned to me.

"Don't jump, Lex! I'm here!"

"Aria." The look of relief on his face stilled my terror.

I raced into his arms, and he picked me up and held me. It felt good to be in his embrace again. We fit together perfectly, like our bodies were made for one another.

We held each other for a moment, both stunned that we were reunited. Following my instinct, I looked up and kissed his lips, and he returned my kiss with a passionate one of his own. We were lost in each other until Sire Vanoire cleared his throat, alerting us to the fact that there were several other people standing there, including Polonius.

Lex gently set me back onto my feet and whispered in my ear, “Don’t ever do something like that again.” His words were harsh, but his voice cracked with concern. “I can’t lose you again.”

“You won’t, but my life ending is not a reason for you to take your own,” I quietly scolded him. “Should we ever be separated by distance or death, your life is still worth living. You wouldn’t have survived that jump, Lex. You’re not a mage, and the magma would’ve killed you.”

“If you were dead, there wouldn’t have been anything to live for,” he said softly, his arms rounding my body one more time before we turned to face the crowd.

“It worked,” I whispered to him while we looked at the sea of confused and angry faces. “I’m a wolf mage.”

Lex looked stunned and surprised for only a second before his face broke into a smile. He squeezed me tighter, then focused on the Crypt Claw Warriors, all poised to strike. Beside the formation of angry Crypt Claw were Cheyenne, Sire Vanoire, a few Royal Guards from Navarrah City, and Polonius. We had quite an audience, yet there was no mistaking the passion in our kiss.

That kiss told Polonius, the Crypt Claw, and those from Navarrah City watching that Lex and I were, and always had been, in love.

## Chapter 2

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### *Lex*

Aria was alive! I couldn't think of anything else, just the fact that she had survived the impossible. She'd jumped into a pit of molten lava, and come out moments later looking more radiant and beautiful than she ever had. I wasn't thinking of Sire Vanoire or Polonius watching us, nor was I considering that my brother was right there beside me; I knew Cheyenne would be thrilled for our reunion. I'd kissed Aria with reckless abandon, grateful to see her alive. Now, we faced a sea of angry expressions and had to contend with the fact that we were actually on the run from Polonius and his men.

At the moment, I didn't care. I had Aria back, yet she was different. Not only was she more radiant, but her aura and light seemed brighter, like she was becoming a beacon for her people. She exuded such an immense amount of power, I could feel it electrifying the air.

She had changed. While I didn't doubt she still loved me, I couldn't help but wonder if things going forward would be different between us. While it wasn't a consideration for the moment, with Polonius about to charge at us, it was something for us to discuss at a later time.

Moments of Aria's life and the times people had risked it flashed before my eyes as I looked at all the scowling, disgruntled faces. Polonius had tried to electrocute her and left her weak and disoriented. Sire Vanoire attempted to drown her and would have succeeded had I not intervened in time. And I'd just freed her from the trap that Polonius had set in Harlance Varian's workshop in the Onyx Rah castle. There, he'd tried to bury her alive. Yet, none of those attempts to end Aria's life had freed her mage. It had taken her diving into the very pit that had destroyed her ancestors to finally transform

her.

“Magnificent,” Polonius said, biting back his rage. He turned to his soldiers. “Everyone, please leave us. Lex, Sire Vanoire, and Cheyenne, you will stay. I’m releasing my soldiers because I’m not going to fight you. I ask that you give me the same courtesy.”

Immediately, the Crypt Claw soldiers drew back and retreated.

“Royal Guards,” I addressed the small troop we had gathered. “Fall back. Cheyenne or I will let you know if there is any danger.”

While they grumbled and protested under their breath, they retreated into the shadows, ready to reemerge at the first sign of trouble.

Polonius bowed his head to me, then looked at Aria. “Impressive,” he said to her. “You survived.” His words were full of awe.

Amadeus, looking older than his years, came forward. His body was weak, and he could hardly take the few steps needed to stand by Polonius’ side. I heard Aria gasp beside me, but Polonius didn’t even flinch, nor did he regard Amadeus in any way. Clearly, he had power over Amadeus and didn’t care what was done to him. Amadeus was a servant to his master and had no value beyond the use his magic served.

“I not only survived, but I’ve unlocked my mage, and we have magic beyond my wildest imaginings,” Aria said before she transformed into her wolf.

Her wolf was massive and strikingly beautiful with a trail of diamond patches from her ears to her tail and on the tips of her paws. She stood before me, a magnificent creature. Polonius was visibly impressed, and for one moment, forgot his hold on Amadeus. Amadeus, too, was inspired seeing his own daughter’s massive wolf. He looked like he might rebel against Polonius and attack him, but as Aria put her wolf away, Amadeus slunk back into an exhausted depression. The hands he had lifted to attack drifted softly down to his sides.

The moment she was herself again, Amadeus’ power and will to fight evaporated. It was as if Aria’s wolf had given him the strength he needed, and without it, his power was almost completely depleted.

“I see you’ve unlocked your mage,” Polonius said with excitement. “Come back to Brahman’s Peak, and we’ll continue our work raising Onyx Rah.”

The way Polonius spoke to Aria sent bolts of rage through me. How dare he command her! She wasn’t his, and she had no intention of helping him

steal what was rightfully hers.

I almost spoke up to defend her legacy, but Sire Vanoire interrupted me. “She needs endurance training and instruction. Wild, unrefined power will likely destroy all you want to rebuild,” Sire Vanoire warned.

Amadeus also spoke, though he was hardly able to form words. “Whatever mage trains her, they must be as powerful, or her magic will overrule them.” All the while, he coughed and sputtered from the effort to speak.

Watching Amadeus, I saw how much his body and magic had deteriorated under Polonius’ poisoning. I wasn’t sure if mages could even be restored to health from such a state. We had to rescue Amadeus from Polonius.

“Aria doesn’t have to go anywhere with you.” It took incredible strength to hold back my venom as I addressed Polonius. “Her transformation proves that she’s an Onyx Rah royal. Any rights you hold her are null and void. She is free to choose who she wants to marry.

“I can do what I want with her,” Polonius boomed, not listening to reason. “She is my betrothed. Servant or sovereign, nothing changes the fact that she is promised to me in marriage and she’s already agreed to it.”

“I have not,” Aria interrupted. “I was forced to accept your proposal of marriage, but I have never chosen you willingly.” She stood tall and proud before him.

“This is absurd,” Polonius fumed. “I have a contract that says you have. Come, Aria, I’ve had enough.” He outstretched his hand. “I’ll not entertain this nonsense any longer. You’re mine—legally, illegally, I really don’t care. You belong with me. I have ways to force you back I’d rather not use.” He took a step toward Aria, who was a quiet storm. There was no way she’d go without a fight.

“If you want to marry Aria, you will have to court her like everyone else,” I said. “Let her choose you.” I knew the idea would incense Polonius, because Aria would never pick him over me.

“I don’t need to woo what is already mine!” Polonius yelled and continued to stride toward Aria, who centered herself, prepared to fight him.

Sire also poised his arms, readying himself to flail magic to protect her. My wolf and Cheyenne’s were positioned to shift and attack. No one was going to take Aria from us, least of all a brutal tyrant who’d likely find a way to usurp her magic and incarcerate her.

“You told me I was a royal,” Aria said. “You knew it even before I did. Our contract was forfeit the moment my royalty was revealed.” She squared her stance to defend herself.

When Polonius stopped in front of Aria, he reached out to touch her cheek, a disgustingly tender gesture. “You and I both know that’s not true. You’re mine, you’ve been mine since the moment I first saw your wolf.”

His seductive tone was enough to make me sick. I stayed poised, ready to destroy the monster.

“I belong to no one!” she shouted, throwing a ball of fire from her fists that burst onto his chest and singed his cloak as the embers died away.

“Good!” Polonius exclaimed, his eyes glinting with glee. “Very good, my dear. We can work with your magic to make it stronger and more precise.” He shook off the last of the smoldering ashes. “That blast should have penetrated my armor.” He knocked his chest, showing that he wore something stiff underneath his cloak and tunic. “I can make you stronger. Together, we could be the most powerful rulers in all of Voltaire.”

“Never!” Aria gritted her teeth and threw another fireball at him. This one bounced off of his arm and burned a hole in the cloak.

The magic must have touched his skin because he flinched a little before shaking the burning embers off his arm. Polonius looked at Aria with a strange kind of admiration. “You’re a fast learner. Perhaps all you need to do is practice your aim.” A wry smile spread across his face.

She lifted her arms to throw her entire being into another blast, but he caught them in mid-air and held her back.

“You have nothing to teach me!” she screamed as she tried to wrangle her hands out of his.

“Restraint comes to mind,” he laughed as he held her steadfast.

“Aria has the full force of Navarrah’s Armada and armed forces behind her,” I threatened Polonius as I took a step toward him, unsure of what he planned to do with her.

“Surely not behind her this very instant,” Polonius said with a laugh, looking pointedly around us as if the threat of Navarrian armed forces wasn’t a deterrent.

This sent Aria into a rage. Having just obtained her magic, she had little control over its use. With her fury boiling over, she yanked her hands free from Polonius and launched blasts of fire and wind at him, making him jump away from her before being burned alive.

The heat radiating from Aria destroyed dilapidated buildings and overgrown trees, proving the great magnitude of her magic. From the blazing flames, a being started to take shape. Monstrous and dangerous, the fire creature grew to an unfathomable height. Since Aria's mage didn't have the means to temper her magic, she quaked in the throes of rage, infernos spurting and popping around her. The monster she created didn't know who was on the right or wrong side of the argument and likely would have killed everyone had Sire not stepped in.

"Aria!" Sire Vanoire called out. "Rein in your magic! Hold it tight, or it will spiral away from you and destroy everything!"

With great effort, Aria restrained herself, and the leaping flames cooled to smoking embers while the fire beast that had been forming evaporated into mist. Sweat dripped from her temples while she breathed through the torrent of her rage.

"That's it," Sire Vanoire praised, stepping back from her carefully.

"Whoa," Cheyenne said, speaking up for the first time since Aria's return.

Shaken by the enormity of Aria's power, Polonius backed away from Aria and the group. "I can teach you to hone your skills," Polonius said, sounding desperate. "You are more like me than you realize."

Aria's furious eyes focused on Polonius, and it looked like she might reconsider wielding her wild magic again.

"No, Aria!" Sire Vanoire burst out. "You haven't the skill. You kill him, and we will all die."

Aria looked at Sire with a wild and untamed expression.

"She needs to return to the Obsidian Valley and be properly trained," Sire Vanoire said. "Without the ability to control her magic, Aria will become a liability. Anytime she is enraged, her wolf and mage will protect her with raw and unbridled power. Left untrained, her magic will grow into an unmanageable entity. We cannot have that happen. Even you, Polonius, will not want Aria to be so magically unstable—she could destroy your entire kingdom with just a glance. She must be tamed."

"Sire is right," Amadeus agreed in a thin, rasping voice. "She has great power, but to leave it wild would make her a danger to all of us."

Disturbed by the malevolence in her magic, Aria looked to Sire while her mage calmed down and she came to her senses. "Can you teach me to hone it?"

"I must," Sire Vanoire said with urgency.

“Maybe the Goldlace family can help,” Aria said, sounding like herself again. “Their father Harlance is a ghost haunting the Tombs; he has given me guidance before. His family can support me.”

“Perhaps,” was all Sire Vanoire said with a frustrated scowl.

It was no secret that Sire had a great hatred for the Goldlace family. I assumed the less he had to do with them, the better, but necessity now demanded that he abandon his prejudice. The Goldlace family made up the two other branches of the royal trinity that could resurrect the Onyx Rah kingdom.

“She can be trained in my castle,” Polonius said, still trying to keep his hold on Aria. “Her own father can do it.”

“You and I both know he’s not strong enough,” Sire said, shooting Amadeus a hateful glance. It was Polonius’ poisoning of Amadeus that had left him so weak. “She must return to the Obsidian Valley where there are mages and materials needed to refine her skills. I’ll bring up the matter of your contract with the Lupine Coalition and see what their thoughts on the matter are. They were the governing body behind your peace negotiations, were they not?”

“They were, but I don’t have to uphold their laws,” Polonius huffed. “Aria is already my possession. You may train my wife, but you will return her to me when you’re done. The Coalition has already mediated the transfer; there is only the matter of a ceremony to perform. The contract states that she is to be my wife. By law, that contract allows me to have Aria.”

“Still, I will discuss it since there is the matter of her royalty to consider,” Sire Vanoire said as he took Aria, still shaking, by the hand and walked her away from Polonius and the mouth of Genesis Pit where we were still gathered.

Cheyenne and I quickly followed them, leaving Polonius and Amadeus behind. I didn’t look back to see their angered faces. I didn’t care. We were getting Aria to safety.

When we reached the vehicles we’d left near the ruins of the Onyx Rah city, we all climbed into one of them for the long, arduous journey back to the Obsidian Valley.

“I promise we will figure this out,” I said as Aria slipped onto the bench seat and laid her head against the glass window.

She didn’t respond, just turned her head to watch the passing scenery.

Cheyenne and I sat with her while Sire Vanoire drove. What had she



become? What would our future look like? There were too many questions to make conversation, so we rode in silence until Cheyenne eventually spoke while Aria continued to stare out the window, lost in thought.

“Will you be returning to Navarrah City while Aria trains in the Obsidian Valley, Lex?” he asked. “You’ve been absent from your duties for a long time. Rumors will spread that you’re alive and have survived plunging from the top of the Angeline Falls.” Cheyenne’s tone wasn’t accusatory, just concerned.

How quickly my brother had grown from being a young eager child to the man sitting beside me. He’d shouldered my duties well and was a formidable soldier in battle. Father would learn to rely on him as he had on me.

I needed to spend my time with Aria, especially since it seemed Polonius would stop at nothing to get his hands on her.

“I will accompany Aria to Obsidian Valley and attend her training,” I told Cheyenne. “She still needs my protection. Should the kingdom worry in regard to my whereabouts, you can advise Father to tell the kingdom I’m still recovering. I’ll resume my duties when I’m fully restored to health. Until then, Cheyenne, you have been doing an exceptional job of fulfilling my role,” I complimented. “I ask that you continue to do so on my behalf. Father must enlist more troops for you and Jarvis to train. I fear war is on the horizon. I will be back one day.” I offered him a smile as I took Aria’s hand. “We both will.”

Aria stiffened a little in my grip, but the tension in her muscles quickly released. Whatever objection she’d tempered must have passed.

“My dear brother, Aria clearly doesn’t need anyone’s protection,” Cheyenne said with a laugh. “However, I relish the chance to learn more about leading our troops and honing my fighting skill. I’ll fill in for you for as long as you need me. Father now trusts me enough to sit at his table and participate in his chamber meetings in the great salon,” He gave a proud smile. “They’ve been riveting and very informative.”

A pang of jealousy stabbed me. Only months ago, I was the only Redveign heir to sit at my father’s table and be privy to his chamber meetings where vital issues relating to our kingdom were discussed. While it hurt to think I was no longer able to sit by my father’s side and weigh in on crucial matters, I couldn’t think of anything more important at present than Aria’s health and well-being. Both were being compromised by her transformation into a mage.

She looked well, but her magic was out of control, as was her ability to reason. I feared she'd do something rash and hasty, given that her focus was solely on resurrecting a dead kingdom and reviving its people.

"You have become a true leader, Cheyenne," I said. "I can think of no one better to carry on my duties."

"Thank you, Lex," Cheyenne said with humility. "Keep Aria close. A partnership with Onyx Rah, when it is raised, will benefit all of us."

"As will keeping the love of my life alive," I said, giving him a look.

I thought the mention of this would get a rise out of Aria, but she was still too lost in her musings. She stared out the window as if she wasn't even in the carriage with us.

"Aye," was the only answer Cheyenne gave, with Sire driving the car. We didn't know where his loyalties fell, exactly. I figured he was only truly loyal to himself and his ambitions.

Sire drove the car, but apparently had no need to add to our conversation, as we spent the rest of the trip to Sire's house in relative silence.

When we arrived, Cheyenne informed us that he planned to journey on to Navarrah City and would be sending troops to protect the Tombs and relieve the soldiers there already. After agreeing that was a sound plan, I exited the vehicle with Aria.

The moment she stepped out of the car, Sire approached and mumbled something before he attacked. Magic flames hit us so hard, it was like we were being burned alive. I'd had a level of trust in Sire Vanoire, but that vanished the moment we were hit with wind and heat. The flames and intensity of his magic were powerful enough to have me believe he'd just set us ablaze the same way Aria had tried to kill Polonius.

## Chapter 3

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### *Aria*

Fire burned around us, but my magic knew to protect me and Lex. It knew that we were in danger and went to work.

Sire was doing his best to attack from all sides, but my magic deflected his. It felt good, sparing with Sire and being able to protect Lex. Since he had no magic at all, I was the one who shielded us from the fire strikes and lightning bolts coming from Sire's hands.

I didn't know why Sire had suddenly attacked. I could only assume it was to test me or to push me as he'd done in the past. He'd brought me to the brink of death before in an attempt to extract my mage. Now that my mage was present, I fought with raw magic and power.

Like my wolf, my magic was its own entity, and it protected me. Since Lex was my wolf's mate, my magic also protected him. Though I wasn't able to command my magic yet, it knew to divert Sire's strikes against us. As effective as it was in doing that, I wanted the power to direct my magic and create an offensive against him. I longed to be as powerful as Amadeus or Sire, but I also knew that magic had its limits.

"Try to turn my magic against me," Sire commanded as if he'd heard my thoughts. "Focus on turning the magic back into the conjurer."

Lex had his sword poised in the air, ready to kill, but it was a useless weapon against the power of magic. However, the sword's reflection gave me an idea. I put my hands up to the flashes of heat and laser-sharp light, yet all it did was singe and burn. When I imagined mirroring the fire strike and making its exact copy, the bolt turned back on itself toward Sire Vanoire, and he had to dodge his own fire. The more I repeated the process, the fewer fire bolts he made. Suddenly, I wasn't just reflecting his magic back, but making

my own as if I'd done it my whole life. Some inner knowledge was working without my even being conscious of it. I felt my confidence increasing with each bolt I sailed back toward Sire. I decided to test my skill to see if I could change the shape and function of the bolts I was sending.

I was able to alter them some, but not enough. And as I tried to manipulate my magic, my strength started to wane. With my power abating, I could feel tension radiating from Lex.

"Leave her alone, Sire!" Lex yelled from beside me. "She's been through too much! We aren't in the mood for your sick mage tests."

"She's learning," Sire retorted, his tone elated tone. "She's an excellent pupil."

"Then ease up."

"I'm alright," I breathed out, voicing words I was saying to myself, reassuring myself that the me I knew myself to be was still there.

On the drive to the Obsidian Valley, I had pondered the changes I felt happening within me. Remnants of myself had remained, but I was someone very altered from who I had been. Before, I was angry and determined, but with my mage and her magic came a kind of peace I'd never known. I couldn't expect Lex to understand it, at least not right away. All he knew was the woman he loved, the woman who had been taken by a tyrant and forced to find her mage in the most harrowing of ways. Yet, it all had molded me into something greater than myself.

Despite the surge in my power and confidence, I could feel my body aching and my lungs clamoring for breath. Lex's wolf tensed within him, and I feared Lex might shift and seriously injure the old mage. I knew Lex's wolf more acutely now after my mage had appeared. Our wolves were eternally connected, regardless of the obstacles that stood in the way of our union. Lex was, without a doubt, my wolf's mate regardless of the political challenges we faced.

While my mind momentarily wandered, Sire regained the upper hand, and I found myself on the defensive again. I could feel Sire's strength dissipating, but so was mine. I understood now how Amadeus must have become so weak, he fell prey to Polonius after freezing all the citizens of Brahman's Peak.

Sire changed strategies and sent some kind of plague to me that had my skin crawling. Instead of scratching the itching patches of skin, I tried to ignore the discomfort and envision Sire with actual bugs and tiny crawling

beings on him.

Little critters did bloom all over his body, but the more I conjured them, the worse my itching became. It got to the point in my magical sparing with Sire Vanoire where I could hardly stand upright.

“Enough,” I gasped as sudden fatigue overtook me, and the little creatures crawling on Sire disappeared.

“I told you,” Lex scolded Sire.

Sire Vanoire lowered his arms and caught his own breath. “I had to see the extent of her raw magic,” he said as if doing so was absolutely vital to my existence.

“She needs to rest. She’s just been burned alive, and all you can think to do is try and fry her again?” Lex was both exasperated and incensed.

“I have my reasons for doing so,” Sire said, regaining his strength.

“We need to eat.” Lex glared at him. “You brought us to your home, and as reluctant as I am to be your guest, I must ask that you provide us food and a place to rest. Polonius backed down too easily today. We can’t expect him to relent that quickly. He will return. At any moment, he and his Crypt Claw warriors will become our biggest problem. We can’t face them starving and fatigued.”

“Of course not,” Sire Vanoire said condescendingly. “This way.”

Sire Vanoire walked to his front door, and it magically opened. Once we were inside the room, my stress dissipated with the warmth and pleasant smells of baked bread and fragrant vegetables. I was impressed with the old mage’s amount of magic, as I was still weak and disoriented from our sparring, yet he’d had enough to attack me while maintaining a warm climate in his home. In the blink of an eye, hot soup with ribbons of steam coursing out of the bowls appeared, as did a thick meat stew, billowing loaves of freshly baked bread glistening with butter, and a tall carafe of deep red wine. Not until I saw the food did I realize how hungry I was.

“Sit and eat,” Sire offered with a sweeping movement of his arm. “Polonius will not come with his forces to attack us. I believe he’ll try to woo Aria’s affection, or at the very least, obedience. He, like myself, must be curious about the extent of her enchantment. If she is as powerful as I believe she is, Aria will be a formidable foe.”

“Good. He should know to stay away from her, then,” Lex grumbled. “I certainly wouldn’t want to marry a powerful mage who wanted me dead.” He turned and glanced at me, then offered a little smile, which I appreciated.

“He’ll not want to tempt her wrath, certainly, since Polonius needs her to resurrect Onyx Rah to do his bidding,” Sire said. “I think the truer scenario might be one where he will manipulate Aria into believing that he’ll submit to her for the greater good. He’ll want to have her as his wife, which might make you think his marriage offer is legitimate. He may even try to convince you, Aria, that you’re his fated mate.”

Sire’s even mentioning such a thing sent my stomach lurching. “There is no way that I would ever agree to become Polonius’ mate!” I protested vehemently.

“Of course he knows your feelings for Lex,” Sire said. “His angle might be less of a romantic gesture and more a powerful one. The ultimate good mates with the ultimate evil, and thus, in turn, the kingdoms of Voltaire stay in balance. Polonius won’t be wooing you away from Lex, but could try and manipulate you into believing that a partnership with him would be the only way to keep him from hurting those you loved.”

This made me pause. “He would, wouldn’t he?” I knew that Polonius would try any angle, and that one would be the only approach that might actually work.

“Only time will tell. Until then, rest and eat. Tomorrow, you’ll begin your training. For now, I must go into town and make a few pressing inquiries regarding Onyx Rah and its resurrection. There are others who’ve attempted to raise the ruined city. I’m curious to see what they’ve tried. No one will bother you here tonight, including me.”

And with that strange explanation, Sire left us alone with the food. I thanked him as he walked away, then looked at Lex. For the first time in longer than I could remember, we were alone without the immediate threat of someone tearing us apart or trying to kill one of us. For the moment, we were together, safe and sound.

“Finally,” Lex breathed as he returned my gaze. “Are you really alright? Is there any pain?”

While Lex’s look of distress worried me, I breathed past it. “I believe the worst of it is over,” I said with a reassuring smile.

“Do you have any wounds or injuries?” he asked, still looking worried.

“They’re all only memories.” I smiled at him again and sat down to eat. My hunger had become the only thing I was feeling at that moment.

“We can’t keep doing this to each other,” he said, sounding serious. “We have each nearly died. I won’t live a life without you.” He gave me a hard

stare.

“Perhaps our near deaths have proven that we can withstand anything,” I countered after taking a spoonful of the rich, brothy stew.

“Or that we’ve tempted fate one too many times.” Lex’s eyes slid into a glare of warning as he cut off a chunk of bread and dunked it deep into his stew.

“I’m just glad you and I are here,” I said, easing his stress with a big smile and an outstretched hand.

“I am, too,” he conceded. “I do question Sire Vanoire’s motives, though. He’s brought you to death’s door one too many times.” He grimaced, then took a hearty bite of his stew-soaked bread.

“This time, I fought him hard. The stronger I get, the less of a threat he’ll become,” I said, continuing to eat. “Now I have what I need to resurrect my kingdom and bring my people together again.”

I suddenly had a wave of warmth and pride. I had a purpose. Defending Lex and fighting beside him for the honor and autonomy of Navarrah City had first united me and him. I, however, found a greater calling in knowing my destiny was to bring my people back to their homeland and create a kingdom that could never be defeated again.

“You found your mage, for which I’m grateful, but I’m afraid until Polonius is stopped, neither of us have won,” Lex cautioned.

“I’ll learn how to use my magic and soon will be more powerful than Polonius, especially with Sire Vanoire’s help. Then we can rescue Amadeus,” I said, feeling hopeful.

“I wish Amadeus was teaching you and not Sire. He didn’t tell you about being your father because his love for your mother was forbidden, however, I appreciated that he still sheltered you. I would much rather he be your guide,” Lex sighed and dunked his bread again.

“As would I, but he’s being poisoned and controlled by Polonius. He can’t help me, but soon, very soon, I’ll rip him from that monster’s clutches. Polonius is going to pay for all he and his family have done to the Midnight Moon Pack.” Anger warmed my ears and tightened my throat at the thought of Polonius’ grandfather killing all of my ancestors and trapping their souls in the Tombs.

“Revenge is never a good motivator, Aria,” Lex said, feeling the need to counsel me for some reason.

“I agree, but liberation, retribution, and restoration is,” I said with a smile,

easing the mood and eating more. “As long as Sire Vanoire’s goals align with mine I don’t see anything wrong with letting him teach me what he knows. He’s a very powerful mage and I’d be a fool not to allow him to instruct me. I have too much to learn.”

Having food in my body and a warm, relatively safe harbor, took the hardened edges off. I knew Lex’s words were motivated by fear and I understood his concerns, but I wasn’t going to let anything keep me from raising Onyx Rah and seeing Polonius defeated.

“I just want you to be careful,” Lex reiterated. “I never want to see you die again. That is a command from your future king.” Stew glossed lips spread into a sweet smile and all I wanted to do was kiss them, so I did.

I leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his tasty lips.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I said with only a slight mocking tone.

“Shall we finish our food and go to bed, Your Highness?” he asked, with a deep and sultry voice that fanned over my ear and sliced straight to my aching center.

Being in Lex’s arms, seeing his face, feeling his body, enveloping myself in Lex Redveign was a luxury I thought I might not ever experience again. Here he was with me, alone. We were both alive and more, we were able to love one another that night. Not that the laws and rules forbidding us were ever to be obeyed, but knowing we could be with each other was intoxicating.

“Sire Vanoire said he wasn’t coming back,” I reminded him as I sat back in my chair and tried to finish my meal.

“Good,” Lex said with a sly grin that made us both laugh.

We finished eating most of the food Sire had conjured, and when we couldn’t eat anymore, Lex rose and took my hand.

“Shall we retire?” he asked.

“I hope you’re asking me to make love to you,” I said coyly.

“Oh, yes, that’s exactly what I’m asking,” he laughed. “Shall I draw us a bath? We both really need one.” In emphasis, he scrunched his nose and waved his hand in front of his face.

I hadn’t really thought of my appearance, but as I ran my fingers through my hair, I found that they quickly lodged into the snarled strands. I then looked down at my tunic and pants and saw that they were burned, ripped, and soiled. Lex didn’t look much better, with drying blood on his clothing and a few healing wounds on his arms and hands.

“I think a bath is definitely in order,” I said as I walked into the bathing



room and touched the spigot, looking for the knobs to open the water. As soon as I touched the metal spout, water began to flow by magic.

“This whole house must be doused in magic,” Lex marveled.

“Sire spelled everything.” I looked around the unassuming space with its arched entryways and soft sandstone flooring. The colors were muted and calm, but I could see magic swirling over everything. I hadn’t noticed before, but his entire house had been glamoured, making it glitter with magical energy.

“It’s convenient for us that he did,” Lex said with a devilish smile as he tugged his bloodied shirt over his head, revealing a few healing wounds crisscrossed over tight musculature.

Lex was the most handsome man I’d ever beheld, but I’d never given myself license to look at him with desire. I’d always felt like such things were only allowed for someone deserving of his love. While I’d never considered myself unworthy, everyone else had. I was a servant, an underling to his royal majesty, and though Lex had never treated me as such, it was hard not to see myself that way.

Now, I was a royal wolf mage belonging to a lost kingdom. I was his equal in the eyes of society. I could stand beside him as his queen, and no one in Tobran would protest. Heck, all of Voltaire would honor our union, but, whose queen would I be? A consort to him and his kingdom, or the ruler of my own?

“Are you getting in?” Lex asked as his naked body slunk into the steaming hot bath. “I have a spot right here for you.” He grinned at me, patting his lap.

Under the swirling water teeming with a thin veil of steam, I could see his sizable cock rising hard and thick. How I loved that girthy beast. His body was like a sanctuary where I longed to take refuge. When the world had pulled us apart by abducting me or battling him, we’d stolen a moment to find solace in each other.

This night was no different, only it was entirely ours. We could bask in each other. If I wanted to make love to him over and over again, there was no one to tell me not to. And more importantly, no one to tell me I didn’t deserve his love. There was the pesky matter of Polonius thinking I was his, but I wasn’t. Being a royal gave me choices I’d never had before.

I slipped out of my tunic and let my pants drop to the floor, ready to face Lex as his equal. For the first time in my life, I truly felt like I not only

belonged to Lex, but also belonged with him and his kind.

I dipped myself into the water and met his raging cock, my legs straddling him. He leaned in and kissed my lips, and my insides electrified with the familiar taste of him. I had missed him. His fingers danced over my flushed skin, making my nipples hard, sensitive, and needy.

“Let’s never leave this bathtub,” he whispered into my neck. “I want to suspend time forever.”

His breath was warm and soft against my overheated neck. I writhed on his erection, wanting him inside me as I bit down on his moist skin. The bone of his clavicle lodged softly in my mouth before I licked his shoulder, wanting to devour him.

“I don’t want to stay in this bathtub,” I countered. “I want you to take me to the bed and make love to me there.” I curled my fingers around his cock and tugged on it slightly, hardening him more. “Forever.”

“Yes, my queen,” he barely breathed.

After finding a bar of scented soap and various bath oils, we made quick work of lathering up and scrubbing the dirt, dust, and blood from our skin. When we were clean, Lex lifted me out of the bathtub, water sluicing from our bodies. He set my feet down on the cold soapstone floor, and water rained off me before Lex wrapped a warm towel around my body. He then lifted me into his arms and carried me to the bed, his cock stabbing me through the fabric.

“I need you,” I said. “I want to feel you inside me. I want to be stretched and filled until I don’t know where I end and you begin.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and his lips met mine again. They were warm and familiar and tasted like victory.

## Chapter 4

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### *Lex*

Her body tightened around my cock as I sank into heaven. Of everything in the world, there would be no greater feeling than Aria's body sheathed around mine. Having her almost die yet again, and facing losing her forever, had my cock hard for her all night long. No amount of sex could satisfy my desire to possess her, body and soul.

I knew she was a woman who would never be owned. Her fierce and independent spirit would, above reason or rationale, guide her to make her own choices. Like the fact that she chose to jump into a fiery pit to face her death. Almost losing your lover did something to a person, and Aria's act of transformation had done terrible things to me. I felt enslaved to the thought that one day, I could lose her just as easily as I almost had.

"Stay with me forever," I begged her as I rocked into her harder while she arched against my chest, her soft breasts melding against my muscles.

"I'm here," she moaned, avoiding my exact meaning. She spread her legs wider, giving me better access as she nuzzled her face into my chest. "Fuck me harder." She bit my skin as her wolf called out to mine, mating with furious need.

At that moment, there was love between us, but with what we'd been through, there was raw passion, too. As her pussy muscles constricted my cock, I ached for a release, for that warm wave of euphoria to hit, but Aria was still in battle mode, still a warrior. I was on top of her, kissing her neck before my lips trailed down her body to suck each of her pert nipples into my mouth. A slow moan escaped her lips. Her hands gripped my ass cheeks, pinning me to her so that I was as deep inside her as my cock could go.

She was in desperate need of a release. I pulled out of her and kissed her

sweet lips that had curled into a pout.

“On your knees, soldier,” I said, my voice ringing with an erotic command.

“What are you doing?” she complained.

“I said, on your knees. You want me to fuck you? Well, you’re going to get fucked.” My voice was dark and heady, and she smiled as she turned her perfect ass up in the air. I slapped those ass cheeks hard enough to leave a little pink mark.

“Lex?” Aria looked back at me with a sly grin. I placed one hand on each side of her hips and aligned my cock with her gorgeous pussy. “Are you ready?” I asked in an almost sinister tone.

“I think,” she laughed as I bolted into her, making her gasp with the onslaught. “Yes,” she breathed.

Denied her title all her life, Aria had been made to live as a servant. Then she’d been stolen by a ruthless warlord and forced to the brink of death to find her mage. She had rage bottled up inside of her, and I was there to extract it. I may not have been able to help her with her mage, but I was going to be there to tame the fury that was just simmering below the surface.

My cock tingled as erotic sensations lit up my body. Taking her from behind had my wolf rearing his head as he surfaced from the depths, animalistic and primal.

“I’m yours, Aria Blackbane,” I said as I thrust. “Forever,” I thrust again. “You are my queen, my defender, my mage, and my life.” I thrust harder and faster. “Mine,” I gritted out. I leaned forward, then rounded my hand to her pussy, massaging her clit until she shattered around my cock.

Convulsing and tightening until I couldn’t hold myself together anymore, I pulled out and pumped a torrent onto her ass.

We both collapsed after riding out our powerful orgasms. When we were done, Aria was silent. Seeing her dazed expression, I brought her wet, naked body to mine. I then wrapped the warm duvet over us, knowing our passion would cool and we would soon be chilled to the bone. Aria was safe and comfortable in my arms. Sex protected us; sex was a fight we could both win. Love had endangered our hearts and made them vulnerable, and yet, at that moment, it was all I could feel.

I moved her damp hair from her ear to say the words put us on a perilous path, but I didn’t care. “I love you.”

Her hand took mine and brought it around her body, cinching me in

closer as I spooned into her back, enveloping her. Her thumb lovingly stroked my hand, but she didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Her mind must have been a whirl of thoughts and feelings.

I understood the magnitude of her transformation. With it had come answers she'd always craved, but there were questions, too. Questions neither of us had answers for yet.

It didn't take long for sleep to claim us. As night became morning, I woke several times, panicked that Aria might be gone, only to find her still nestled in my arms. Noticing how good she felt in my embrace, I brought her in closer. She unconsciously held me tightly as we fell back asleep, exhausted and at peace.

Hours of blissful slumber were suddenly shattered by blaring sunlight and gruff instructions.

"Get out of bed," Sire Vanoire ordered, standing over us.

Thankfully, our naked bodies were covered, but it was still jarring to find Sire Vanoire peering down his long, beaked nose at us with those beady eyes. While he had sharp and aged features, they seemed rather intensified as I looked up at his glowering face.

"We have a meeting in half an hour," he barked. "You both need to awaken and get dressed."

Aria barely stirred in my arms, likely still needing sleep. What her body had been through in the last few days warranted more than a couple of hours of rest.

"What meeting?" I rubbed my eyes after gently extracting myself from Aria's embrace.

"We are discussing how to revive the Onyx Rah kingdom with the Goldlace family and have precious little time before Polonius becomes impatient. We must act quickly," Sire said with great urgency.

"Of course." I turned to Aria and kissed her bare shoulder. I didn't care if Sire saw us; I'd kiss the woman who would likely become my wife as often as I liked. I needed Sire and the world to know she was mine.

"Hmm?" she mumbled.

"We have a meeting in the city," I whispered. "We're going to raise your kingdom, my love," I said with a lilt in my voice.

A sweet smile crossed her face. "Good," she said, opening her eyes.

"I'll leave you to get dressed," Sire said, still sounding perturbed.

After the door clicked shut, Aria and I extracted ourselves from the bed.

“I could sleep for days,” she confessed.

“And you should be allowed that luxury, but alas, you are a bonafide royal now,” I said with a smile. “And royals never rest.”

“It wasn’t like I was lounging around all day as a servant, either,” she reminded me, her voice teasing.

“If you’re in bed with me, we won’t ever be doing much lounging.” I walked up to her and looped my arms around her middle. “You’re too delicious to resist.” I kissed her lips, savoring her taste. “So, I won’t resist you.”

“I don’t see the problem with that,” she said, beaming.

While Aria was the same person, she had a different look now. It was hard to describe exactly what had changed about her, but there was an air of joy and refined grace layered over her tough and formidable exterior. She'd always had beauty, but it had been overshadowed by her grit and bravery. Now that beauty remained, as did that fierceness, but she held herself like a queen.

I envisioned her wearing a crown and ruling a country. While I knew she deserved to be the sovereign Onyx Rah needed, I selfishly wanted her ruling Navarrah City by my side.

But she would never know my inner longings because I was committed to helping her raise her lost kingdom. After we dressed, we met Sire Vanoire in the living room.

“Fine,” he said in greeting. “We’ll at least be on time if we hurry.”

I assumed Sire was just voicing his own inner monologue, likely perturbed that Aria and I had taken the time to enjoy each other. He wanted her to himself for mage-training and kingdom-raising. Despite his obvious frustration, it felt good to be traveling through the city with Aria. We were allowed to be in the open, freely moving about, without the Crypt Claw Warriors hunting us down.

The open carriage we rode in gave us a great view of the Obsidian Valley. The region was governed by the Lupine Coalition, a diplomatic leadership that consisted of Xavier Goldlace and two elected officials. Unlike the royals who led other regions, the Obsidian Valley was ruled by a government. As our carriage made its way through the city, I watched the bustling metropolis teeming with life and color.

Unlike the less populated Navarrah City, the Obsidian Valley had an interesting mix of characters. My kingdom had royal subjects loyal to my

father and family. Conversely, the Obsidian Valley, with its dense living spaces and cluttered streets, was a mix of criminal activity, rare wolf mages, a diverse populace, and the wealthy elite. It was hard to fathom that Brahman's Peak, with its oppressive regime, was just over the distant mountain range.

The Lupine Coalition had been able to keep Polonius at bay because they had so many mages, Xavier Goldlace included, who protected the city from Crypt Claw warriors. While this was not our city, nor would it be, we did have a place there together. This was confirmed by Lara Goldlace the moment we walked into the meeting in a dusty tavern at the far side of the city.

"I still want my money, Redveign," Lara said to me in greeting, standing up from a table holding a beer she was drinking much too early. "Your beta's son was quite the spender, and I have no intention of turning a blind eye to his debts. We welcomed you Navarrah City royals to the Obsidian Valley, and Ulryk considered this place his home away from home. You will pay his debts, or we won't be so generous with our dear royal neighbors in the future."

The frothy beer had the same red hue as Lara's hair. Both glistened in the early morning light streaming through the window. While her beauty didn't rival Aria's, Lara was busty and curvaceous, and she wore both assets proudly. Donning her signature leather pants and tank that barely covered the globes of her breasts, she sauntered over to us, her body language threatening. Ulryk Bevata had owed her for drugs and other things her criminal network provided before he died, and she was trying to secure her money.

"As I said before Lara," I began calmly, standing my ground, "just send my father an invoice, and all of Ulryk's debts will be erased."

I gave her a wicked smile. I knew that sending my father a written request for money would be problematic, given Lara's line of work.

"Oh, and what would this slip of paper say?" she asked, nearly growling. "Pay me for the illegal drugs, women, and weapons your beta's son acquired?" She languidly placed her hand on her hip as her eyes narrowed at me.

"Have it say whatever you want it to say," I said, shrugging. "My father knew of Ulryk's vices in the end."

"But will he pay for them?" Lara asked, gritting her teeth.

"Not likely, so you'd better think of something else to put on your

invoice,” I said, then laughed. “Or get out of your line of work.”

“Or how about you get me the money?” Lara stepped toward me, and Aria, perhaps by instinct, moved in front of me.

“It’s not his job to pay you for Ulryk’s illegal activities,” Aria said with defiance.

“Perhaps not, but I’ve helped you both. I expect the same goodwill.” But Lara was staring at Aria in unmistakable awe.

She must have noticed the change in Aria since she’d unlocked her mage, as did Halo and Xavier, who were also seated at Lara’s table, watching us. Standing upright, crafted of lean muscle and graceful features, Aria nearly glowed with a magical light. In the tavern’s dusty, golden glow, she reflected the faint yet unmistakable illumination of magic.

“So you really did it,” Lara marveled, walking around Aria, admiring the shimmering aura around her. Her gruff threats had given way to an open-mouthed stare.

“I did.” Aria smiled broadly, knowing exactly what Lara meant.

“How?” Lara asked, shaking her head. “We were pretty sure you were marching straight to your death.”

“And you just let me go,” Aria reminded her with a smirk.

“A fool is a fool is a fool,” Lara said simply. She shrugged and returned to her beer. “But I still want my money. It’s a hefty sum, one I won’t soon forget. Glad you survived. Now you can convince Lex to pay it.”

“Like Lex said, send an invoice to the king.” Aria gave Lara another playful smirk, and the two of us walked over to where the Goldlaces and Sire were seated.

“So, why are we here?” Xavier asked with an air of annoyance. “I have much better things to do. The Lupine Coalition has a city-planning meeting this afternoon. We need to clean up the North Quarter, and I have to be there,” he huffed.

“This won’t take long,” Sire said, taking a seat across from the Goldlace siblings. “Aria has made her transformation, and is in fact Duke Norvali’s heir. As the three of you represent the Valian and Prit points of the royal triad, your help is needed to raise Onyx Rah. We’d like to discuss how the kingdom will be restored before Polonius finds a way to interfere and take it for himself.”

“Honestly, Vanoire, we want nothing to do with Onyx Rah,” Lara said lazily.



“She’s right,” Xavier said. “We really don’t want to be a part of this. We have jobs in the Obsidian Valley, and embarking on a fruitless mission to raise a dead kingdom has no appeal for us whatsoever.” He picked at his plate of pickled vegetables.

“I just want to research the place,” Halo said with a smile. “I don’t really want to rule it. I’ve never had any desire to be a leader. I’m only interested in its history. I’m sure Aria will make a great queen.” She turned to Aria, beaming with excitement. “How did you do it? We’re dying to know what happened in the pit.”

“I saw Harlance’s ghost, and he helped me,” Aria explained. “The walls illuminated with markings etched inside the burned stone. They told the story of our people and how Polonius’s grandfather, Zonas, marched them into the Genesis Pit to be burned to death. It was horrific, but their souls remain in that terrible place. It was the spirits of the dead who helped my mage find her place within me.” Her tone turned excited. “There are also Midnight Moon Pack ancestors who escaped death and moved to the other kingdoms. Generations of their children are lost within Voltaire. We have to rebuild Onyx Rah to give them and the descendants of the dead a home again. Their spirits can be reunited in magic, perhaps.”

I loved the way her body came alive as she spoke of reuniting her people and bringing them back together after such a horrible tragedy.

“That sounds amazing and almost too unreal, but I knew Father would guide you,” Halo said, her eyes glinting with happiness. “I could feel it.”

“That’s why we need your help,” I said, hoping to appeal to their empathy and desire to bring their kingdom back from the ashes. “All three branches of the Onyx Rah royal triad are needed to bring your kingdom back to life. You don’t have to rule if you don’t want to, but at least support Aria in her effort to return your kingdom to your people.”

“Our parents died trying to bring Onyx Rah back to life again,” Xavier said grimly. “What are your assurances that we won’t meet a similar fate?”

“Polonius has killed our people so that he can steal the kingdom from us. We don’t have the means to defeat him,” Halo added, pushing half-eaten meat around her plate. “I worry that we’ll raise the kingdom, only for Polonius to steal it from us.”

“You’ll have a full armada of soldiers from Navarrah City behind you,” I reminded them.

“I like my role in politics here in the Obsidian Valley,” Xavier cut in.

“Democracy suits me. I don’t want to be a part of an arbitrary monarchy when I’ve been ruling in a democratic government. And I don’t have to resurrect a kingdom to fulfill my role.”

“I’ve got a good gig here,” Lara chimed in, taking a long sip of her beer. “No way I want to start my ‘businesses’ elsewhere. We’re established, and things are fine.”

“Yes, but this isn’t your kingdom,” Sire added, having held himself back as long as he could.

“The Obsidian Valley isn’t a kingdom, mage. Anyone can be here.” Lara looked at him with obvious disdain.

“Perhaps the Obsidian Valley can exist peacefully with Onyx Rah,” I suggested. “Sire, you could be the royal mage of the kingdom and let the Lupine Coalition continue to rule over the Obsidian Valley since it’s already established.”

“And you can continue to help me grow my powers and fight Polonius,” Aria appealed to Sire Vanoire, no doubt trying to entice him with the power he was craving. “You want to be the greatest mage of all time? Well, resurrecting a kingdom and defeating a tyrant might actually get you there,” she added with a smile.

“And how do you plan on handling Polonius?” Sire asked.

I answered, “Without Amadeus, all Polonius has is the brute strength of his warriors. We have to rescue Amadeus, then with you supporting Onyx Rah and Amadeus behind Navarrah City, Polonius will not only be outnumbered, but will have Voltaire’s most powerful magic working against him. He’ll go down eventually.”

“I can see that possibly working,” Sire mused, “but how will you lead Navarrah City’s forces and stand by Aria’s side in Onyx Rah, Lex? You can’t be in two places.”

Sire made a valid point.

“Perhaps Cheyenne could lead Navarrah City’s troops?” Aria asked, sounding as if she’d already planned on Cheyenne taking on my role within my own kingdom.

I wasn’t ready to relinquish my birth rite to my brother. I was next in the line of succession, and I didn’t want to give up that part of my legacy. Yet, I didn’t see any other way to help Aria build her kingdom without abandoning mine.

“Yes, Cheyenne could fill in temporarily,” I told them.

“I want to see it,” Halo said. “Can you take me to the Tombs? I’m not sure what we can accomplish, but with Aria as our alpha and Sire as our mage, I could consider the role of beta, perhaps.”

Halo wasn’t wholly committing, but even her consideration was a step in the right direction. Since she was the only one showing any kind of interest in the mission, Aria and I immediately responded. “Yes,” Aria said with excitement.

“We can go right now,” I added, trying to show my support.

“I believe leaving tomorrow is better. It’s quite a journey,” Halo said, cooling our fire a little.

“Right. Tomorrow would be best,” Aria conceded.

“So, are we done here?” Lara asked, finishing her beer. “I got stuff to do,” she added with a wink.

“And I’ll be able to make it to my meeting,” Xavier said, standing.

It was still early enough to have plenty of the day ahead, but Halo was right that the journey to Onyx Rah was a distance. And with the Crypt Claw soldiers possibly still lingering about, we had to be ready for a fight if there was going to be one.

“I’d love to show you Onyx Rah,” Aria said with pride.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Halo said with a wide grin.

Halo had never struck me as an especially joyous person, but she could hardly contain her smile. Aria and Halo were the only ones really invested in raising Onyx Rah. Aria knew Halo would understand the magic needed to bring a magical kingdom back to life.

Despite how deeply I loved Aria, I wasn’t her kin. As much as I hated to admit it, I couldn’t be as great an asset to this part of Aria’s journey as Halo.

## Chapter 5

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### *Aria*

The next day, we traveled with Lex, Sire Vanoire, and Halo to the Onyx Rah Tombs. Since motor travel was long and arduous, we took a flying machine. Halo's family practically owned the city, thanks to Lara's illegal operations and Xavier's governing, so we had access to a small flying vehicle that could seat six, excluding the pilot. What would have usually taken us over a day to traverse was crossed in mere hours.

When we arrived at the Onyx Rah Tombs, each of us was lowered to the ground by a basket and pulley system. While it was a little worrisome to be dropped from such a great height, it was also thrilling. Once all of us were on the ground, we headed to the ruins.

Little did Polonius know, I had no intention of helping him steal my land after his ancestor killed my people. We were there to convince Halo to help us resurrect our once great kingdom. As we walked into the ruined city, I felt a sense of peace and calm. There were Navarrah City Royal Guard intermittently dispersed throughout the space, but the Crypt Claw warriors were gone.

For several years, Polonius had his warriors shovel out debris and chip away at lava-encrusted buildings to excavate the artifacts that Polonius used in his experiments. At that moment, I was grateful he had never found the key to raising the city. We were there to locate the one magical thing that would bring the kingdom to life.

"What is that?" Lex asked, looking mesmerized by all the archways made of brick and the towering buildings that still stood. "It feels like some kind of electricity in the air." He moved his hand around his face as if he were touching a living entity.

“It’s magic,” I replied. “The Tombs are filled with it. I believe there was a great deal of magic here once, and it remained as if it knew one day it would have a purpose again.”

“That’s probably true,” Halo chimed in. “My father used to tell me about all the celebrations they had. Colors swirled in the air, and the wind seemed to sing.” Her face lit up with joy at the memory. “I have to say, I do feel more comfortable here. My wolf’s restlessness has stilled, and I’m more at peace.”

While Halo was only making an observation, she looked content.

“I’m glad you agreed to join us, Halo,” Lex said, smiling at her. “It’s nice for Aria to have someone else who understands this place and your shared history.”

“Aria and I lost a great deal of our history here,” Halo remarked in a somber tone.

“The place where I saw your father’s spirit is right over there,” I said to her, leading us into the catacombs under the palace where I’d seen the vision of Harlance in his workshop. “He helped me learn about my magic in that room.” I pointed to the room where I’d been trapped.

We stepped over large pieces of crumbled wall, “Here,” I said, moving into the room I’d only just escaped from. “You can still see the faint markings on the walls, where the words burned into them when they lit up.”

I marveled at the writing left there, then noticed Lex staring at me. I turned to him. “What?”

“You are just so amazing,” he said, his voice full of smoldering admiration. “Though it’s not that I didn’t know it already.”

“You two are so in love,” Halo laughed. “These are cool,” she said, shifting her focus to the wall and the faint markings there.

“Your father was here,” I said to Halo, ignoring her comment about Lex and me. “He came to me and told me how to raise the kingdom.”

I was about to share the visions her father had given me when dust swirled in the air, moving like it had a life of its own.

“What’s happening?” Lex asked, his hand flying to the scabbard at his hip.

The tiny particles of sand and soot continued to swirl until they took on the shape of a man. As they grew and became more animated, a tall and imposing figure formed.

“Papa?” Halo asked, tears welling in her eyes.

The figure didn’t say anything at all, but was made in the likeness of

Harlance Valian. The apparition pointed to the writing forming on the walls.

“I think he wants you to read it,” I said to Halo.

Halo stared at the ghost who had materialized in ash and sand.

“Can I touch you?” she asked instead of moving to the place where Harlance was pointing. Not waiting for an answer, she reached out to touch her father. Though his apparition remained, he didn’t respond to her fingers upon the soft sand, which shifted and moved away from her touch, a puff of air and dust pluming out. Harlance was heaving a sigh of sadness. His apparition remained steadfast as he nodded to the writing scrolling across the walls.

“Unleash the magic locked within the walls,” I read out loud. “The magic therein will provide protection over the kingdom. Find the sons and daughters of those who were lost, and you will rebuild better what was destroyed.”

I finished reading, then paused. “Those are very encouraging words,” I remarked, feeling like I had to lighten the mood, especially with Halo looking on the verge of a nervous collapse.

Harlance’s ghost looked at me and nodded, then turned to Halo. A phantom hand came up to her cheek, dancing across her skin. Then, in a puff of air, the apparition was gone. Debris rained to the ground, and Halo stared into the void left behind.

“It was him,” she said, smiling. “I was so little when he and Mama left, but it was him.” Her face broke into a wide grin. “I’m in. I’ll help you in any way I can. I want to see Onyx Rah restored, just as my mother and father did.”

“Good,” I said, feeling very relieved.

Using a pad of paper I was carrying in a sack with water and dried meat, I wrote down all the words scrolled across the walls. I wasn’t sure how long they would last. When I finished documenting them, we made our way back to the Obsidian Valley.

The next morning, Sire Vanoire woke me and Lex before sunrise. “Hurry now,” he said as I shuffled out of Lex’s arms, not quite ready to face the day. “We have to get started immediately before Polonius comes back to Onyx Rah and sees Harlance’s writing. If he reads what is written, he’ll be able to exact his nefarious plan.”

“You think this nefarious plan might allow us to eat breakfast first?” I asked wryly, clearing the sleep from my eyes while Lex stirred beside me.

“There’s very little time for anything,” Sire Vanoire huffed. “Dress and eat quickly. We leave in twenty minutes.”

With that, he left Lex and I in peace.

“Why do we have to work with him?” Lex groaned as he tried to rouse himself from the bed. “It’s not like the Tombs are going anywhere. And that’s the second time he’s come into our room without an invitation.”

“I agree, but Sire is right. We have no idea what Polonius might be up to. Let’s get a move on,” I said as I slapped his bare behind.

Making love to Lex after seeing Harlance’s ghost had been a sweet reward. Lex was finally able to understand more of the magical realm that would soon become a bigger part of our reality.

We dressed quickly and halved a long bread roll. Filling it with meat, cheese, and sauce, I created a sandwich that we shared, eating it on the run after filling our water flasks.

I thought we might take the helo vehicle again, but instead, we drove in a massive truck with several others following behind us, carrying the supplies we’d need for our rebuild. The journey was long and arduous. We were going to have to stay in Onyx Rah for some time to save us all the time traveling back and forth between the ruins and Sire Vanoire’s house.

After traveling for most of the day, we arrived at the Tombs, and Harlance’s ghost was there again. I didn’t think Halo would ever truly be used to seeing the apparition of her father, as she was moved to tears whenever he appeared. This time, she smiled at him through misty eyes.

“I read in the text on the walls that Halo and I must awaken the heart of Onyx Rah to raise the kingdom? Is that true?” I asked him after reading over my notes from the night before.

Harlance nodded slowly.

“Okay, so where is this heart?”

The apparition pointed to the path that led to the Genesis Pit. My stomach lurched at the thought of going to the pit again. There were tunnels under the molten lava that would bring us to the pit and the spring that coursed beneath it, but I dreaded facing all that heat and fire again.

“I guess we’re going back to the pit,” I told the others reluctantly, then took a deep breath.

“We need to bring those candles,” Sire said, looking at Lex.

“You mean me. *I* need to bring these candles,” Lex said pointedly, picking up a heavy box of candles that had been brought with the rest of the

supplies.

“Yes, I believe that’s what I said.” Sire was being snide with Lex, but he was an old man traveling with two women. To him, Lex was the obvious choice to carry the supplies. Halo and I were definitely strong enough to carry the box, but Sire and Lex didn’t really get along. This likely was also Sire’s attempt to take a dig at Lex.

Some of the Navarrah City soldiers who hadn’t already marched to their lookouts stayed behind to transport food, wood, drums of water, and other essentials to the gates of Onyx Rah. If we were going to resurrect the kingdom, we’d need the basics for our survival. Lex carried the box. I offered to help, but Sire Vanoire shuffled me and Halo forward.

“You’re going to need all of your strength for the task ahead,” he said, his voice more eager than I ever remembered hearing.

Under the Genesis Pit, I showed everyone the way through the tunnels where lava still flowed. All around us was hissing and spurting from the lava hitting the cool rocks. Luckily, the moving globs of fire never ventured beyond the walls, where it drained down through cracks and fissures. The path was hard-packed and easy to traverse despite the growing humidity and foul sulphuric odor. I wondered if Onyx Rah would always smell this bad. Maybe once we had healed its magic, the intoxicating fragrances I’d heard so much about would return.

I put those thoughts behind me and moved my group toward the sound of rushing water in the distance. There, I knew, a waterfall fed into a spring under the lava pit that bubbled and popped over our heads. We prepared the candles Lex was carrying to see in the dark. As we walked deeper into the underground pathway, the light gave way to the darkness.

We reached the spring with a small waterfall trickling into it. The air around us was steamy and hot, with only fragments of light sparkling through the walls. Lex picked up a few of the candles and lit them on the lava flowing down the sides. While it was potentially very dangerous, I didn’t feel any fear, especially with Lex by my side.

“Are you ready for this?” Lex asked me gently, setting out the candles. “You’re about to do what no one before you has been able to do,” he said with a cautioning kind of excitement.

“I’m ready to know who I am,” I said proudly. “Who we are.” I motioned to Halo. “I’m excited for the future.”

“As am I,” Lex said, then finished laying out the candles before walking



over to me and giving me a kiss. “I’m so excited. Let’s do this.”

With Lex’s encouragement, I looked over to Sire Vanoire. “How shall we begin?” I asked him. In my heart, I knew what to do, but I wasn’t sure how to accomplish it.

“According to Harlance’s instructions, you will both need to resurrect the heart of the Tombs from the spring,” Sire said. “When you’ve brought it to the surface, your instinct should tell you what comes next.”

“I read Harlance’s writing over and over again. It just said we needed to find the heart in the spring, but never said what that heart was.” I felt a wave of frustration, knowing we were so close to the answer.

“King Prit threw the heart into the spring just before he died. I remember that,” Sire said, his eyes scanning his surroundings as if trying to recall his memories. “It has to be spelled with something vital to the recovery of the kingdom.”

Suddenly, a wave of panic sliced through me. What if this didn’t work? What if there was nothing magical to bring the kingdom back to life? But if that were true, Polonius wouldn’t have been so insistent on finding a Midnight Moon Pack mage.

For only a moment, I felt doubtful. I looked at Lex for reassurance.

“You got this,” he said to me with a confident smile. I could feel his energy infusing with mine.

I nodded to him. He was right. I could do anything with him by my side.

“Come,” Halo said to me, outstretching her arm. “Let’s do this together.”

I took her hand, and we walked into the spring. The water was warm from the stifling heat and humidity around us. Sulfur, tinged with an aroma of death, permeated the air, but the soft liquid swirling around us had a calming effect. We continued to submerge ourselves until we were waist-deep in the water.

“I will start with an incantation,” Sire said, moving to the edge of the water.

I held onto Halo’s hand when Sire started chanting in a low, melodic cadence.

“Oh, heart and soul of the people whose bodies are now part of your earth, bring forth their spirits, commence their rebirth. From the ashes you fell to the sprouts you will spring, raise up Onyx Rah greater than our imagining.”

Over and over again, Sire said the same thing until his words petered

away and he entered a meditative trance. When he did, the denseness in the stifling air dissipated, and a cool breeze danced on my skin. I didn't let go of Halo's hand, but the water around us began to tremble. While most would have feared what was to come, somehow, I knew it would be wonderous beyond my wildest imagining.

"Your souls are never gone!" Sire screamed, breaking his trance. "They honor your sacrifice, they bring a light to the darkness, they shall be revered and remembered in music and song." He then hummed a tune; he was a surprisingly good singer.

The quaking water became chaotic waves explosively crashing against each other. But still, I wasn't afraid. This moment marked the end of everything I'd ever known of myself before my mage emerged. A rebirth not only for a kingdom, but for all of us.

Rising from the swells was an ancient chest that burst out of a wave of water that launched it into the air. Suspended by magic, it floated above our heads. As soon as the chest appeared, Sire stopped singing, and everything became silent.

"Thank you," Sire said, almost in prayer.

Just as he did, the chest opened, and a perfectly preserved crimson pitaya fruit rose from the charred, blackened wood. The chest crumbled to dust, and when its remnants rained down upon the spring, the water became calm again. The suspended pitaya fruit glowed brighter and brighter until it became blinding.

Suddenly, it fell unceremoniously into the spring, pushing water out in all directions that forced Halo and me to the shore. All we could do was watch as the water seeped into the hole where the crimson pitaya had fallen, but within moments, all the water was gone, and in its place a tiny sprout grew.

The walls around us began to shake, and Lex ran to my side while Halo and I continued to hold each other. Sire Vanoire stood in amazement, watching the water seep into the ground and form another spring on the other side of a wall of lava.

"It's happening!" he shouted. "It's actually happening! Come, hurry! The kingdom is restoring."

We followed him out of the tunnels that shook and rattled all around us just in time to see grass and trees sprouting up over every inch of visible land as far as the eye could see. All the burned and scarred earth was giving way to fresh needles of grass. Tree trunks reached for the sky as they sprouted

branches shimmering with shiny green leaves. Soon, the dirt and debris were blown away by a magical wind that whipped around our feet and heads.

The sun. Since Onyx Rah had been buried, the sky was dark and ominous here, but here was the sun again. Roads glistened under its glare, highlighting tangled pathways to places where the imagination could run.

Before us, unfolding like a golden flower, was hope. Hope for the lost souls, hope for the future, hope for a kingdom once obliterated. The magic revealed ample space to farm, live, and thrive. There was still the destruction from the initial invasion that would take many hands and hours of labor to undo, but the bones of reconstruction were there.

“The streets will need paving, and the structures reinforced,” Lex mumbled, going over a laundry list of things. “Of course, furniture and textiles are going to have to be made and woven. But it’s a kingdom. We can live here and make it what it once was.”

“What are you doing?” I asked him with a smile, elated that something I’d once considered an impossible task was already well underway thanks to the magic of my kingdom.

“You’re going to need a lot of things, Aria, before Onyx Rah is inhabitable,” Lex said matter-of-factly. “I know from sitting at my father’s table for most of my life what it’s like to build and keep an infrastructure going. I was just making a mental note of how many people from Navarrah City you’ll need.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re thinking strategically, Lex,” I started when Halo interrupted me.

“But the citizens of Onyx Rah have to be Midnight Moon Pack descendants,” she said eagerly. “The first inhabitants have to be able to prove that living in Onyx Rah is their birthright.”

“And they will be Midnight Moon Pack members, Halo, but we can’t ask them to come and then give them nothing to come to,” I said gently. “Lex’s people can help us build a place for them to come to, and all he has to do is send the command. But we will offer permanent jobs to our people first,” I assured her. “Since Navarrah City is our ally, we should welcome as many hands as are available.”

“Right. I see your point,” Halo said, her expression softening into one of gratitude and hope.

I looked up at Lex and smiled, imagining what it would be like to rule a kingdom of formerly lost and betrayed people together. We walked towards

the castle in the distance, surprised to see that it had been structurally restored. It still needed reinforcements, embellishments, and furnishings, but like the rest of Onyx Rah, the bones were there. I took Lex's hand, feeling a rush of energy surge through me.

Just then, a spike of adrenaline jolted both of us. Something was wrong.

"Something's here," I said, my hair standing on end and my wolf awakened.

"Behind us," Halo agreed as she whipped around to see what had come out of the shadows.

There, surrounding us from all sides, were Crypt Claw soldiers. They materialized together, two deep in two rows, with their weapons raised. I half-expected to find Polonius among them, though I didn't see him. Lex and I took position in front of Halo and Sire, getting ready to fight. I was struck with worry that we would never have peace, but our people deserved to return home. So, I was ready to shed some blood.

I was prepared to use magic to protect us, but once the soldiers advanced, I watched their eyes roll back in their heads. All the Crypt Claw men shook and jerked, seized by an uncontrollable convulsing, then disappeared.

They had simply vanished into thin air.

## Chapter 6

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### *Lex*

We were standing in front of the palace when all the Crypt Claw soldiers had simply evaporated.

“What happened?” I asked Sire Vanoire, assuming he’d be the only one who could give an answer.

He looked at me with a perplexed expression and shook his head, “I have no idea.” He stood there blankly, just as confused as we were.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Halo added, apparently expecting that I’d ask her next.

“Maybe the heart of the kingdom—the pitaya fruit that sank into the spring—has something to do with warding off the soldiers,” Aria mused. “Perhaps it’s some kind of protection.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “I just hope they were transported to a place where they can’t catch us off-guard later,” I put my hand on my scabbard just in case we encountered them again.

“Maybe if we go into the palace, we’ll have a better idea what is happening,” Aria said. “Perhaps there’s more writing or something.”

“We’ll follow you,” I said with a smile, loving that Aria was in a position of authority. She’d always been a leader, in charge of everything in her world. But to see her be acknowledged as a royal was more thrilling than I’d realized.

As soon as we entered the palace, Harlance appeared. I doubted I’d ever get used to the materialization of a ghost. Harlance’s spirit had previously been formed out of the debris and other matter available. But since the palace walls had been restored and the floor knit back into a polished marble, all that could be used to fashion his apparition was the glints of golden dust flitting

through the air.

The shimmering fragments of metal and earth gave Harlance a heavenly glow. I stepped closer to Aria. While she never wanted me hovering, I was doing just that. I didn't want anything to happen to her, especially since we didn't know whose magic had made the Crypt Claw soldiers disappear. I would have hated her to meet a similar fate.

To our astonishment, Harlance's ghost finally spoke. "I conjured up the crimson pitaya fruit and buried it in a chest in the spring so that one day, if it were ever found, this great land could be raised from the ashes," Harlance began. "I couldn't undo the destruction that leveled my kingdom, but I could, at least, plant a seed of hope within it. Now that my kingdom has rematerialized, the echoes of it have given me a voice. I'm grateful my daughter and Duke Norvali's heir were powerful enough to bring the heart out of the spring and plant it again. That one magical fruit and the water that trapped it have spread through the veins and pathways under the kingdom. It is now Onyx Rah's life force. A new spring has emerged to protect the lava, and the old one has infused with the plants, grasses, and rivers that will soon thrive here."

"Will the magic protect the kingdom, Father?" Halo asked with reverence. "So that we might not ever be attacked and decimated again?"

"Yes, my child," Harlance answered. "The magic you and Aria have unleashed today will protect the city unless a more powerful magician renders it useless or my protection spell is broken. The two of you and your security forces will have to remain vigilant. "You may rebuild the kingdom from the bones that have been laid. Bring the Midnight Moon Pack descendants and their allies home. They will help you restore Onyx Rah to its former greatness."

Halo looked at the shimmering image of her father. "How will we reach them?"

"They will be called to come. Now that the spirits of their ancestors are free, they will draw their descendants out."

"What if the Crypt Claw come again?" Aria asked, already strategizing for the future.

"The protection spell should keep the Crypt Claw out," Harlance replied. "If they dare try to enter the kingdom now that the heart is planted, they will be immediately teleported back to Brahman's Peak. Every time they come, they will fail. Just like the texts that were glamoured to be read by Midnight

Moon Pack descendants only. The protection spell will keep the Midnight Moon Pack safe.”

“May we invite citizens from other kingdoms and nations to join us?” Aria asked, already being a reasonable queen.

“They’ll have to be given a test to see if they’re worthy of admittance,” Harlance said, continuing to hover over the newly laid marble floor. “Aria and Halo will need to know who can be trusted and who cannot. Don’t give your magic away without careful consideration of each and every entrant. Should they attempt a second unwanted breach of our borders, they will be transported directly into the volcano.”

I was very grateful for Harlance’s ghost and his immense wisdom regarding Onyx Rah. Just as it looked like he was about to say more, there was a loud commotion behind us. We had entered the palace, but hadn’t closed the heavy metal doors behind us. We turned to see a thunderous upheaval at the kingdom’s gates.

Aria and I once again prepared ourselves for battle. Despite what Harlance had said about there being a protection spell on the kingdom, none of us were sure exactly how it worked or what our threats might look like. Had Polonius already gotten Amadeus to perform magic strong enough to break an ancient protection spell?

“Prince Lex,” a voice from over the gates boomed. “Prince Lex of Navarrah City. We have brought your reinforcements.”

With a flash of relief, I recognized that female voice. While it had been many years since I’d heard that loud and gruff tone, it couldn’t be mistaken. She was one of the only women in our military. While women were not allowed in the Royal Guards, they could join the military that patrolled our kingdom.

“Wait,” I said, holding my hand up. “I know that voice. It’s the troops from Navarrah City.”

I didn’t know how to rely on magic, and probably never would. But I always could count on my troops.

As I turned to inform Harlance’s ghost, I realized that he had vanished. Instead, Aria stood there smiling.

“They’re here,” she said, also sounding deeply relieved. “We can open the door.”

I opened the gates to find a woman standing at about five feet six inches, her fire-red hair shorn on both sides with wild coils spiraling outward in all

directions. She had deep green eyes and a warrior's physique.

"We made it," she said to me with a triumphant smile. She thrust her hand out to Aria, who took it graciously. "You must be Aria. You fit your description to the letter."

"And you are?" Aria asked politely as Halo, myself, and Sire Vanoire looked on.

"Bindi Culpepper. I'm a friend of Cheyenne's. He said you all needed some troops, and so we have come. We're all descendants of the Midnight Moon Pack."

"Oh." Aria's smile widened. "Wow." She looked over the sea of soldiers standing behind Bindi. "Thank you for coming—all of you. Please, enter." Aria stepped aside and allowed Bindi to take a step forward.

Bindi turned toward the mass of people standing at attention behind her and raised her arm. "We're going in. Stand your ground, keeping your ears open and your arms ready. They are not protected and have many enemies."

There was a general salute among the troops, and Bindi walked through the gates. Her troops marched in behind her and fanned out.

"Come inside," Aria offered, and Bindi joined us. Aria looked around for something, and as she did, a long wooden table materialized in the dilapidated yet spacious dining hall just ahead of us.

"A table," Sire announced as he waved his arm over the room and chairs fell into place.

We all walked over to the dining hall, which would likely also serve as a ballroom one day, and took seats around the table—all but Bindi, who stood at attention in front of Aria.

"So, how did you come to be here?" Aria asked with a thrill of excitement in her voice.

"Well, this guy's brother," she answered, nodding to me. "Prince Cheyenne told us about you and how amazing you are," Bindi said with a look of adoration in her eyes. She gestured to the soldiers. "We couldn't get here fast enough to assist you, my queen," she said with a deep curtsy. "Anything for you, my queen. And the Redveign Monarchy, of course," she added, smiling at me as if I was simply an adornment on Aria's arm.

While I appreciated that Bindi admired Aria and was treating her with the respect she deserved, I didn't like her cavalier demeanor toward me. I was still a Redveign prince and heir to the throne. While she had addressed me correctly upon meeting us at the gates, I couldn't help but feel slighted.



“Please have a seat.” Aria gestured to the chair across from hers.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Bindi said as she sat down.

“So, Cheyenne sent you?” Aria asked, her brow furrowing. “I don’t ever recall seeing a woman in the armed forces.” She sighed and glanced at me for just a second, though I knew very well what that glance was saying.

Why hadn’t my father allowed Aria to fight? I knew she had wanted to be in the Royal Guard, which was by invitation only. I assumed she was wondering if we allowed women like Bindi to fight in the military, why hadn’t anyone ever offered her that option. She’d have likely much preferred it to being a servant.

The others leaned forward in their seats, wanting to hear why Bindi had come only hours after Onyx Rah’s resurrection, flanked by hundreds of soldiers.

“There are a few of us,” Bindi laughed, “but none who are Midnight Moon Pack. I was on a ship patrolling the waters around Navarrah City and the Obsidian Valley. I was only supposed to be out for a few months, but my tour was extended because of the threat Polonius and the Crypt Claw posed to our ports. I was on a mandatory home visit just as Cheyenne was coming back from his trip to the Obsidian Valley, where he told us about your miraculous transformation.” Bindi’s cheeks reddened with admiration.

“And you say you’re a member of the Midnight Moon Pack?” Sire asked, and by the inquiring look on his grizzled face, he was very curious about Bindi.

“A lot of us are,” she said with pride. “Prince Cheyenne asked for any Midnight Moon Pack members to come forward for the tour. It took some coaxing, as most of us have been in hiding for so long; we wouldn’t have dreamed of divulging our heritage. But Prince Cheyenne convinced us that Her Majesty would need a royal guard and protection to restore our kingdom. It didn’t take long for all of us to agree to come, as well as three hundred of Navarrah City’s troops to guard the perimeter.”

“We truly appreciate your presence here,” Aria said with a smile. She reached out and took my hand. “We need all the protection we can get.”

“You’ll also be happy to hear that Prince Cheyenne has organized a meeting of all the leaders in Tobran to discuss Polonius’s threat to their nations and ours,” Bindi said. “He hopes to get their support and ally with them to fight the Crypt Claw.”

“That’s amazing!” Aria exclaimed, her voice jubilant.

I, too, was happy at the prospect of Tobran uniting to defeat Polonius, but when had Cheyenne gained so much power? It wasn't like he was Fallon, my father's beta. He was my father's younger son and third in line to the throne after me and Amadeus.

His increased influence was likely due to the fact that I was with Aria and so many of my duties had been relegated to him in my absence. Amadeus had been captured, and at my father's behest, I'd needed to stay with Aria to protect her. It was a task I'd lay down my life for.

I tried to calm myself, reminding myself that Cheyenne was certainly the next logical choice to assist my father in not only protecting Navarrah City, but helping to build up the guard in Onyx Rah. Also, my little brother wasn't like Fallon—he wouldn't ever murder me to sit on the throne. He was a hard-working soldier and my father's loyal son. He'd do anything for Navarrah City, and for that, I was grateful that we had Cheyenne in this time of great uncertainty.

"Also, King Helix plans to tell the nations of Tobran about the revival of Onyx Rah and name you, Your Majesty, as its queen," Bindi said to Aria, her tone still full of reverence.

"Oh, thank the stars," Halo said with a sigh of relief. "We won't have to fight to get you on the throne." She looked at Aria and smiled.

"We can share it," Aria offered graciously.

"No, thanks." Halo aggressively shook her head, as if the very idea of ruling a kingdom was total madness.

For a moment, my heart warmed. I couldn't think of anything more perfect than ruling a kingdom by Aria's side, but the fact that I also had one to rule was a problem. It would have been more convenient if Onyx Rah bordered Navarrah City, but there was a two-day distance between the kingdoms—and that was if one was traveling by night.

"Well, King Helix also named you, Halo, as a ruling royal," Bindi said to Halo with some trepidation.

"Semantics," Halo said with a shrug. "We'll work it out," she said to Aria with another smile.

"And will there be a king?" Bindi asked, overstepping her place.

Halo and Aria exchanged glances, then looked at me as I shook my head.

"Let's just get a kingdom first," I said, redirecting the conversation. "And make sure that our queen and Halo are protected and kept safe."

That was all we needed to do. Aria had Polonius breathing down her

neck, not only to steal Onyx Rah from her, but to keep her tied to him in matrimony. Imagine if he were able to secure both Amadeus and Aria? There was a very real threat of Polonius becoming way too powerful.

“Just thought you were up for the role, Lex,” Bindi said, laughing too irreverently for my liking.

“I am up for whatever Aria needs, Bindi,” I said tersely. “And I am a prince. Please do not forget yourself.”

Aria turned and shot me a curious glance.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. It won’t happen again,” Bindi said, looking ashamed.

I had never been one to boast about my rank, especially with a soldier, but Bindi and I had only met a few times when she’d first enlisted. My father and her father were close, but it irked me that she’d forget my title so easily. I was to be her king, either in Navarrah City or Onyx Rah. In any case, I was her prince. The idea that I would rule Navarrah City was never far from my mind, but sitting there, in that small gathering, I had to wonder what it would be like to stand at Aria’s side as she ruled Onyx Rah. Would I give up my own kingdom for that honor?

I knew I would not, but the idea of standing beside Aria and keeping her safe for the rest of our lives was something I couldn’t deny I wanted.

“I don’t need your apology. Just your respect,” I said, and I wondered why I had even cared so much.

Perhaps seeing Aria so adored, which I knew she deserved, was making me feel less than in some way. I had to get over that—she and I were equals, and I should have been thrilled that she was finally being treated as such.

We moved on to a light conversation, strategizing how to go about the rebuild, then left the table and toured the kingdom. Our goal was to assess which parts of the kingdom had been restored, and which parts needed the most urgent repairs.

Magic had shed the layers of ash and debris that had once littered Onyx Rah. Sprouts of lush grass and vegetation had taken root, and while some of the buildings looked like they were structurally sound, others remained demolished. Still, there were enough inhabitable spaces that could house the troops the magic allowed inside the gates. Our soldiers from Navarrah City could easily set up camp outside of the gates.

“So,” Bindi began after we completed the hours-long tour and assessed the damage that still needed to be fixed. “We can get our troops on this,” she

said, feeling confident, but I knew it would take more than armed forces to repair the still extensive damage.

“We need to bring people into the kingdom,” Aria said quietly, likely feeling a little uneasy in her new leadership role. “I don’t think the troops should be responsible for building the city and protecting it.”

Aria was a fighter, a tough, gritty warrior girl and the woman I loved. But that didn’t automatically make her able to handle the responsibilities of a queen.

“Agreed,” Bindi said. “I’ll have them build their own barracks as they are used to doing on the field, and then we’ll put the word out to have any Midnight Moon Pack members who are able to relocate and willing to help us rebuild move to the kingdom and start the repairs.”

“And Navarrah City will certainly help with financial support. As you can see, my father has already sent over troops,” I assured Aria.

“Perhaps we can let those troops into the city,” Aria said. “I know there is magic keeping anyone who isn’t a Midnight Moon Pack member out, but Lex and Sire Vanoire are here, so obviously the magic can make concessions.”

“What do you think?” I asked Sire.

“Aria and Halo would have to make the allowances,” he explained. “I believe that the magic shielding Onyx Rah will listen to them.”

“Let’s try it,” Halo said as we made our way to where the soldiers from Navarrah City were camped out.

As we approached the troops, each soldier stood and saluted in a grand gesture of respect for Aria and Halo. Spread out in a sea of uniforms, the three hundred troops Navarrah City had sent looked very impressive.

“Greetings,” Aria started. “Welcome to Onyx Rah. While it isn’t much yet, I appreciate your commitment to protecting us and our vision of what the kingdom will be.” She took Halo’s hand and whispered to her, “Should we just say we give them permission and see what happens? I’d hate to have any of them disappear back to Navarrah City, or worse.”

I shuddered to think what would happen to morale if any of them were teleported out of Onyx Rah.

“Worth a try,” Halo said with a shrug. As much as he unnerved me, I was sort of hoping that Harlance’s ghost would show up again.

“Are any among you brave enough to take the first step into the kingdom?” Aria asked. “If you are not of Midnight Moon Pack descent, you may be magically transported back home. No harm will come to you, but as

the magic in this land is as powerful as it is mysterious, we have no guarantee that our magic will give you the permission you need to enter.”

While I wouldn't have been quite as transparent with my subjects—sometimes, such honesty backfired—I loved that she was brave enough to tell the truth.

“I will go first, Your Majesty.” A strong and burly soldier came forward. “Should I be returned to Navarrah City, I will be on the next convoy back to guard the gates of the city.”

Aria nodded to him. “You are a brave soldier. What is your name?” she asked, sounding more and more like a queen.

“Shipfield, Your Majesty. Lawrence Shipfield.” The soldier squared his shoulders.

“Well, Lawrence, I give you permission to enter the gates of Onyx Rah,” Aria said with reverence.

The soldier boldly marched forward, clearing the gate without an issue.

Cheers erupted from outside the gates, and a wide smile broke across Aria's face. She tried not to let her triumph show too obviously, but I could tell she was proud of herself. Perhaps it was that pride and confidence that had her fledgling powers bending so easily to her command.

“You are all welcome,” she stated to the soldiers, raising her hands in the air.

For a moment, the ground shifted a fraction. It was as if time and space had tripped up for an instant, as if there was a tiny buckle in the firmament that shifted our reality. As soon as Aria welcomed the troops, they marched through the gates in neat lines, filling the cavernous square where Aria, Halo, Sire, and I stood. All we could do was watch as Aria's army approached. While they were still under Navarrah City's jurisdiction, you could tell by the looks on the soldiers' faces that they were there for Onyx Rah.

When everyone was assembled, Aria and Halo stood in the middle of the square. Though without a pulpit or a dais, they addressed the crowd.

“Thank you for coming,” Halo gushed, near tears.

“Yes, your service is immensely appreciated,” Aria continued. “There will be many days of work ahead, but I know that together, we will see Onyx Rah prosper again.”

“We will,” Sire Vanoire proclaimed, stepping forward. “And I want to be the first to pledge my allegiance to Aria Norvali, Queen of Onyx Rah.”

Despite his great age, the mage took a knee in reverence to Aria, his newly pronounced queen.

Following his lead, Halo also took a knee, “Queen Aria,” she hailed.

Bindi followed suit, as did every single one of the soldiers standing before us until the only ones left upright were Aria and me.

I walked over to Aria, took her hand, then gently kissed the top of it. If I bowed to her, I would be sealing her fate, wedging a gap between us, as we would eventually be separated by our duty to two different kingdoms. Yet, I couldn’t deny her birthright.

I took a knee and bowed before her.

“My queen,” I said quietly, elation and trepidation warring in my heart.

## Chapter 7

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### *Aria*

It was overwhelming to witness a sea of people bowing before me, including Lex. I couldn't really bear it. I'd been a servant and a captive to a tyrant, but here I was, a queen before them. I tugged on Lex's hand gently, and he stood up beside me. My equal, and yet he had taken a knee.

"Please stand up," I begged as the expanse of people before me continued to kneel. Unsure of what a queen would say, I changed my strategy. "Thank you for your service and devotion. Now, please rise. We have a lot of work to do."

That did it—everyone got back to their feet. Even Halo helped Sire Vanoire up from the ground.

Bindi hollered loudly, "Okay! Midnight Moon Pack with me in the palace, the rest of you, spread out into the city. Keep your eyes open, build your shelters, and be on a twenty-four hour watch. The Crypt Claw will be here—it is not a matter of if, but when. You are dismissed to your duty."

In an orderly fashion, they filed out of the city center through the arteries of the kingdom to watch over the farthestmost places.

"Let's help them out a little, shall we?" Halo said to me with a beaming smile.

"Sure," I agreed, but I wasn't exactly certain what I was agreeing to.

"Let's give them food and water, at least." Halo rolled up her sleeves and prepared to disperse her magic.

I did the same, envisioning abundant food and drink filling up their knapsacks as they made their way through the city. As the last of the soldiers filed out, I noticed that their bags had become heavier, and by the looks on their faces, they were very happy with the provisions. Bindi and the thirty or

so soldiers she had with her all smiled as they noticed their packs getting heavier.

“Looks like that worked,” I said to Halo as we watched the troops fan out across the kingdom.

“Thank you, ladies!” Bindi said giddily. “Now we will enter the palace and secure it before you all enter. Give us a little time.” With that, she saluted us.

“Yes, thank you,” I answered, still feeling the slightest bit awkward with all the saluting and bowing.

I was so excited about being able to provide for the troops, I hadn’t noticed my growing fatigue. Using so much magic after raising a kingdom had drained me. My eyes started to feel heavy, and my body was weak.

“Looks like you and Halo have a pretty solid command of your basic magic skills,” Sire said to me, also looking tired. “Perhaps Amadeus taught you something as a little girl, Aria?” He sighed, not waiting for my answer. “There’ll be plenty of time to sort that out later. For now, I think we need to make space for ourselves in the palace.” He nodded toward the heavy wooden doors of the palace entrance.

While the palace was no longer covered in ashes and soot, it was still pretty dilapidated. I doubted that there would be many rooms, if any, that were suitable to sleep in. Unlike the military, we hadn’t brought field packs full of bedding and essentials. Only the clothes we wore, and our depleting magic.

“I can try and make us something to sleep on,” I said. I looked at my hands, still not exactly sure how my magic worked.

Perhaps my father had taught me something when I was young, but since he’d never even acknowledged that I was his daughter, I doubted it. Strange memories, however, clouded my vision at times. I felt things as if I’d experienced them before, like knowing that my hands could create things if my mind simply imagined them. I had no way of knowing that, and yet I had a vague recollection of Amadeus telling me just that when I was very young. I shook it away, fatigue was playing tricks on me.

“We can create things out of nothing, Aria. That’s the beauty of being a mage,” Halo said as she walked over to me and took both of my hands. “Think of soft linens and billowing pillows,” she said with a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Hot soup and a warm bath,” I added as the air around us electrified.



Sire and Lex were silent as I thought of a warm room with a bed big enough for Lex and me to share with food, along with a hot bath, downy blankets, and safety from all that threatened us. As the wind sparked and crackled over our heads, I felt my body drain of all energy. Suddenly, I went heavy and limp, and I could hardly keep my eyes open.

I immediately understood what had happened to Amadeus when he'd given the entirety of his magic to free Brahman's Peak. My arms dragged at my sides, and when I looked at Halo, she still had a lovely smile but seemed equally as depleted.

"Let's go see what we made," she said with a little less enthusiasm than before.

"Yes," Sire said, starting to walking toward the palace. "We should all rest."

Lex slid his arm around my waist to support me, which I appreciated. "I am so proud of you," he said. "Every day, you amaze me just a little more." His eyes sparkled with adoration, and my heart warmed.

When we entered the palace, there was a fire in the main hearth and simple furnishings throughout the great hall. While the walls were still unfinished and broken, we had added the basics. Halo and I gave each other a satisfied grin as I knew our joint magic had given us what we needed. Though neither of us were as powerful as Amadeus nor Sire Vanoire, we had enough magic if we used it together.

"See you in the morning," Halo said to me with an exhausted rasp as she dragged her feet up the stairs—stairs our magic must have also repaired because they were intact.

"I recommend you two also retire," Sire Vanoire said to Lex and me as he followed Halo up the stairs. "We are well-protected with all of the troops surrounding us. Sound minds and bodies are what is needed now."

At the top of the staircase, Halo and Sire went in separate directions as if they knew exactly where their rooms would be. I turned back and closed the heavy wooden doors, drawing down the lock bar. While there were any number of ways to get inside, for some reason, locking the front doors felt safer.

"Ready to find a room?" I asked Lex.

"I am so ready," he said with a smile as he took my hand, and we walked up the stairs together.

As if being drawn by an unknown force, we continued past the first

landing where Halo and Sire Vanoire had stopped to the second landing, where we found a door open and a big inviting room with a fire in the hearth and a view of the entire kingdom from the balcony.

“Looks like we’re home,” Lex teased.

“*You* look like home,” I said, turning to him and wrapping my arms around his middle.

“That’s because I am,” he said, clearly not giving the implications of his words much thought.

I knocked my head against his chest. “I can’t use magic for everything. I’m going to have to get Midnight Moon Pack descendants here. I hope they don’t mind helping us.”

I bit my lip, thinking of the lives I would be asking them to lead. I was once a servant. I already knew what it was like to feel less than others.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Lex said, stroking my hair. “But remember, these people will not be indentured to work for you. They’ll be ancestors coming home, becoming part of the tapestry of their restored kingdom. And they will not be servants. They’ll be paid, have private living quarters, and will come and go from work as any other citizen might, just like you suggested in Navarrah City. Now is the time to make that dream a reality.”

“You’re right,” I conceded. “They will be employees of the palace and descendants of the kingdom. That will work. And those in Brahman’s Peak, the lost and disenfranchised, I can let them in as well. My magic and Halo’s will do that. They can be next when all of the descendants have returned,” I added, feeling slightly energized again.

“And those who want to swear their fealty to you and support your reign can fill in the spots that are left,” Lex said. “You will have a kingdom of loyal subjects valued for the work they do, and each will have a reason to be here. No one will be a servant or a captive.”

“No one will face what I have,” I whispered, feeling the heaviness of my circumstances suddenly weigh on me.

“We will win, Aria. I promise we will defeat Polonius,” Lex said as if he was reading my mind. “Come.” His hand slid down my arm, and he tugged me forward. “There is a basket of food here, and then I want you to go to bed and sleep a long night’s sleep.” His face broke into a warm smile.

As much as I wanted to make love to him all night long, eating and sleeping were essential. And so, we ate the brown bread, butter, and soup,

and drank the tea I had dreamed of as we talked about what Onyx Rah would become. After we'd had our fill, we ambled into bed, slipping into cool, crisp sheets laid out on a pillowy mattress.

Just before falling asleep, Lex looked at me. "You did this, Aria," he said. "You made it happen."

While technically, he and Halo and Sire Vanoire had helped, he was right. My jumping into the fiery lava pit had brought about a rebirth, and now the world I could only imagine was coming to life.

"However," Lex continued, "tomorrow night, we should have a guard stationed on the balcony and one at the door. Your life has always been precious to me, but now it is priceless to the world." He snuggled me in closer, and I let his words sink in as my eyes drifted closed and I fell asleep in his arms.

Waking up with Lex—in my palace—was a sensation that words could not describe. For a moment, I just sat there and basked in the beauty of all that had transpired. I watched Lex as he slept, his finely chiseled jaw, high cheekbones, and poetic features making me fall in love with him all over again. Everything felt right. I had a place in the world, and I was building my home and growing my family just as I had always wanted. Lex was my partner, and I hoped one day, he'd be my king.

But I dared not say anything to him yet. We still had the matter of kingdoms to sort out.

As I enjoyed my quiet moment beside Lex, I worried about Amadeus. He would have been a much better help to us than Sire, yet I didn't know how to liberate him from Polonius. I believed Sire was only supporting us because he wanted the Goldlaces out of the Obsidian Valley. More worrying was that Sire wanted to be the most powerful mage of all time. If he eventually became the Royal Mage of Onyx Rah and the Obsidian Valley, Sire could probably have his wish.

"There's someone at the city gates!" Halo shouted, bounding into our room. "They've made it past the guards! Hurry!" She left as quickly as she'd entered, perhaps to tell the others.

"What?" Lex bolted out of bed, looking bleary-eyed. "What's happening?" Before anyone could answer that question, he was out of bed and getting dressed as I did the same.

We flew down the stairs and out the front door. As soon as we exited the palace, we saw Bindi and her soldiers standing at attention with their arms

drawn and their long crossbows pointed toward the road leading into the city.

“Polonius is at the city gates,” Bindi said with gritted teeth. She leveled her eye into the crossbow’s viewfinder, ready to shoot. “Cover them!” Bindi yelled, and soldiers suddenly surrounded me and Halo, but not Lex.

I grabbed Lex and pulled him to me. “Cover him, too!” I ordered. “He’s unarmed.”

“Right.” Bindi nodded to a few more soldiers, who ran to surround Lex as well. “You stay here. I’m going to see what’s happening.”

“We’ll come with you,” I said quickly before she moved the troops forward. “Polonius is here to see me.”

“If Polonius wants a word with our queen, he can meet with her in the Obsidian Valley.” Bindi continued to aim her crossbow as she moved forward. “I’m not allowing you to be put in danger, Your Majesty,” she said, adamant.

“He will do worse things than stand at the gates of the kingdom if I don’t go, Bindi,” I told her, dreading what lay ahead of us.

“He has no right to you,” Lex growled, red-faced with anger.

“He thinks I’m his property,” I told Lex. “But I will speak with him.”

I knew there was no avoiding Polonius. If I refused to speak with him that day, he would have probably attempted something more dangerous in the future. We had to pretend we were willing to negotiate.

“Aria,” Lex cautioned.

“You know we can’t ignore this.”

“I don’t like it,” Lex said with a scowl.

“Neither do I,” Bindi said. “What do you want me to do?” She looked at me.

“Take us to him,” I commanded. “Keep those crossbows handy, though,” I added with a smile.

“You know I don’t like this, my queen,” Bindi grumbled.

“We’re both going to have to get used to doing things we don’t like,” I said before we marched to the gates of the city, heavily guarded.

It didn’t take long to walk to the border between our kingdom and Brahman’s Peak. When we reached the barrier, Polonius was standing with Amadeus and an army of Crypt Claw warriors. I knew I had Navarrah City militia tucked throughout the kingdom and was well-protected from Polonius’s army. Within moments, they would be surrounding us, ready to shift and fight.

“Aria,” Polonius greeted, nodding at me.

“To what misfortune do I owe your visit, Polonius?” I asked, hating the sound of his name in my mouth.

“Amadeus has a little wedding gift for you,” Polonius said with a vicious kindness.

“How thoughtful,” I retorted.

Amadeus then attempted to cross over the border between Brahman’s Peak and the Onyx Rah kingdom. While the entire kingdom was gated, there was a small section where the gate had been broken, likely by thieves or other Crypt Claw members. I made a note to myself that the entire kingdom would need to be fortified before we did anything else.

As Amadeus attempted to cross the threshold of my kingdom, he placed his booted foot over the line. A spark of electricity flared, and he was catapulted backwards, leaving behind a plume of smoke from where his foot had stepped. He cried out in pain, but for some reason, I knew in my heart that his agony wasn’t real.

Polonius grunted in anger as he marched over to where Amadeus had just stepped. A bolt of lightning crashed on him, throwing him backwards.

He lay in a smoldering heap on the ground. While he was not mortally injured, it took him a moment to orient himself as his warriors looked on with their weapons clutched in their arms, ready to fight.

“You cannot enter,” I said to Polonius as one of his soldiers helped him up from the ground.

“You are mine,” Polonius hissed.

“I think we’ve already discussed this. I am not yours, but if you want to woo me as any suitor might, I will consider your offer as is customary of an unwed queen.” I had no intention of marrying him, but the kingdoms of Tobran—and, in turn, all of Voltaire—were not ready to go to war with the Crypt Claw. Avoiding a battle was still the main objective.

“You are already mine, and I can destroy you,” Polonius said darkly. “So let me in now, and I will avoid making your first days as a queen your bloodiest. And your last.” He sneered a little. “I’m here to discuss our wedding and the melding of our two kingdoms. My people are in desperate need of the resources Onyx Rah can provide, and you need my citizens to help you rebuild.” His voice was now diplomatic, if not slightly imploring.

“I’m not your bride, Polonius.” I said. “I can’t let you in.”

“Try to break the spell,” Polonius ordered Amadeus.

Bindi raised her crossbow closer to her eye, focusing her shot on Polonius, as did the other soldiers.

“I’m sorry,” Amadeus said to Polonius, bowing his head. “I’m not able to serve you in that way. The magic protecting this kingdom is stronger than mine.”

“The spell was cast back when Zonas had invaded,” I said. “I can’t undo it, and anyone looking to harm Onyx Rah who is of Crypt Claw blood will never be able to enter.” I took a step forward and stood proudly with my head high.

Of course, it was a lie. Halo and I had let in the soldiers from Navarrah City, but I had to convince Polonius that I couldn’t break the magic.

“Amadeus should be able to enter, then.” Polonius’s voice was tight with anger. “Get in there,” he commanded Amadeus.

Just as Amadeus was about to speak again, Sire Vanoire walked down the street from the palace and joined us. “A mage cannot undo the original spell,” he said. “He, too, will be blocked. Amadeus cannot change this magic, no matter how powerful he may be.” He gave Polonius a congenial smile, as if we were all having tea in the garden rather than holding an army at bay.

Sire then turned and winked at me, which made me wonder if he was making things up. Perhaps both he and Amadeus were.

“Fine!” Polonius shouted. “You had better have the spell removed by the time I return, Aria.” My name in his mouth was a hot blast of rancid air. “You are mine, as is your kingdom! If you do not honor your commitment to me, there will be blood on your hands for all the innocent lives I will take as revenge against you.”

“I can try to alter the magic, but if powerful mages like Amadeus and Sire are not able to lift it, why do you think I can?” I asked, hiding the fact that Halo and I were the only ones who could lift the spell.

“Let’s hope for your sake, you succeed,” Polonius sneered as he turned toward his troops and marched back to Brahman’s Peak.

We watched him leave until the last soldier was gone. Only then did Bindi lower her weapon.

“I think Amadeus’s crimson pitaya poisoning is gone,” she said. “He could have easily crossed that line, but he didn’t. He protected you, Aria. Amadeus was only pretending to be hurt by the magic. His muscles didn’t tighten, and his breathing remained calm. Being zapped by magic hurts to the core. Polonius was genuinely zapped, but Amadeus knows he needs to keep

you safe. If he was still dosed, he wouldn't have done that."

"Well, let's hope he's no longer dosed," I said. "And that he finds a way to escape and get out of Polonius's grip." But I was still very worried about my father.

## Chapter 8

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### *Lex*

We watched as Polonius and his soldiers retreated back toward Brahman's Peak. Blood still boiled in my veins, and I wanted to chase after him and stab the monster right in the back. Without Polonius, our lives would be perfect. I, however, could not kill the warlord outright without just provocation. While Polonius posed a threat to us only if Aria didn't submit to their marriage, he'd done nothing that would warrant his execution.

Nothing, other than try and steal the love of my life.

Just as we turned away to return to the castle, we heard a nearly deafening sound over our heads. We looked up to see a large airbus hovering over us. As we watched the airship starting to make its descent, there came a roaring sound of a motor car approaching the front gates.

"What's happening now?" Halo asked, looking exasperated.

"Who would be attacking us? Is Polonius coming back?" I turned to Sire Vanoire as if he knew the answers.

"If he is coming back, the airbus would have to be piloted by Midnight Moon Pack members because even the atmosphere over our heads is protected by magic," Sire said. "No, this is something else." He looked up at the hovering airship with an almost academic curiosity.

"Open up! I come bearing gifts," Lara shouted as she turned off the motor on the car and exited the vehicle.

While I was relieved to see it wasn't an enemy, I didn't consider Lara a friend, either.

"Lara! Oh, goodness, it's you," Halo said to her sister with a radiant smile.

Halo opened the gates wide enough to let Lara drive through. Lara parked



her car on the side of the road, leaving enough space in the middle of the street for the airship to land.

“What is all of this?” Aria asked, bewildered.

“Gifts,” Lara said, gesturing to Aria and Halo. “For the royals of Onyx Rah. Not for you, though.” She looked pointedly at me. “You still owe me money.” She placed her hands on her hips and laughed.

“Ulryk owes you money, and he’s dead,” I snarled.

“Logistics,” she said, still laughing. She looked at Aria. “So, I have another motor car coming, but until then, the airship and this vehicle are yours.” She motioned her arms, and the airship magically descended.

The airbus wasn't huge; it could probably seat four to six people. As it descended upon us, it barely touched the ground before the engine cut out, and the pilot exited the cockpit.

“Thank you, Lara,” Aria said, beaming with gratitude. “This is unexpected, but so generous.”

These gifts would give Aria and Halo the opportunity to move about the kingdom faster and travel to other kingdoms on diplomatic missions. They were essential to the work they'd be doing in the coming months.

“When I first heard you were raising Onyx Rah, I didn't think there was any way you were going to be able to do it,” Lara admitted. “Now that you have, I want to offer my help. You and my sister need modes of transportation. The hulls of these vessels are fortified with crimson pitaya fiber, so you'll be traveling safely, I can assure you.” She looked very proud of herself.

“Again, thank you, Lara,” Aria said, nodding graciously at Lara.

“We are going to be going to a summit meeting tomorrow, so these will come in handy,” Bindi said, looking excitedly at the new vehicles.

“Great,” Lara said. “I like what you've done with the place,” she said to Aria, looking around the dilapidated city square.

The kingdom was still in a state of dire disrepair. Although the debris, lava, and soot were all gone, there was still much to do as far as repairing collapsed structures and bringing life back to the kingdom.

“We have a security force,” Aria said. “That's a start, but now we need to assemble builders, designers, farmers, and merchants to create the infrastructure and bring necessities in so that we might actually support our citizens.” Not for the first time, she sounded like a true queen.

“We could use another mage,” Halo said sweetly.

Lara responded with a resounding, “No!”

“Why not?” her sister pressed.

“First, dear sister, your kingdom is not inhabitable. Second, with no people, there is no crime, no money, and no reason for me to be here. I like the Obsidian Valley.” Lara sneered pointedly at Sire Vanoire, who huffed in response. “I like the little operation I’ve got going there. It keeps the fires lit and the belly full. No, you two have fun raising the tombs. I’ve got other plans.” She gave a hearty laugh again, and Halo frowned.

“It won’t always be this way,” Halo said, jutting out her chin in defiance.

“Good,” Lara said, giving her sister a loving and proud look.

“Well, despite your not wanting to join us yet,” Aria said, measuring her words carefully, “I appreciate your gifts. They will be vital to our rebuilding efforts.”

“No problem,” Lara said. “Sorry, I can’t stick around, but I need to get back. The airship is going to take me home, but the pilot will return for your trip to Angeline Falls in the morning.” With a farewell wink, she walked across the city square and was hoisted into the cockpit of the air shuttle by the pilot.

I half-expected her to fly the thing herself, she was that tough, but she slid over to the passenger seat as the pilot returned to his position and closed the door with a metal arm. I looked at Aria, curious to see her reaction to the gifts, but she simply waved Lara off, looking confident and regal.

“Well, the fact that she could drop an airship over here without troops filing in from all sides has me worried,” Bindi said. “I need to talk to my soldiers and make sure they are ready for anything. Clearly, they weren’t ready for this,” Bindi said and walked toward the road ahead.

“I’m going for a rest,” Sire Vanoire said.

“I’m taking this car,” Halo announced, looking thrilled. “Anyone want a ride?” She looked at me and Aria.

“No,” Aria said, taking my hand. “I want to talk with Lex for a moment.”

“Sure. Have fun,” Halo said as she walked toward the vehicle.

“I’d tell you to do the same, but I already know you will,” Aria replied, laughing as she walked with me back to the palace.

Aria looped her arm in mine, and for a moment, we walked in silence, letting all that had happened that morning sink into our minds. As soon as we got close to the palace, I asked her the question that had been burning my brain. I had to know what her future plans were and why she was making

dangerous choices regarding Polonius.

“Do you really intend on letting Polonius into Onyx Rah?” I asked, hoping she’d just been lying.

“I have no plans to let him in,” Aria said. “But I have to keep him thinking that I will, or he’ll attack Navarrah City or us to abduct me. We aren’t ready for that. We may have over three hundred troops, but that’s not enough to fight the Crypt Claw. We need the allegiance of all the kingdoms to do such a thing. It’s better that Polonius thinks he’s getting what he wants for now.” She sighed. “You’re letting your love for me cloud your logic, Lex. I can feel it.”

“Well, he’ll be a problem for us as long as he’s alive,” I countered. “My mind is clear enough to understand that. Also, the magic that is protecting you and the others while you’re in Onyx Rah doesn’t exist in other kingdoms. What happens when you leave? Outside of Onyx Rah, you’re going to be vulnerable. Like tomorrow when we attend the summit meeting.”

“I’ll have Sire and Halo with me, not to mention Bindi and several of the guards. Also, I’m magical, Lex. And tough as shit. I can protect myself.”

I gave her a side eye. While she was all of those things, Polonius had trapped her before. He could do it again, now that he knew more about her. He could find a weakness we hadn’t considered.

“You’ll also have me,” I assured her, ready to kill anyone who dared touch her.

“And most importantly, I’ll have you,” she echoed. “Let’s not deplete ourselves worrying about it. I want to see how things are progressing with the troops, and when Halo gets back with the motor car, we should do an assessment of the kingdom.”

She wanted to focus on Onyx Rah. While her desire to do so was appropriate, her disregard for Polonius and his will to secure her at any cost concerned me. I wished Cheyenne was with me so that I could discuss military strategy with him, as I was reluctant to approach Bindi, having felt so slighted by her. However, since she was the head of Aria’s Royal Guard, I had to talk to her about keeping Polonius away from Aria.

“I agree we need to assess the current needs of the kingdom,” I said. “However, we should consult with Bindi on strategies to lessen Polonius’s threat.”

“After our summit meeting tomorrow,” Aria said dismissively. “Currently, she’s working with the troops on finishing the temporary housing

and importing enough food from the Obsidian Valley to sustain them until the farmers can plant crops. We'll have to have food sources for at least a year."

In her head, Aria was already running a kingdom. I admired that she wasn't daunted by a tyrant who wanted to destroy her and her new kingdom, but worry gnawed at me that she wasn't giving Polonius enough credit for making good on his threats.

Later that day, Halo returned with the motor car, and Aria and I traveled the kingdom to assess the troops' needs. We stayed out until dark, then returned to our room after a modest dinner. It had just been the two of us, as Halo had eaten with Bindi and Sire Vanoire.

"It feels good to be alone together and openly sharing a room," I remarked. "We've never had that." I stripped out of my bathing robe, draped it over the chair near our bed, and slid under the covers, fully aroused after showering with Aria moments before.

"I could get used to this," Aria said, entering the other side of the bed.

"We have a summit meeting with the other kingdoms to hopefully form an alliance against Polonius meeting in the morning," I said cautiously. "We'll need our wits and our rest." But it was obvious by my state of need that ignoring each other right now was not going to be an option.

"We'll make it fast," Aria said as she slipped her arms around my center and kissed my lips. She felt perfect in my arms. Her warm, tender lips pressed against mine, and my demanding cock thickened, wanting more of her soft sweetness.

"I have to have you," I whispered hotly into her neck after our lips parted. "I dream of making love in our own bed, in our suite," I added, but didn't finish the sentence. Would that room exist in her castle, or mine?

"For now, this is our bed," she said, kissing my chest as her deft fingers curled around my cock, gently prodding it into a sweet ecstasy.

"For now," I repeated as I kissed her neck and gently rolled her onto her back.

We were both so fatigued from our long journey around the kingdom and the altercation with Polonius, our love-making was gentle and caring. Aria's fingers had hardened my already stiff cock to the point where I couldn't wait to be inside her, but she needed my attention—deserved it. I kissed my way down to her breasts, taking each nipple into my mouth as I focused on bringing the buds to their peaks. She moaned under my lips, and my cock

stabbed her soft thigh, wanting attention. Her hips bucked gently into mine as I kissed my way down her center, tasting her soft, clean skin, then the tiny thatch of hair above her pussy.

My hands softly pressed against each of her thighs, spreading her legs wider so that I might kiss her nether lips and arouse her to the heights I'd already reached. She moaned louder as my tongue swiped across her center and dove inside her, tasting her sweetness. I then kissed the inside of each thigh, teasing her as I returned to her pussy and kissed her clit, then made my way back up to her lips.

"Make love to me," she begged. And I did as I entered her gloriously tight body, feeling the rush of euphoria she always gave me.

"Yes," she hissed, wrapping her arms and legs around me as I started to pump in and out with a tender rhythm.

"I love you," I said, staring into her eyes filled with warmth and passion.

Without saying anything, she kissed me, her hands urging me to quicken. Soon, I was lost to my own desires as I nestled in closer to her, feeling myself slip in deeper as I brought us both to an eventual climax that had us panting and rasping each other's names. As she clenched her pussy around me, I gently pulled out and brought her into my embrace as I released on her thigh and stared into her incredible face.

"Thank you," she said sweetly as I took a small towel that sat beside a pitcher of water and washed my spend off of her.

"I could spend the rest of my life like this," I said with a laugh as I brought the covers up around us, and she nestled into my embrace.

"Let's hope we get that chance." Her words drifted into the air as she fell asleep against my chest.

The next morning, garments were delivered to our door. Each outfit was made with crimson pitaya silk. We were told by the officer who had delivered them that Sire Vanoire crafted each piece of clothing with his magic. They were made of luxurious fabrics designed to reflect our royal status. Aria's dress was a rich plum velvet with a plunging neckline, embroidered in crimson pitaya threads weaved with gold. Swirls of gold brocade and velvet danced around the skirt, and I marveled at her beauty.

"I don't think I've ever seen you wear a dress," I said adoringly. "You should wear them more often."

"Well, I don't like dresses, so don't get used to seeing me in one," she said, her face curling into a frown as we walked into the main hall.

There, we found Sire Vanoire dressed in elegant black velvet. Halo was standing beside him, garbed in an incredible dress of green and sapphire. Bindi stood off to the side, wearing her military best.

“Great,” Sire said, looking proud of himself. “You received the garments I made. When we can harvest crimson pitaya again, we’ll have to have a team of dressmakers and tailors fortify all of the citizens’ outfits, but for now, these will offer another level of protection.”

“Thank you, Sire,” Aria said with sincere gratitude. “The outfits are wonderful, and I appreciate your help keeping all of us safe.”

“And I promise, my troops will be with you every step of the way, my queen,” Bindi chimed in. “No one will so much as come near you, let alone threaten your life.”

“I thank you, too,” Aria said, nodding to Bindi. “Shall we go?”

Though gracious and composed as a queen should be, Aria was still struggling to fill the role, as she looked to Sire and then me for confirmation of her command. A queen who was comfortable with leading wouldn’t need the visual assurances of anyone. Even her lover and the kingdom’s mage.

“Yes, let’s go,” Sire said, and we made our way out of the castle.

“You look incredible,” I told her, trying to prop her up. “And you deserve this role. You’ve earned it. Today, at the summit, remember you are already a queen. You don’t need anyone’s validation. You know what your kingdom needs. Don’t back down, and be as fierce as you’ve always been. Just be that tough in a dress.” I gave her a smile.

“Thank you,” she told me, taking my words to heart. “I needed to hear that. And I have you and Bindi for back-up.” She let out a laugh. “Though I wonder why you never traveled with security?” She looked at me with a playful scrutiny.

“I didn’t need it,” I said, laughing. “I was such a fierce warrior, no one messed with me. And you are as well, but since your kingdom is still vulnerable, it’s best you have a little back-up.” I gave her a smile, and she put her head on my shoulder.

“I’m glad for it,” was all she said.

The view from the airship as we traveled over Onyx Rah toward Angeline Falls was remarkable. Despite the beauty of air travel and the landscape we passed, I was having an emotional reaction to returning to the falls. I started to feel my skin heat and my heart race. The last time I had been there, I was thrown into the waterfall for fighting Polonius in my attempt to stop him

from taking Aria. I was only half-surprised that they'd let me return to the city.

Aria and I dozed off during the three-hour flight across the Obsidian Valley into Angeline Falls. I wasn't sure what to expect when the airship landed on the airstrip, but I was quite surprised to see a large welcoming committee with signs and flowers. Banners welcomed the Onyx Rah royals, and several people carried large bouquets of white flowers symbolizing peace and welcome.

We exited the ship, Bindi and the two soldiers she'd brought with her being the first to exit. She and her guards stood two by two on either side of the ship's exit ramp, standing at attention with their crossbows in arms at their sides. They were armed and ready as Sire Vanoire exited next with Halo behind him, then Aria.

As soon as Aria stepped out of the airbus, there was a roar of cheering. Something that threw her totally off-guard. Her steps faltered a little, but she regained her composure quickly as she descended the ramp. I followed her, virtually unnoticed. I didn't care—my last visit to the falls was disastrous—but it seemed that Queen Nadine and Bastien Salt had all but forgotten the horrors of that night when Aria was abducted by Polonius just before I was thrown to my death. Hopefully, this visit wouldn't end in tragedy.

"Welcome, Aria, queen of Onyx Rah." Queen Nadine bowed her head. "And Halo Goldlace. We are glad to have you come. You and your entourage are welcome here, as is your mage, Sire Vanoire." The queen nodded her head to Sire.

"My gracious queen," Sire acknowledged, returning the nod.

"You are welcome here as long as you abide by our rules," Bastien immediately chimed in, and the queen's face remained stoic and regal. "We allow no weapons, so kindly have your guards remove them from their persons."

But Bindi wasn't about to let go of the armory. She just held her crossbow more tightly.

"It's okay, Bindi," Aria said, addressing Bindi and her troops. "You may return the weapons to the ship. You will not be needing them here."

Bindi huffed, but did as Aria commanded. "As you wish, my queen," she said with a reluctant sigh.

"Very good," Bastien continued. "We also don't allow shifting." Bastien's eyes slid to me, and I nodded in acknowledgement. "No combat,

but for mild disagreements. No disrespecting any worker or Arsenal Fang pack member. Doing such will get you thrown over the falls.” With that, he turned away from me as if he hadn’t already thrown me over said falls.

“We promise to obey your rules,” Aria told him.

“Yes, Bastien. You won’t have to worry about us,” Halo added, standing next to Aria.

“Then, shall we?” Queen Nadine gestured ahead of her as she took a step forward.

We followed her down the tarmac to the city, where people lined the streets with flowers and signs, chanting “Onyx Rah” as we passed.

Already, Aria was loved. She had no idea the kind of hope she’d given the people of Tobran by resurrecting Onyx Rah. She’d essentially obliterated the Tombs by raising the dead kingdom from the ashes, and word had traveled fast. Aria had only just found her mage, but with the arrival of troops from Navarrah City came news of a new Onyx Rah, thanks to the soldiers who spoke among themselves and others. If citizens could rally so much support in so little time, Aria’s reign was poised to be legendary. This both excited and terrified me, given the threat it would pose to her life if anyone, namely Polonius, tried to overrule her.

We walked through the streets and met the throng of riotous cheering and hailing with bows and nods. Aria graciously accepted the people’s adoration. A servant girl turned savior, what wasn’t to love? Only I knew the glory of the woman she truly was, the woman I loved with my entire being.

We were escorted to the palace and then to the resort location reserved for royals that was just beyond the palace gates.

I had stayed in this part of Angeline Falls when I came here with Amadeus. Just being in the same location triggered a fresh wave of trauma. I tried not to think of it, just focused on this being Aria's moment to emerge as a royal sovereign.

“You are our welcome guests,” Queen Nadine said as she walked us to the apartments at the top of the mountain reserved for royals. “Please use the courtesy phones provided to call a caregiver to get you anything you might need. Tomorrow, we will host the summit meeting gathering the leaders of Tobran. Until then, you are free to enjoy the resort’s amenities.”

We gave the queen our thanks and said our goodbyes to Halo and Sire Vanoire. Halo was excited to hear the symphony that was playing that night in the palace, and Sire deserved a much-needed rest.



Aria and I looked at the hot springs that hovered over the Angeline Falls that promised an enticing break from the politics and royal fanfare. I assumed that my mother and father had already arrived at the resort here, but I was not ready to face them just yet. I was excited about spending time with Aria alone in a peaceful, beautiful setting.

“I don’t have a bathing suit,” Aria said when I suggested we take a swim.

“All you need to do is ask,” I told her as I picked up the phone and ordered two bathing outfits. “See? That wasn’t so hard,” I teased as I wrapped my arms around her waist and stood on the balcony overlooking nature and all of its beauty.

The falls were truly a remarkable place, perched on various mountains with a floating island hovering over several of them, the tallest of which was the Angeline Falls that had nearly ended my life when I’d been pitched over it. I was glad to have Aria in my arms, enjoying happier times at this place.

After a few moments, there was a knock at the door, and two servants dressed in black uniforms with a blue and silver trim brought two large silver boxes into our room.

“How many swimming suits do we need?” Aria laughed.

“These are from Her Highness, Queen Nadine, to honor the queen of Onyx Rah’s great accomplishments,” one of the servants said as he and the other servant bowed in unison. “Take them with her adoration and respect.”

“Oh my goodness. Thank you,” Aria said, red tinging her cheeks. “I have no way to repay such kindness,” she said, forgetting that she was soon to be the ruler of the most coveted land in all of Voltaire.

Onyx Rah had the potential to grow more crimson pitaya plants than any other place in Tobran. The proximity to the volcanos and their heat provided the perfect growing conditions for them. Soon, she’d have more crimson pitaya than any other kingdom.

Queen Nadine was wise to get into Aria’s good graces early and establish an alliance. Angeline Falls was rarely under attack, but if they ever were, their troops and citizens would be quickly decimated as they’d never allowed violence and weapons beyond the city gates. None of the citizens were trained to fight and would be easily picked off.

“The queen only requests that you enjoy her gift in good health,” the servant who’d spoken replied. “Thank you, Your Majesty.” The servants bowed again and backed out of the room.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this,” Aria said, looking at me wide-

eyed.

“You will, because you are going to be loved by so many,” I said with a kiss to the top of her head. “Let’s find our bathing suits.”

As we went through the silver trunks, we pulled out several elegant gowns I knew Aria didn’t necessarily want. However, there were a few pairs of warm jodhpurs and tunics, which made her smile. I wasn’t sure if those were for me or for her, but the boxes also contained attire meant for a king. Namely, two ornately embroidered jackets with gold-embossed lapels and gold-plated epaulets.

“The queen was quite generous,” I said, seeing the garments she’d included for me, the man she predicted would be Aria’s king.

“These are beautiful, but I can’t wear dresses if I’m going to be digging in the dirt,” Aria said with a frown.

“You can wear them, my love, when you are acting as a dignitary for your kingdom,” I told her. “That’s what the dresses are for, and I would say it is a kind gesture from the queen, as she knows your history. It is as if she is supporting you woman to woman, knowing what you will need in the months ahead. Already, you have a good portion of my father’s army and these fine garments, all gifts from those who seek to be your allies. So far, you are well-supported, Aria. These gifts, you will come to discover, are vital in your quest for diplomacy and relationships with neighboring kingdoms.”

“You’re right, Lex,” she said. “And they are so beautiful.” But what was more beautiful than any gown was her delighted smile.

“Now, let’s find those bathing suits so we can take a swim before it gets dark,” I suggested.

“Do you think we should visit your family first? Is it rude not to?” Aria looked at me with real concern.

“No, it’s not expected of you,” I said. “What is more important is that you take some time to relax and rest before your first diplomatic meeting.”

In truth, I didn’t want to see my family. Or face the fact that I should have been with them here, representing Navarrah City. I wanted to be by Aria’s side, though my loyalties were divided. I was happy that my father wanted an alliance with Onyx Rah, though how could he not?

“I suppose you’re right,” Aria said as her smile widened.

We found our bathing outfits, and Aria and I spent the rest of the evening in the hot spring water overlooking Angeline Falls. We didn’t say much as we spent the night holding each other, looking at the stars as the warm water

eased our muscles and nerves.

When we returned to our room that night, the sun had just set. We were treated to a delightful meal upon our return, and she ate like a woman starved. As soon as she'd had her fill, she yawned, disrobed, kissed me, and fell asleep the moment her head nestled into the soft pillows.

I on the other hand, was restless, so I left Aria to sleep while I sought out my family. I found them in the courtyard of the resort, playing cards and drinking wine. They, too, seemed to be enjoying some recreation time in the beautiful surroundings.

"Lex!" My mother jumped out of her chair and ran to me. "Oh, it is so good to see you, my son." She hugged me firmly, as if the amount of muscle used to hold me to her reflected her unending love.

"It's good to see you, brother," Cheyenne said as he stood up from his chair, looking in a cheery mood. "Now that I've seen the falls from this angle, I'm very glad Amadeus helped you survive. I would not want to face what you did." He shuddered.

I didn't want to think of what I'd been through after nearly seeing my life end when I fell into the roaring water.

"Just glad I survived," I said, patting my mother's shoulder as I stepped away from her. "Thank you for sending troops to Onyx Rah," I said to my brother. "That will help the rebuild immensely."

"That wasn't me, Lex." He looked at me as if he wouldn't have been asked to do such a thing, given that it was my birthright to be my father's second-in-command. "That was all Father's doing," he added with a smile.

"Congratulations are in order, son," my father said, looking up from his hand of cards. "You've accomplished what most could not. Onyx Rah is almost a reality, and we'll soon be allied with a kingdom that will provide our greatest resource." He was acting as if Aria had already told him she'd share her crimson pitaya harvests with him.

"Always politics," I sighed, realizing that both Queen Nadine and my father were wooing Aria for their own gains. I sat down at the table and poured myself a glass of wine from a half-empty pitcher.

I knew I would follow Aria wherever she went. If she were to leave Onyx Rah and relinquish her throne, I'd bring her with me to rule Navarrah City one day. I didn't have my hooks into the kingdom's eventual crops of crimson pitaya. I just loved the woman who was brave enough to serve as their queen.

“You’ve been an excellent diplomat, Lex,” my mother said consolingly as she took her seat at the table and picked up her cards again.

Cheyenne also sat down and hailed a servant who was standing at the door. “More wine,” he commanded.

No one around me flinched. The Cheyenne I knew before I left Navarrah City wouldn’t have dared command anyone in my father’s presence. That role was reserved for the king and his successor.

“Yes, Lex,” my father said. “I’m very excited about the emerging prospects. Not only will there be crimson pitaya, but Aria will no doubt have a robust army and an ability to offer a line of defense against the Crypt Claw. Also, with Polonius’s treaty broken, we retain the use of our ports, so we can be the tradeway for the crimson pitaya she doesn’t give us. And our city will prosper from the levies we’ll wage against the goods.” He looked down at his hand, proud of his prospects and the cards he held as he laid them down in front of everyone. “I believe that’s it. I’ve won.”

“It seems you have, Helix,” my mother said with love and pride, laying down a much less impressive hand of cards.

“I was so close,” my brother groaned, showing his hand. He was only one play away from winning.

I spent the rest of the evening hearing stories of Navarrah City and Nan, who was happy to be retired, but still cared for the children because she loved it so. The troops had been training, but without a mage to guide them, it had been hard on Jarvis. They still hadn’t brought back the royal recruits for the Royal Guard because of the aftermath of Ulryk’s drug use and how his disastrous reputation had tainted everyone’s regard for the Royal Guard. I was sad to hear how much the Royal Guard would have to do to repair their relationships with the other nations.

I could see how a major alliance with the newly resurrected Onyx Rah would put Navarrah City back in a prestigious place of respect. As Onyx Rah was going to be the golden treasure among the kingdoms, having Navarrah City as its strongest ally would all but obliterate everything Ulryk and Fallon had done to tarnish the kingdom’s reputation.

I drank plenty of wine and enjoyed the time with my family. When the hour grew late, I returned to Aria to find her still sleeping peacefully. I looked down at her beautiful sleeping face and wondered if she knew how much power she truly held. She had the whole of my heart, and without doing anything but being her feisty self, she had all of Tobran wrapped around her

little finger. All she had to do now was fill her own shoes.

The only one who could topple her, and destroy all of us, was Polonius.

## Chapter 9

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### *Aria*

I woke up with Lex's warm arms wrapped around me. I loved sleeping in his embrace. Being so adored and showered with gifts was something that unnerved me as I was unaccustomed to getting so much attention. I also had a hard time believing I deserved gifts and praise.

What I did understand, and what felt least complicated, was waking up in Lex's arms.

If only our love could be that simple. I had a kingdom to raise, and that came with a great many complications.

I basked in the moment and allowed myself to feel Lex's breath on my neck and the gentle rhythm of his belly rising and falling against my back. I tried to ignore the hardness that pressed into my backside. We didn't have time to make love that morning.

We had to join the summit meeting and make plans for the future of Onyx Rah. I was too excited to lay still much longer, but I did for a moment, just to savor being near Lex as he slept. I ran my hand over his and felt the softness of his skin. The undersides of his hands were rough with callouses, but the tops were soft and smooth.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," he said softly as he awoke. I leaned back and kissed his lips.

"Soon," he cinched me in closer. "I'll be able to court you and vie for your hand in marriage. Properly."

"I would think that running the gauntlet with me, then being thrown over the falls and nearly dying is more than enough to get my attention," I laughed.

"Ah, but I haven't sent you flowers and gifts," he said in a playfully regal

tone.

“Please don’t,” I pleaded. “No more gifts.”

I couldn’t bear them. It was hard going from a servant who had to fight for every single freedom to becoming a queen overnight and having royals lavish me without pause. I would never be so trusting of a new monarch, but the title of queen seemed to hold a great deal of power with most.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

“Aria, Lex,” Halo called through the door in her sweet but stern tone of voice. “We need to leave for the summit in an hour. May I come in?” She turned the handle on our door, likely ready to enter with or without our permission.

“You can come in,” I said as I jumped out of bed and grabbed a robe from the peg where it was hanging on the wall.

“Ah, still in bed,” she grumbled when she saw us.

“You should have gotten us earlier,” I teased. “We will be ready in a moment.”

“You’ll need someone to dress you,” Halo said. “Unless you expect him to do it.” She looked at Lex and frowned.

“He’s been doing a fine job of it,” I said with a smile.

“Fine enough, but you must look like a queen,” Halo said. “You need your hair done and your dress fit just right. When we get back to the kingdom we’ll have to get servants situated. We can’t keep using magic to dress and feed ourselves. We need to save our spells and energy for growing crimson pitaya and restoring...oh so many things.” She rolled her eyes at all the daunting tasks that lay ahead of us.

“Let’s just focus on getting dressed. The rest will come,” I said, trying to calm her a little. “Did you receive garments, too?” I asked as Halo sifted through the dresses I’d hung up in the wardrobe that were sent to me by Queen Nadine.

“I did, and they are just as beautiful as these. I never thought agreeing to help you raise Onyx Rah would have so many perks.” Her joyful voice squeaked a little.

“Neither did I,” I told her as I slipped out of my night dress.

“Wait! Lex is still in the room,” Halo hissed, looking horrified.

“He’s seen me without my clothes on, Halo,” I whispered.

“I have,” Lex assured. “But I’ll avert my eyes if I must.” He stood out of bed, just as naked, and walked to his wardrobe closet on the other side of the

room and started to put on his pants.

“No, no, no,” Halo groaned, averting her eyes. “Just get ready, please.”

It took us very little time to dress and prepare ourselves for the summit. Within the hour, Lex, Halo, and I were carried by an open motor carriage to the meeting hall. The weather was beautiful, but I wondered why we were in a motor carriage without a roof until I saw the throngs of people lining the streets to wave at us as we passed.

Lex and I shared one seat, and Halo had the seat across from us. The driver was a row ahead of us. He and Bindi occupied the front seat. Behind us was a motorcade carrying Bindi’s soldiers, but by the look on her face, Bindi wasn’t very happy about the idea of protecting me without a crossbow or the ability to shift into her wolf.

“How do they expect me to protect them from...them?” Bindi motioned to the crowd while talking to the driver, who clearly had no jurisdiction over the rules of Angeline Falls.

“No one will hurt the queen or Ms. Goldlace,” the driver assured her. “We are a peaceful people,” he added, almost robotically.

“There are other people there. People not from Angeline Falls,” Bindi huffed.

It took about a half hour for us to reach the conference hall where our summit meeting was to take place. The entire time, we were waved at and cheered at until we finally came to a stop in front of the grand government building at the edge of the city. When all of us entered the room, I was announced by an emcee standing at the door.

“Arriving are Aria, presumed Queen of Onyx Rah, Prince Lex Redveign of Navarrah City, and Royal Mage Halo Goldlace of the Obsidian Valley,” he said with a bow.

Everyone seated around the table stood and gave a small bow before they were seated again.

Halo gave a tiny wave to her brother Xavier Goldlace, who was one of the leaders in the Lupine Coalition. Also seated at the table were the other members of the Lupine Coalition, including Ellestria Culp and Mattias O’Halloran, King Helix and Queen Delia of Navarrah City, as well as Prince Cheyenne, who was seated next to Queen Nadine and Bastien Salt of Angeline Falls. Around the room were soldiers in differing uniforms representing the various royal kingdoms. Each was protecting their monarch, and so Bindi and the soldiers in her attendance went to the wall nearest the



chairs where we were seated.

“Thank you for coming,” Ellestria Culp started. “Welcome to the Obsidian Valley. Queen Aria and Her Royal Highness Halo of Onyx Rah, we are more than delighted to have you here.” She looked at each of us and nodded while smiling broadly. The blond streaks in her dark hair shimmered under the golden afternoon light. She was a strong-faced woman in her early thirties who could easily command a room. “News of your kingdom’s resurrection has been met with joyous celebration in all of our kingdoms, and I speak for each of us when I say we are grateful to you both for what you have been able to accomplish. I will admit none of us believed it could be done. Brava to both of you.”

This was met with clapping from everyone seated.

“Truly a miraculous feat,” Queen Nadine added, looking regal with her otherworldly grace and beauty.

“Yes, extraordinary. So we are here to support you both. I think the best way to do that is to hear what you might need from us.” Ellestria looked at Halo and me. “Would either of you like to speak on the matter?” She looked directly at me, but I turned to Halo to make sure she didn’t want to speak.

Halo had made it clear that she wasn’t interested in being a figurehead of the kingdom and was only there to support the rebuild, but would take a backseat as soon as that happened. She was a scholar, not a leader, but I noticed she had enjoyed being treated as a royal. Perhaps I would be able to convince her to stay with me so that we might rule together, as our ancestors had before us.

“You go ahead,” Halo said to me and bit her lip. “I hate these kinds of things,” she whispered.

“Okay,” I said with a little laugh and went to the podium at the head of the table.

My entire body was electrified with nerves, but I’d been through much, much worse than a summit meeting. Oddly, though, the summit meeting was almost scarier than anything I’d ever faced. I was among them, the royalty who had ignored and looked past me for my entire life. But there I was, being heard by them. It was enough to shatter anyone’s nerves.

What I did have going for me was the ability to do impulsive things with conviction.

“You’re going to do great,” Lex whispered as I stood to approach the podium, giving my hand a squeeze.

“Thank you,” I whispered back, then I took my place at the podium. “And thank you all for being here today to offer your support. As you know, Onyx Rah was destroyed and its citizens were killed, but there are descendants of the few survivors who remain. It is my hope that we welcome them back to Onyx Rah and that we are able to provide them sanctuary and support. In order to bring Onyx Rah back to its original prosperity, we must first establish a military presence, bring in law enforcement, and build up the infrastructure. Our hope is to invite former Onyx Rah citizens and descendants to return to the kingdom. All we ask is that each bring a skill we can use to rebuild. They need to help with farming, construction, and establishing a means for citizens to buy food, get water, and live their daily lives. Those who are from the Midnight Moon Pack will be allowed to live in the kingdom without question or prejudice.” As I spoke, I could feel my insides shake.

“That sounds like a solid plan,” King Helix remarked, “however, we aren’t sure how many of the Midnight Moon Pack members actually survived. You’ll need to allow more than Midnight Moon Pack members in, I’m afraid.”

The king was right. We needed to expand our borders and allow wolves from other packs to join us as citizens of Onyx Rah.

“I agree, King Helix,” I said. “The next to be invited will be skilled laborers, craftsmen, farmers, educators, medical professionals as well as soldiers and law enforcement. We’ll also need citizens who can provide transportation or are able to build motor vehicles.”

“That sounds fine, but how are you going to find these Midnight Moon Pack members? We’ve been looking for years,” Xavier Goldlace interrupted.

“Well, as you know, your sister Halo is very good at research,” I answered. “She has been poring over the documents that survived the fires. She’s found several records that indicate which families owned property. We hope to restore land to their rightful owner’s family. In the past, Midnight Moon Pack members were reluctant to come forward, as there was a worry that they may still be hunted, especially by Polonius, but now we have a kingdom that can protect them. So, we hope they will come forward. After we’ve allocated land to Onyx Rah descendants, we will draw property boundaries and divide resources among anyone who is qualified to immigrate to Onyx Rah.”

Talking about all that we needed to accomplish had my nerves amping

up. There was so much we had to do.

“And will you be opening your borders to trade, then?” Mattias Halloran asked.

“Yes, and we’ll be allowing citizens from all over Voltaire to join us once our kingdom has been established,” I said. “Our criteria will change, perhaps to include artists, writers, performers, caregivers, clerks, hospital workers, and more so that we might fully realize our kingdom. At that point, we will formally announce the court and have a coronation so that we might officially open the kingdom.”

“What a delightful little project,” a distant voice commented, and I looked toward it to see Polonius walk into the room.

Every single muscle and nerve in my body froze. It was much easier to face Polonius behind the magical protection that kept Onyx Rah safe. Here, I was far more exposed. I wanted to be braver and more defiant, but all I could do was stare at him. Somehow, it felt like it was only him and me in that room. “You’re mine,” I heard. “Your kingdom is mine! I should have been invited to this meeting.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, trying to temper my voice to one of a polite and powerful queen.

“I might ask you all the same thing?” Polonius said with a menacing hiss. “I’m sure it was just an oversight on your part, but it looks as if you’re having a summit with Tobran’s leaders. Last I checked, I, too, am a leader of a kingdom in Tobran.”

“We are here to discuss the rebuilding of a kingdom your ancestor destroyed,” Queen Nadine said with venom.

“Precisely. My ancestor.” Polonius took a seat as two Crypt Claw guards entered the room with Gabrielle.

Why did he have her? She had come with us when we’d escaped his castle.

“Not me,” Polonius continued. “I’ve not destroyed anything, and Aria is my wife, most importantly. While I’m disappointed I didn’t receive my invitation in time, I was able to spare a few moments to join you, so here I am.” His soldiers and Gabrielle stood behind his chair.

There were audible protests peppered throughout the room. I tried to make eye contact with Gabrielle, but she wouldn’t look at me. How had she ended up with Polonius? We had saved her. She was supposed to be in Navarrah City.

“You were not invited,” Ellestria Culp stated. “For reasons I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Well, pardon me if I don’t understand why my wife is standing before you, without me,” Polonius said. “I half expect a prince to attack and get tossed over the falls because he believes he has a right to her. Because he loves her.” He laughed. “Since when has love ever mattered in political matches?” Polonius looked at Lex and glared before he turned his head to me and stared with death in his eyes. “Imagine my shock. I can only assume the messenger with my invitation has met some sort of horrendous misfortune... or will.” He reached back and took Gabrielle’s hand.

“She’s not your wife,” Lex barked, standing and looking like he might attack Polonius again. I couldn’t have that. Lex could truly be killed if he broke the rules again in Angeline Falls.

“No!” I shouted to Lex. “No. I’ll handle this. You will not.”

He sat down and closed his mouth, fuming with anger, but he was staying silent. Bastien looked at Lex and nodded his approval. I was not going to lose Lex again, not because of a tyrant like Polonius.

Polonius looked at me and smiled as he let go of Gabrielle’s hand, who was still not making eye contact with me.

“Good, my dear,” he said. “I warned you about making political decisions based on your personal preferences. Remember, you were given to me in a treaty that defined terms forbidding me and my army from invading Navarrah City. I have a copy of that treaty here.” Polonius took a stack of papers out of a leather satchel. “As worded, the treaty also protects the other kingdoms of Tobran from an unprovoked attack.” He sneered.

“That treaty was never signed,” King Helix interjected.

“Exactly,” Polonius said. “The treaty was never signed, but the marriage contract that was included with it was. And here I have Aria’s signature.” Polonius read a portion of the document. “I, Aria Blackbane, do solemnly vow to honor, love,” Polonius stopped to smirk at me, “and obey. From this day forward and until death do us part, the Warlord Polonius of Brahman’s Peak, my lawful husband.” His eyes landed on me and a shiver froze my soul.

“I didn’t sign that,” I whispered in shock.

“Is this not your signature?” He held up the paper that, to my horror, showed my signature. “I’m sure we can have it authenticated if you want to go through the embarrassment.”

“No.” I bowed my head and wondered how he could have gotten my

signature, then I realized he must have used Amadeus's magic.

"This is ridiculous. You all know she didn't sign that marriage contract!" Lex yelled, losing his grip on his self-control.

"Clearly, she has," Bastien Salt said to Lex.

"You're keeping my wife from me," Polonius prodded with the greatest of skill. "I can and will attack any kingdom that supports the abduction of my wife."

"But I am not your wife," I told him, standing up to him. "We were never married."

"Yet, you signed a contract and are promised to me to be just that. I can attack everyone in this room right now and take you back with me. My army is ready, and the most valuable players are all here with only a few Royal Guards, none of whom are armed."

I saw Bindi tense up, and she looked like she was about to shift into her wolf, regardless of the rules. I held my head high to show her that I wasn't frightened by Polonius's threats.

"I have already said you may court me," I reminded him.

"There's no need to court what is already mine. However, I will refrain from attacking the leaders here today and sign a peace accord promising not to strike against any kingdom or territory if you acknowledge my marriage contract with Aria. I shall send my armies back to Brahman's Peak. I don't want war, as much as most of you believe I do. I'm not in this to destroy you. I simply want Aria to marry me as I've grown fond of her company. She is the queen of a neighboring kingdom, and our union is an alliance for our kingdoms," Polonius dared to add.

There were gasps and sounds of shock around the room as King Helix and Queen Delia looked at Lex, who nodded, verifying the reason Polonius had wanted Aria all along.

"We cannot be pressured into making a decision on this matter," Queen Nadine said evenly. "A royal wedding takes time."

"I'm afraid you will have to make a decision. Amadeus is under my control, and he's been resting so that he might be of greater use to me when called upon."

"May I have a few days to consider your proposal?" I asked Polonius.

"No, you may have a few *hours* before our wedding," he said with a wry grin. "I'm sure you'll want to spruce up."

"I'll not marry you today," I stated with conviction.

“Aria,” Queen Nadine interjected. “We should discuss this.”

“I agree, Your Majesty, we should.” I turned and looked at Polonius. “We might actually want to fight you. *I* especially.” Polonius laughed. “And I might die in battle. If that happens, then Onyx Rah will be lost to you.”

“Are you suggesting that you will kill yourself?” Polonius sounded intrigued.

“I’m saying that if you attack us now, I might die in the fight. However, if you give me a few hours to consider my life’s worth, I might agree to your terms.” My organs trembled against my bones as I risked his wrath, putting us all in danger, but I wasn’t going to submit to Polonius.

“You’ve already agreed to my terms,” he hissed.

I wasn’t ready to lay down and let him win, especially with Lex so near, with my future so close. There had to be a way to keep Polonius back.

“Remember, I also control the prisoners on the Isle of Vitoria,” Polonius stated. “I could ruin Tobran if I withheld shipments of crimson pitaya. You are willing to risk all of this for love?”

“Are you willing to marry a woman who hates you?” I countered, feeling my skin redden with anger

“I am,” Polonius said simply. “Your hatred will fade. I can and will love you, and soon you’ll be married to the most powerful man in all of Voltaire. I’m sure you’ll be able to find something to love in that.” He stood. “I’ll be back in two hours. Be ready.” He grabbed Gabrielle’s arm and left the room, with his soldiers following behind him.

As soon as he left, I thought my legs might give out.

“You have to consider his offer,” Queen Nadine told me. “He has the manpower to destroy us all.” She seemed to remember that her kingdom was almost completely unarmed.

I looked over at Lex. He was being oddly quiet, but I knew his thoughts and his heart.

“What do you think, Lex?” I needed to hear his voice.

I wasn’t able to think clearly, as my life was swirling into the abyss. Once more, again, despite all the fanfare and regalia, these royals truly didn’t care. Not about me, not about what I needed.

“He is a good political match,” Lex said, and my heart sank. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Was he giving up on me, too?

“But I can’t,” I choked out.

“It is the most strategic move,” Lex said. “He has the manpower to bring Onyx Rah to its feet, and at the moment, he has Amadeus. Don’t get me wrong, I want the man dead—we all do. I’d throw Polonius over the falls in a heartbeat.”

At the mention of murdering Polonius, Bastien cleared his throat.

“But,” Lex segued, “if Polonius thinks he’s going to marry you, we have a chance to build our armies.”

“Lex has a point,” King Helix added. “If we have Polonius’s compliance, we might be able to get Amadeus away from him as soon as he lets down his guard.”

I could see Queen Nadine’s wheels turning. “Do you have a way to postpone this wedding, Aria?”

“Yes,” I said. “I believe I do.”

As we were speaking, I’d devised a plan that I hoped would work. I knew what Polonius wanted, and it wasn’t just me, but Onyx Rah for the crimson pitaya and the potential to rule the world by withholding it from everyone. I realized that I knew what was most valuable, and I was willing to test my theory with confidence.

“He plans to return in a few hours,” Ellestria Culp said, sounding stressed. “Will you have an answer for him, Aria? Something that will keep all our communities safe?”

“Yes, I do,” I said with assurance. “We can adjourn the meeting until tomorrow. I’ll send word to Polonius that I need time to reconcile with my decision and I will meet with him and all of you tomorrow.”

“I hope this works,” Queen Nadine sighed.

“I believe it will,” I told her, looking her in the eye. “I’m better at this than you might think.”

“I believe you are,” she said with grace. “You, of all people, Aria, I believe.” She nodded her head to me in reverence, and I knew I was making the right choice.

After that, everyone left the summit, less confident and more confused than when they came, but not me. I knew exactly what was ahead of me. As we exited the room, everyone was silent. As soon as we neared our carriage, Halo spoke.

“I can’t believe this, Aria,” she said, sounding hopeless. “I don’t want Polonius in our kingdom.”

“Neither do I,” I said. “That’s why I’m going to go through with this, or

make him think I will.” I didn’t say any more, knowing my plan but holding it from the others.

Lex remained silent, but I knew what he was grappling with, and I couldn’t face it. Not at that moment.

“If I may, Your Majesty,” Bindi began as we climbed into the car.

“Yes, Bindi,” I said. “You may speak always. Just say what’s on your mind.”

“I know how Polonius’s people operate. My grandparents were a part of the diplomatic assembly that had gathered in Onyx Rah when Zonas attacked. They fled with their family and ended up in Navarrah City. I have been training for the Royal Guard in Navarrah City.”

“They let you?” I asked, excited that perhaps they finally let a woman into the Royal Guard.

“They have not, but Cheyenne is working with Jarvis to allow them. It’s one of the reasons why Cheyenne chose me as the head of your Royal Guard—to start a precedent. Now that Polonius poses a very real threat, we’ll need all the soldiers we can get to protect the Redveigns, and many more to help protect you. What I’m trying to say is that we can beat Polonius. You don’t have to give in.” She looked so worried and determined, I couldn’t help but give her a hug before we got into the car.

It threw the stalwart soldier off a little, receiving affection in that manner from her queen, but I didn’t care. We were both soldiers, and I needed her to know that.

“I trained for the Royal Guard, too,” I reminded her. “I’m also a warrior. I know we can defeat Polonius, and we will.”

Just at that moment, Gabrielle came running up to us.

I turned to face her. “What happened? You are supposed to be in Navarrah City? What are you doing with Polonius?” I demanded as Gabrielle took heaving breaths.

“I,” she panted, then swallowed. “I was working in the castle, just as His Majesty and the queen left. I didn’t expect anything at all, but a man asked for me by name. When I went to the gates to inquire how he knew me, he put a bag over my head, and within hours, I was airlifted to Brahman’s Peak. I don’t even know if Naomi or Nan even know I’m gone. I mean, they must know by now.”

“So Polonius had you kidnapped?” His reach was much farther than I had anticipated.



“It was only one man and not a Crypt Claw. I think Polonius paid him to take me. It’s my fault. I was so happy to be home, I didn’t think. I should have never gone to the gates.” She shook her head in frustration.

“He would have caught you some other way,” Lex said, speaking up for the first time since the summit. “Polonius knows our palace. He’s had men stake it out before. You weren’t going to be safe unless you were guarded. It was the Royal Guard’s fault for not protecting you,” he added with sadness.

“Polonius has sent me and is sending word to the others. He understands that two hours is hasty for a wedding, so he’s having me return to Onyx Rah with you. I think he knows you’re not going to marry him, but Amadeus has set a truth spell on me. I must speak the truth, so I’m here to warn you. I’m supposed to be bathing, I must be quick. Anything you tell me will be shared with Polonius. So don’t say anything to me that you don’t want him to know.” Gabrielle’s fingers fidgeted with nerves.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said. “Hurry and go back, or you’ll have to say that you’ve spoken to us.” I didn’t want her in any more danger.

“I know, but he cares little for me,” Gabrielle said. “He’s obsessed with you. He’ll not call for me tonight. Rather, he’ll want me ready to journey with you tomorrow.” She shook her head again. “I hate that Amadeus has done this to me. I’m just an ugly servant girl who everyone dismisses. You two, you and Halo, are so beautiful, so regal. You’ve always been a queen, Aria. I don’t deserve to be among you.” She kept wringing her hands.

“No, you can’t say such a thing,” I told her. “You are beautiful, and I plan to have you in my court as soon as I am crowned. We’ll have you married to the finest of men. I promise. Your life will change.”

“But Polonius would never allow it.” Her head dipped to her chest.

“No, he won’t, but that won’t matter. I’ll be happy to have you with me.” I smiled at her and took her wringing hands into my own. “Go back now. Don’t get caught, and thank you for telling me about the truth spell.”

“Of course,” Gabrielle said, finally smiling a little. “Always.” With that, she started running back toward where she’d come from.

“Wait just a minute!” Halo shouted and ran to Gabrielle. “I might be able to break the spell,” she said, furrowing her brow.

She placed her hands around Gabrielle’s head, and a swirl of smoke warred with an inky black haze. The plumes and beautiful tendrils of smoke were quickly swallowed up by the darkness.

“I can’t believe this,” Halo groaned, gritted her teeth. “Amadeus’s magic

is too strong. You better run. I'm so sorry."

"No worries, Your Majesty." Gabrielle curtsayed and ran off.

"What are we going to do?" Halo looked at me, seeming helpless for the first time since I'd met her. "I can't break Amadeus's magic. With him, Polonius is too strong."

"We are going to free Amadeus," I said. "I promise. And I will never be Polonius's wife."

"But how?" Halo looked at me like I was completely crazy.

"We brought a kingdom back from the dead," I pointed out. "We can do amazing things. And one day, we will bury a tyrant. I promise."

"Or you'll marry one," Halo sighed.

## Chapter 10

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### *Lex*

I couldn't believe what a nightmare this had all become. There was no way I'd let Aria go, but I also didn't want a world war on our hands. Polonius was just crazy enough to do it.

When we came back to our room from the peace accord, I needed to get some air. Halo and Bindi had sequestered Aria to work on her magic. Bindi was guarding both of them, so I went to find my brother. I had been away from Navarrah City for too long, and if I was going to see Aria put her life in jeopardy, I had to make sure Navarrah City would fight to protect her.

I walked into the dining room to find Cheyenne huddled at a table having tea. My mother and father had likely already returned to their rooms.

"Hey," I said as I sat down.

"I am so sorry," were the first words out of his mouth

"We're going to figure this out," I said, knowing what he was apologizing for.

"Why does Polonius want Aria so badly?" Cheyenne had a frustrated look on his face.

"Onyx Rah and its potential to grow crimson pitaya. His grandfather is the one who destroyed the kingdom for the same reason. But worse, I believe he thinks he can love Aria."

"We can try rallying the troops," Cheyenne suggested. He bit his lip, knowing that only Navarrah City had a robust enough army to fight Polonius. We weren't trained to battle soldiers like the Crypt Claw, who had no regard for life.

"We won't have to. Aria will. She'll do what needs to be done, and I'll stay with her." I changed the subject. "Have Mom and Dad discussed their

plans for Navarrah City with you, as I have been absent from the kingdom for so long?”

I had to know if they were putting Cheyenne in my place. I wasn't ever going to leave Aria—she was my priority, despite all—but I had to know if I was giving up my throne so that one day she could have hers.

“They are very happy that you're acting as a diplomat,” my brother said. “Keeping close to Aria and supporting Onyx Rah's resurrection is perfectly in line with their plans for you. We can be an ally to Onyx Rah, and to Aria.”

“She'll get Polonius out, I promise,” I said, bucking both of us up. “We both will. We just need more time.”

“Yes, of course,” Cheyenne said. “You're still heir to the throne, you are our future king, but for now, keeping Aria safe and hopefully helping her get out of this mess is the priority. Father is still well and healthy and very vested in his kingdom.”

“And you? What are their plans for you?” I had to know. Cheyenne was becoming an incredible man. He deserved a place of honor and respect in the kingdom.

“I'll lead the Royal Guard one day when Jarvis retires or becomes father's beta. Either way, my place is in our armed forces. I've trained hard to be there,” Cheyenne said with pride.

“You have,” I agreed.

“There you are,” Aria said as she walked into the dining room that looked over the falls, taking in the beauty to ease her mind.

With all the stress we were facing, I'd forgotten to appreciate the beauty of Angeline Falls. The tall, arching glass windows perfectly framed the waterfalls that cascaded around us as our resort was located on an island suspended in mid-air. Somehow, that serene view made everything seem less dire.

“Are you done?” I asked, hoping I'd have Aria to myself for the rest of the evening.

“For now.” She smiled at me with that big beautiful smile of hers.

I didn't know how she was staying so calm.

“So, what is the plan?” Cheyenne asked, looking worried.

“I'm going to let Polonius marry me,” she said as her smile widened.

“You can't,” I protested, feeling myself jump out of my skin.

“I won't marry him, but I am going to tell him I will.” Aria sat down with us and poured herself a cup of tea.

“How will you keep him from making you his wife tomorrow?” I asked her point-blank.

“I can’t tell you, Lex,” Aria said regretfully. “I know you too well. First, you’ll not agree, and second, you’ll lose your head and do something that will put us all in danger. You’ll just have to find peace with the fact that I have a plan.” A triumphant grin crossed her expression as if she’d just outwitted the world.

“Good. I just hope your plan works,” Cheyenne said as he stood up. “I need to get some beauty rest if there’s a chance that my wolf will be fighting thousands of Crypt Claw tomorrow. Good night to both of you.” He gave a curt bow as he turned to leave us.

We said our goodbyes, and I looked into Aria’s gorgeous eyes. “I have to know,” I told her. “Also, we must free Amadeus. I can’t believe that Polonius is able to threaten all of the kingdoms of Tobran just because he has Amadeus trapped.”

“We will. Freeing Amadeus is part of my plan,” she said calmly.

“You don’t have to marry him, Aria. You can’t,” I implored, feeling as if I’d already lost her. Again. “You have the Goldlace mages and Sire Vanoire. You can defeat Polonius.”

But I truly wasn’t sure if any of us could.

“Where is Sire Vanoire?” Aria asked.

“He’s been basking in the luxuries of Angeline Falls. He wasn’t called to the summit meeting, so he’s apparently had a massage, a dip in the hot tub, and several meals.” Despite everything, I couldn’t help but chuckle as Cheyenne told me stories of what the old mage had been up to while we were at the summit meeting. “The soldiers have been talking about it all afternoon.”

“Well, at least someone is having fun,” Aria said with a laugh. When this is all over, we will have to come to Angeline Falls for a real vacation instead of always fighting for our lives.”

“You know I don’t trust Sire,” I reminded her. “You’re grateful to have anyone extending a helping hand, but honestly, other than making some food and giving us shelter, the guy really hasn’t done that much.” She needed to see reality.

Aria was so thankful for everything that she let a lot slide. I guessed I’d be the same way if I didn’t have parents who cared for me. Amadeus had never treated her like his child, and Nan had given her what she could, but

she'd given all the children the same affection. Aria had never been special to them, never treated as a loved child.

Without knowing it, she was always looking to please people so that they didn't leave her or shut her out for some reason. Even someone as horrific as Polonius.

"Sire's done a lot more than that, but he's also very old," she said. "Without him, I would have never known that I was a mage." Her wistful expression relayed that she gave Sire Vanoire too much credit for everything he wasn't doing.

"Well, if you're doling out the thanks, Polonius is the one who told you that you were a Midnight Moon Pack mage, and he gave you all the tools you needed to raise Onyx Rah. Feel like going to Brahman's Peak and giving him a big hug for his effort?" I asked, only partly teasing.

Aria sighed. "It is true, though. Without him, I'd still be fighting to get into the Royal Guard just so someone would care about me." She seemed to visibly wilt, her mood plummeting.

"Well, now you know that I care about you." I took her hand and kissed it. "And because I care about you, I don't want you playing dangerous games."

"I will win," she said, looking me straight in the eye. "You have to trust me. I will win this."

I did trust her, but not in this matter.

I offered my hand to help Aria out of her chair, and as soon as she was on her feet, I brought her into my embrace and held her for a moment.

"Let's go back to our room," I suggested. "I want to pretend that we are the only two people in the world for one more night." Even saying the words out loud made my heart ache.

"Me too," she said quietly. Perhaps the gravity of the situation had finally sunk in.

We went back to our room, where a fire had been lit. The room was warm and inviting, with the setting sun casting a golden haze over the waterfalls and foliage. Food had been set on the table near a picture window, and the very sight of it made my stomach jolt with hunger. I took Aria's hand and brought her to the table.

"I hadn't realized how hungry I was," I laughed as I pulled out her chair.

"Neither did I." She sat down on the soft velvet seat. "I can do this," she said, likely reassuring herself more than me.

“I never said you couldn't. I just don't want you to.” I started putting food on Aria's plate, hoping she'd eat her fill. Neither of us knew what tomorrow would bring. Thankfully, she began to dig in, so I sat down and ate as well.

“I fascinate Polonius, and that might save my life in the end,” she mused. “He's killed other Midnight Moon Pack members, looking for a mage who could bring Onyx Rah back to life. I am that person. I don't think he'll hurt me since he doesn't know the full scope of my powers or their use to him.” Her words were callous and emotionless, but true.

“I don't think he'll hurt you because I believe he's fallen in love with you,” I said truthfully. “He's moved up the timeline because he's jealous and knows that the more powerful you become, the more likely it is he'll lose you.”

Aria only stared at me, unable to deny it.

After dinner I brought her to bed and slowly stripped away the camisole and panties she wore to bare her supple pale breasts to the cool night air. Her nipples were small and rosy, peaked with the cold and her arousal. I was hard and ready for her, but since our last love-making had been quick and furious, I wanted to make sure we fully enjoyed one another.

I kissed her lips and neck, and she spread her legs for me so that I would fit better between them. I tasted her mouth as our tongues danced upon each other. My fingers threaded through her soft, silky auburn hair as I brought her naked body closer.

“I could worship at your temple for all of eternity,” I said as I breathed in the light floral fragrance of her skin.

“Soon, this will be our reality,” she said, falling into the fantasy.

Neither of us wanted to face the fact that this could be the last time we spent the night together. We were about to return to the peril and chaos of our former lives, an existence we'd only just escaped.

Her hands tightened around my back, and her head nestled into my chest so that her breathing was hot on my skin. I believe she would have absorbed into me if she could have.

“I will never leave you,” I said, vowing that no matter what happened with Polonius, I'd be there with her.

“I know,” she said softly.

She looked up to me with her big soulful eyes and kissed my lips. My body flushed with heat and desire. All I wanted was to be nestled inside her, connected, joined, and united.

I gently slid my cock into her, and her body arched against mine. With a slow, gentle roll, I pressed in and pulled out, feeling her muscles tighten against my skin. Tiny breaths escaped her as our bodies moved together in a slow rhythm.

“Yes,” she whispered, as her legs curled into her chest, allowing me to go deeper.

“Yes,” I answered, kissing her temple, driving my cock harder, trying to reach the depths of her, perhaps to touch her soul.

She cried out, and it wasn't pain that made her wail but need. A need I shared for us to finally have our freedom.

I pulled her into my lap so that she sat atop my cock, folding her into my embrace so not even a sliver of light would shine between us. I wanted our bodies to be one. One being, one entity, with the power of all the mages and royals within our reach. We weren't pawns, but conductors, leaders, warriors, and lovers.

Her feet planted behind me, and she took control of our lovemaking, bouncing gently, gaining momentum on my cock. Her lips found mine again as she drove herself onto me, feeling my length and hardness inside her beautiful body. Her hips rolled forward and back as she took her pleasure from me. I wasn't going to be able to sustain myself if she continued.

“Stop,” I said gently, and took a deep breath. “I need...to,” I choked out, and she smiled.

“Always too eager,” she teased as sweat rolled down my neck.

“Someday, I'll fill you up, Aria. We'll climax over and over until we are nothing but heaps spent on the bed. But for now,” I patted her perfectly round behind, “I need a breath.”

She gently pulled herself off me, tracing the line of perspiration trailing down my chest to the cock that was raging with desire, swollen and hungry for more of her. Her delicate finger danced around the tip, sending fire and ice through me.

“For now, I'll let you,” she flashed me an evil grin.

I couldn't love her more.

Claiming her mouth again, I kissed her, and we laid back until the heat of passion had cooled within me. My fingers found her wet and waiting pussy inflamed and ready for another invasion, so as her fingers had so delicately hardened me, I used mine to satisfy her. Sliding my thumb over her clit and pressing it into her bone, she arched into my hand as two fingers found her



tight wet center. I ravaged her with care and expert handling, relentlessly plunging my fingers into her sensitive core until she cried out and coiled into me, shivering and wrecked by her orgasm.

“Lex!” she cried out. “Yes, yes!”

“Yes,” I hissed as she came on my hand, her face beautifully contorted with passion. I loved her to a place beyond the stars.

When she was soft and sated, I rolled her onto her stomach and kissed her neck as I laid myself over her, gently entering her from behind. My strokes were tender but deliberate as I pressed myself in and out, loving the tightness and depth the position afforded me. Needing more, being greedy and perfect, she spread her legs for me, and I slipped in deeper and lost control.

Soon, I was at the mercy of my carnal needs. I thrust deeper and deeper until my balls seized and my heart clenched.

“I’m going to come,” I grit out before pulling myself from her so as not to place a baby in her fertile womb.

To my great surprise and delight, she rolled onto her back, her hand firmly finishing me off. I came so hard, I saw the heavens and stars.

I remember nothing more of the night other than her warm body on mine. Dreaming of a life we’d finally live together, I found comfort in her slight weight upon my chest. Her soft, naked skin was my blanket, and her beating heart my solace and sanctuary.

When morning came too soon, we looked at one another. Would this be the day I lost her? My heart constricted.

“We should get ready,” she said with words that held too heavy a meaning.

Ready? Ready for Polonius and his hideous ultimatum? Ready to let her go? Ready to part? No, I wasn't ready for any of it, and I knew I never would be.

Aria kissed my chest, then my lips before peeling herself away from me to enter the bathing room.

I lay there for a moment, not wanting to move as I heard her turn on the shower. All sound was instantly drowned out by the din of rushing water. I dragged myself out of bed and joined her in the shower. We didn't say anything to each other because there were too many words to share.

I took the lavender and mint soap provided and used it to wash the night and our lovemaking off Aria's body. I wanted my scent to linger with her, but we were to return to our hiding places. We were no longer allowed to be

lovers in the open. Again, we would be relegated to the shadows or the veil of magic to share what was our right as lovers to exchange.

Aria let me wash her and dipped her head back onto my shoulder as my hands stroked her soft skin. My cock, though well-satisfied the night before, banged against her as I lathered soap on all her sacred places. Without a word, she grabbed my erection and fit it into her pussy, bending forward to allow me entrance.

“I need to feel you one more time.” She braced her hands on the wall, and I moved in closer, hovering my large frame over her small one.

“For now. One more time for now, but one day...” I entered her so hard that she would feel me there. When she was in front of Polonius, her pussy would ache with the memory of me. “One day, you and I will have a bathing room grander than this, and we will make love every morning as we shower. You and I will have each other morning and night, and our home will be filled with your legacy. One day, we will rule together. We’ll govern our people.” I thrust into her again. “Our lands.” One more time. “And our family.” I was gentler with the last one. “Our many sons and daughters,” I proclaimed as I tickled her belly, “will spread out across the land and will rule nations not yet born.”

I pushed into her again as I pinched her clit. She came hard, her legs buckling under me as she shook.

I took her into my arms and thrust hard and fast, over and over. She came again, and again, until she was loose in my arms, quaking and breathing.

I pulled out of her and came in the stream of cooling water.

She touched her ravaged pussy and smiled at me. “Thank you,” she said. “I needed you right here. Now you are with me.”

I slapped her ass playfully, trying to lighten the mood. “That was my devious plan.”

She waddled a little as she stepped away from the spray. “Well, it worked,” she laughed, and for the moment, we were okay. A breeze of relief glided over my heated skin, and for just one moment, I allowed myself to believe that everything would be okay.

## Chapter II

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### *Aria*

Lex and I held hands as we rode the motor car back to the conference hall. We didn't say anything to one another. There was nothing that words could do to change what was to come. We knew that, and so we held each other. I could still feel the remnants of Lex inside me, and I relished the sensation. He was my lover, he was my king. I would relent to no one but him.

As we exited the vehicle upon arrival, I pulled my hand out of Lex's. My heart iced over, and my face turned to stone as I put on the mask that I had worn for most of my life. I was strong and unfeeling, ready to face anything that came my way. For a moment, I was Aria the servant girl again, who would fight or kill anyone to prove my worth.

I had to remind myself that I was to be a queen and was developing every day into a stronger and more learned mage. I would prevail. I had to.

We met Bindi and Halo at the door of the conference center where they were waiting for us.

"I have troops at the ready. Our weapons are concealed," Bindi said in a hushed and urgent voice.

"Please, please don't take them out," I urged her. "I can't have more trouble. I'll be okay, I promise. I am going to make this work."

"How?" Halo looked at me as stress slid across her features.

"You'll see," was all I said as I held my head high and entered the room where the leaders of all the nations of Tobran and Polonius stood, awaiting my arrival.

I hated the look of triumph on Polonius's face, but I continued to stand upright as I addressed the group. Lex took the seat to my right, and Halo the seat to my left. Only Polonius and I remained standing.

“Aria,” he said, nodding at me as a way of greeting. Of course he wouldn’t show me the reverence the others did.

“Polonius,” I countered with the same.

“Are you ready to be married?” He was quick to the point, as I knew he would be.

“I will accept your proposal,” I said with a stoic and unreadable expression.

“I have made no proposal.” His voice turned dark and menacing. “Will you and I be married presently, or will my troops descend upon Navarrah City, where they are waiting for my command?”

“I will accept your proposal of marriage, and from this moment forward, you will become my fiancé.”

I heard sighs of relief coupled with sounds of anguish.

“That is not what I proposed,” Polonius’s voice rose with anger.

“I know. But I will not marry you until Onyx Rah is raised and I am crowned queen. Until such time, I am a civilian, the same as any other commoner. How can I know that you won’t kill me the moment Onyx Rah has been raised and restored?” I left the question hanging in the air.

“Why would I kill my wife?” he asked, feigning loyalty.

“Why would you let her live after you’ve gotten what you wanted out of her?” I asked. “You need me to establish the crimson pitaya crops, but after they’ve been instated, I would no longer be of use to you. As your queen, I’m entitled to half of what you own by the laws of Tobran.” I stared Polonius in the eye. “We’ll see who our kingdom comes to love, who they will fight for, who they will protect in the end?” I raised my chin in defiance.

“Or I can attack Navarrah City, as I am poised to do. You think you can outwit me? Outplay me?” He laughed.

“And you don’t think that the armies of Navarrah City aren’t ready for your soldiers?” I challenged. “Do you really believe that the Obsidian Valley and Angeline Falls would sit by and allow your troops to simply destroy them as your ancestor did with Onyx Rah? I might dare to say that all the soldiers in Tobran who are not enlisted in your Crypt Claw army might also be at the ready, waiting for your advance,” I added.

“You’re lying,” Polonius accused.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m lying or telling the truth. There is one thing that is certain. You will never get the crimson pitaya crops you desire or access to Onyx Rah if you invade Navarrah City or any of the kingdoms of Tobran. I

promise you, even if I lose my life today, I guarantee you'll never gain access to my kingdom." I glared at him, and his face reddened.

"Then, my dear, you will be crowned queen on your wedding day," he said. "But I will only allow it if I am immediately named as your fiancé. Which means Prince Lex Redveign of Navarrah City will no longer have access to your person." Polonius glowered with triumph. "Also, I understand that you might be hesitant to marry me. You don't know me...intimately. I need to change that dynamic between us. We will, as a betrothed couple, conduct Peace Accords in the Angeline Falls, the Obsidian Valley, Navarrah City. In each, we will map out our trade, peace, and diplomatic arrangements as a ruling couple in both Brahman's Peak and Onyx Rah. And since I cannot enter Onyx Rah at present, you will come and live with me in my palace and share my bed."

"No," I blurted, yet took a breath and strategized. "I have too much to do in Onyx Rah. I cannot live with you."

"Then you will stay with me, lodge with me, dine with me when we attend our Peace Accords." Polonius's eyes were intense and threatening. "Otherwise, I will always have a wife who hates me. What king wants the scorn of such a beautiful queen? Allow me the chance to love you."

I could feel Lex tense up, but he didn't say anything and remained silent, as did the others in the room. My stomach rolled with nausea, but I had to agree. The arrangement, though hideous, bought me time. And at that moment, time was the most valuable to me.

"I agree," I said softly, hating the words as they fell out of my mouth.

"Then this is settled," Ellestria Culp said without emotion. "The Obsidian Valley recognizes Aria of Onyx Rah and Polonius of Brahman's Peak's betrothal."

"We of Navarrah City recognize Aria of Onyx Rah and Polonius of Brahman's Peak's betrothal. However, should there be any trespass by your troops on our soil, we will immediately rescind our recognition," King Helix said in a monotone, though I detected a hint of sadness.

Queen Delia offered me a look of pity as her way of showing solidarity, and my already tenuous facade of strength nearly crumbled. After Cheyenne gave me a similar look, I decided the best way to survive the day was not to look at anyone but Polonius.

"We of Angeline Falls recognize the betrothal as well." Queen Nadine seemed to be unable to say our names as she was so against our match.

“That settles it. Polonius, we need your word that you will hold your troops. You are getting what you’ve requested,” Ellestria said.

“As long as Aria marries me on her coronation day, you will have no reason to prepare for war,” Polonius said with confidence.

“I will ask one thing of you, Polonius,” I said. “To speed up my coronation date, I will need Brahman’s City’s help in rebuilding Onyx Rah.” I gathered my strength, offering Polonius a tiny smile. “We need resources, such as food and building materials.”

“Why, of course,” Polonius replied with a grin. “We are matched in our desire to see Onyx Rah restored as quickly as possible. See, we are not so dissimilar after all.”

“Perhaps,” I said, forcing myself to widen my smile. “I also want Prince Lex Redveign to go with you to ensure that we get the supplies we need. No one knows what we could use better than Lex as he has worked with his father for most of his life, building Navarrah City into the great kingdom it has become.”

I could see Polonius recoil. “I, too, have built a great city, my dear. I know what Onyx Rah needs.” He was playing the game as well as I was.

“I’m sure you do, but Lex knows specifically what we will require to build a peaceful city with diplomacy and justice,” I said softly. “Oh, and…” I took a deep breath. “If he dies, by chance or misfortune, our betrothal shall be nullified.”

“And I’ll attack?” Polonius hissed.

“Well, if you kill a prince of a royal house in Tobran, I believe you will not only be fighting the kingdoms of Tobran, but all of Voltaire,” I said. “I’ve heard Solbrook has an army as fierce and even more mighty than the Crypt Claw. News does travel fast in Voltaire, so I doubt your troops would last long. I shudder to think of what they’d do to you.” I cocked my head and gazed at him with a wistful expression.

“I’d be delighted to host the prince as my guest, of course. Anything for my beloved,” Polonius said with such saccharine mockery, I nearly burst out laughing.

“Great, well, then it is all settled,” I said. “We’ll return to Onyx Rah in the morning, and Lex will join you in Brahman’s Peak.”

Polonius smiled at me and nodded, then turned abruptly and walked out of the room with determined steps, not saying anything more. My stomach was all butterflies and knots.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Aria,” Lex said under his breath.

“It is for the best, son,” King Helix chimed in. “Aria is doing what she must for her kingdom. She’s offering a sacrifice only the bravest of queens can make,” he said with a softness in his voice.

“I still wish it were different,” Queen Delia added.

“We will support you,” Ellestria Culp interjected.

“Yes,” Xavier Goldlace jumped in. “Whatever you and Halo need. You will win the love of your people. You’re playing the long game, but one day, we will find a way to free you from Polonius. We all appreciate what you have done to keep us from engaging in war.” Xavier bowed to me, and Halo huffed.

“Too much,” Halo grumbled. “This is too much.”

“I’m going to be fine,” I said, not letting anyone in on the second part of my plan.

“Well, then. We’re adjourned for now.” Ellestria Culp said.

I spoke to each of the leaders, thanking them for their attendance before they filed out of the conference room. Queen Delia gave me a long and meaningful hug, but didn’t say anything. There was nothing she could say to change the circumstance.

When Lex, Halo, Bindi, and I were by ourselves, walking to the motorcar and heading back to the resort, Lex finally spoke up.

“What were you thinking, Aria?” He looked at me with such pain in his eyes. “Who is going to protect you? I thought we’d agreed I wouldn’t leave you?” He nearly yelled, and I wondered if he was about to ask if I’d gone mad. “And the Peace Accords? Staying with him?”

“I have the Royal Guard, and you’re a diplomat. You’ll be fulfilling your diplomatic role,” I said with as little emotion as I could. “And do you really think I’ll let Polonius get near me? Perhaps I can find a way to poison him or kill him in his sleep?” I gave Lex a playful grin.

“Sincerely, Aria, I have to agree with Lex. What is wrong with you?” Bindi asked with plenty of accusation in her voice. “We can fight Polonius. You don’t have to marry him.”

“I’m counting on all of us fighting him. I expect that every wolf in Voltaire will eventually rip him to shreds. My being married to him will have no bearing on his death. He will be defeated,” I said with confidence as we approached the car, where we’d have to curb our conversation.

Halo just kept listening and waiting to hear what I had to say. At that

moment Cheyenne walked up behind us and stopped Lex. We all stopped and turned to him.

“I’m coming with you, brother. You’ll need to be guarded, so a few troops and I have signed up for the task. Father is enthusiastically on board,” Cheyenne said with a smile. “We might even kill the bastard before Aria does,” he added with a laugh.

“That’s perfect,” I said, smiling at Cheyenne and Lex. “I’m glad the two of you are going together.”

“What does Onyx Rah actually need, Aria? We’re going to have to give Polonius a list,” Cheyenne asked, being earnest and perfectly Cheyenne.

“Don’t worry about that. When you and Lex get to Onyx Rah, I want you to rescue Amadeus,” I said with a smile. “Be discreet, yet do it quickly. Get him, and get out of there.”

I could feel Lex’s anger rising as he and Cheyenne looked at me as if I’d gone completely crazy.

“And after we’ve provoked Polonius to the point of war, what do you plan to do?” Lex asked me as he entered the motor vehicle with Halo, Bindi, and Cheyenne.

“Polonius will have his Peace Accords and his time with me. I’ll explain that I can’t fall in love with him if he’s holding my father captive. Just get Amadeus out of there.” I knew Polonius wouldn’t hurt me, not outright. It was our only opportunity to free Amadeus.

“Our troops can fight the likes of the Crypt Claw,” Bindi jumped in. “I don’t want to leave Onyx Rah unprotected, but since Polonius is our greatest threat, I’d spare them to defeat him.”

“I don’t know, Aria,” Halo said reluctantly. “This all seems so risky. I wish there was another way.” She sighed.

“So do I, trust me,” I said. “I would love to just raise Onyx Rah and provide the disenfranchised members of the Midnight Moon Pack a home to return to.” Suddenly, I felt melancholy, but I couldn’t let it get to me.

“We’ll fight this, Aria,” Lex said as he laid his hand on my thigh. “We’re going to win.”

I truly hoped he was right.

We returned to the resort, and Lex and Cheyenne went off to strategize how they were going to infiltrate Brahman's Peak and find Amadeus. Halo told me that she was going to look at some of the books in the library to see if she could find a protection spell for Lex and Cheyenne. Bindi promised to



return to the troops and prepare them for the possibility of a battle with Crypt Claw soldiers.

I went in search of Sire Vanoire. I saw him walking down the hall of the resort with Bastien Salt. They were making their way to the infinity pool and seemed to be engaged in an important conversation. However, the matter I needed to discuss with Sire was urgent.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you both,” I apologized as I approached the men. “But I have a pressing matter I must discuss with Sire Vanoire. Do you mind if I take him for a moment?” I looked at Bastien.

“Well, I rather wanted to talk to him.” Bastien looked perturbed.

“Yes, I’m sorry. It’s a matter of urgency, but when we’re done, I hope you will continue your discussion.”

“Fine. Of course,” Bastien backed away, and Sire looked at me with a disappointed scowl.

“It’s not often that I get to talk to a man of my age about royal matters. I am finally a Royal Mage rather than some aging citizen of the Obsidian Valley with a son in law enforcement. I finally have an equal place to Bastien, and he’s giving me the time of day,” Sire said with a smoldering glare.

Well, it was nice to see Sire’s vulnerable side. “Lex and Cheyenne are leaving for Brahman’s Peak tomorrow, and I need something that will help them free Amadeus. This is our only chance to get him out of Brahman’s Peak,” I implored.

“Be careful who you tell about your mage abilities. They are unrefined and dangerous at the moment, and the fewer people who know about them, the better,” Sire chided, avoiding answering my question.

“I will, but what of Amadeus?” I felt my face start to redden with frustration.

“If I knew how to release him, he’d have been freed already,” was all Sire said. “Now, I’d like to return to my conversation with Bastien.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, more frustrated than I was before talking to him. I had to find a way to protect Lex.

I went back to our suite and found Lex staring out the window. He had a lost, faraway look in his eyes. My heart clenched at the sight. I walked over to him and slipped my arms around his middle, then kissed his shoulder.

“I’m sorry I put you on the spot,” I said. Not only had I sentenced him to stay with Polonius, but now we would be separated.

“You did what was needed. You’re becoming a true leader,” he said, craning his head back to look at me. “I’m proud of you. Polonius has put us in a difficult position. Everyone in that room would have blamed you if Polonius attacked and thousands of innocent lives were lost.”

“Yours is the life I’m most worried about,” I said, laying my head on his back.

The sentiment was genuine. I didn't know how I was going to be able to protect Lex while he was gone. All I could hope was that he wouldn't be gone for long.

“We barely escaped Polonius the last time,” Lex lamented. “And that was with Amadeus’s help.”

“I know,” I said softly, wanting to make love to him again, needing his reassurance that he would survive his time with Polonius.

Just as my emotions were beginning to take hold, I had a flashback to when I was eight or nine years old and I recalled Amadeus telling me that an artifact such as fruit or piece of food could be spelled so when a mage ate it, their powers would temporarily be disabled. As I stood there, experiencing this vision that I didn’t recall as a childhood memory, I realized that Amadeus had probably locked my memories away with my magic.

I felt sad that a father would have to do such a thing to his own daughter. Not only was Amadeus forced to deny that I was his child, he’d also had to take and hide my Mage abilities from me.

Lex looked at me with a quizzical expression. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Fine, but I remember something. A memory that Amadeus must have blocked out. I’m going to try it...do you still have the ring Amadeus gave you to become Lucien?”

“Yes,” Lex said. “I always have it in case I need to be in disguise.” He drew the ring out of his pocket.

“Okay, can I see it?” I asked, feeling excitement that I now knew a way I could protect Lex.

“Sure.” He pulled it out of his pocket. “But I can’t be Lucien again. Polonius would know.”

“I know, but I can spell this to turn you into a nondescript person. Just a man of middle age, with no distinct characteristics. That way, you can blend into a crowd as a means of escape.” This wasn’t a foolproof plan, but it was the only layer of protection I could offer.

“Okay.” Lex handed me his ring.

“And I have one more thing to try.”

Suddenly feeling very empowered, I scanned the room to see what we had that I could put a spell upon that might temporarily disable Amadeus's powers. When I saw the fruit basket still on the table from breakfast, my heart started to race. I plucked a grape from the basket and said words over the fruit that came to me as if the wind was whispering in my ear. A pulse of energy reverberated through my body as the grape in my fingers electrified.

I wasn't sure what I had actually done to the fruit and or if it would have the desired effect on Amadeus that I intended, but it was the best I could do. I handed Lex the grape and smiled.

“This should be able to disable Amadeus’s powers enough for you to get him out of Brahman’s City. Just squeeze the juice from the grape into his drink if you can’t get him to eat it. Have you a pouch or anything you can carry this in?”

“I do. In my luggage, I have a kit. I can put the grape in that.” Lex gave me a curious glance.

“What?” I asked, feeling a little uneasy. “It will stop Amadeus from having to follow Polonius’s orders.”

“And you now have the ability to spell things with enough strength to affect a powerful mage like Amadeus?” He sounded very doubtful.

“Sire doesn’t think I should use my magic,” I said. “He believes it's dangerous and unpredictable, but I know I’m stronger and in more control than he gives me credit for.” I raised my chin, holding my ground.

“And so you’re conjuring magic from a dream that may or may not be a memory and testing it out on your father? Ah, that’s not risky at all,” he said with deep sarcasm.

“Well, you and I both know that instincts are usually accurate,” I defended myself.

“Or hunches,” he said, and he smiled. “This feels more like a hunch,” he said, putting both the grape and his ring into the pocket of his jacket. “But just in case, I’m glad I have them.” He patted his pocket affectionately.

“I am, too,” I said, leaning over to kiss him.

I loved when he was playful; his humor always put me at ease. It reminded me of when we were kids and we’d play pranks on each other. I longed for the day when we would have the liberty to tease each other and be playful again.

At that moment, there were three hard knocks at the door, and without

warning, it blasted open as Lex and I were still kissing. At that moment, Polonius strolled into our room, Gabrielle behind him. I could feel Lex's body tense and his temperature rise, and my wolf knew that he was about to shift.

"Don't," I said in a harsh whisper. "No shifting," I reminded him.

"Well, well, I can see that I've interrupted the two of you," Polonius laughed. "As I thought I might."

Lex clenched his fists as he let his arms drop from me. "I don't care if you've coerced Aria into agreeing to marry you. You have no right to barge into her private quarters."

"I don't," Polonius agreed. "My apologies. You also have no right to be kissing my intended, so I see we have both overstepped." Polonius walked to the table where the fruit basket stood and plucked two grapes from the bunch, then popped them into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

"Why have you come?" I asked him, feeling my insides tremble. "I haven't sent for you."

"Nor would you, I suppose. Such an antagonistic marriage, we'll soon have. I imagine I'll have to wear full body armor to bed, lest my wife plunge a knife into my back. Something to look forward to, I'm sure," he said with a shrug. "I'm leaving now, and I'm taking Lex with me since you so graciously lent me his diplomatic services and his expertise in all things Onyx Rah. I'd rather have him where I can see him, considering the very knife my soon-to-be wife might use to kill me would likely be his." Polonius gave a menacing hiss, drawing out the s on his last word.

"I'll need to go and get my things," Lex said with restrained malice.

"No need. I'll provide you with clothing, sundries, and nourishment. All you need to do is follow me." Polonius let out a sigh. "I'm not asking. I'm sure you know that."

"Then let me say goodbye," Lex said, trying to buy a few more moments alone with me.

"I believe you've already said it. Come with me this instant, or our deal, the one Aria so artfully crafted, will be off."

"Go, Lex. We don't want trouble." I squeezed his hand, and my wolf howled into my chest.

I had been impulsive, driven, and focused on solutions. I hadn't been using emotions—those I kept neatly trapped in my soul—but seeing Lex leave that room stabbed me with horrific pain. I just kept telling myself that

he would free Amadeus and return. He'd be home in a day or two. I would see him again.

"I love you," I blurted out as Lex walked out the door with Polonius.

Polonius turned and looked at me with a cold stare. "And perhaps one day soon, I'll finally be able to love you."

Polonius knew that my words were not for him, but he turned them around on me, making sure I knew he was the one who held the upper hand.

## Chapter 12

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### *Lex*

The airship Polonius and I rode was much smaller than the one that had brought Aria and I from Onyx Rah. I was surprised to see the expert craftsmanship onboard, but horrified to see hundreds of weapons fashioned into the metal siding. It seemed that the sole focus of the ship was to carry out air attacks. It wasn't a transit vessel, but a deadly airborne arsenal. Polonius had much more than a forced marriage to merge his kingdom with Onyx Rah.

From the moment we'd left the suite in the Angeline Falls resort, Polonius had not spoken much more than necessary sentences. He told me to follow him, and that we would be taking an airship. His soldiers flanked us as we walked to the airport, which was a short distance from the resort. Once aboard ship and seated, Polonius looked at me, leaning forward menacingly. Our seats were opposite one another, with a guard seated on either side of each of us. It was not lost on me that all four guards were there to protect him.

"You know I like you, Lex," Polonius started with a pleasant but sharp smile.

"I'm sure that's not true," I said, intending never to smile in his presence. "However, you don't always have to like the dignitaries who visit your territory."

"I don't, true. But even still, I like you. You're so angry and determined, you're the kind of man I'd keep close if you were in my army. I'd make you a leader because you simply don't care about the consequences. Ulryk had that same disregard, as did his parents, but I detested them. You are a true leader—and a true lover, I presume. You fight for what you believe in. The Bevatas fought for any little scrap that would give them power. Disgusting

creatures.” Polonius grunted with displeasure.

“And here you are, forcing marriage,” I said politely, feigning my diplomatic role.

“I am making an alliance as nearly every king, save your parents, has done before me,” he said, still using a pleasant tone of voice. “Unlike the Bevatas, who never were able to assess the temperament of those around them, you’ve grown since we last saw each other. I assume love will do that to a man. You’re certainly not after power, or you wouldn’t have allowed Aria to craft the deal she’s made with me.” His inflection changed ever so slightly. He was poking me, trying to get me to react.

“She is a natural leader. I trust her instincts, and her ability to know what is right for Onyx Rah,” I said without emotion.

“Oh, I trust her, too, most definitely,” he laughed. “I wouldn’t marry the woman if I didn’t.” Polonius had a strange glinting smile on his face that made me uncomfortable.

“What are your plans for her?” I asked, unable to hold myself back from the question.

“I, contrary to what you might believe, am a charismatic man. However, I’m elusive and distrusting by nature. I haven’t the presence I need to rule a band of nations. Aria, on the other hand, is an incredible woman. Already, she’s pulled at the hearts of the masses. I admire her strength and bravery, and what she did to activate her mage, all for the good of a people she didn’t even know. Perhaps some of it was to know herself, but who’s to fault her for that? I knew the moment I met her, she wasn’t a servant, I’m sure you did as well.” I wasn’t sure if Polonius was asking a question or stating a fact.

“We’ve known each other since we were children,” I said.

“And did you play with other the servants’ offspring?” Polonius asked.

“No,” I answered, still wondering where the conversation was going.

“And yet, she was a servant when I met her. Well, at least she isn’t one anymore,” Polonius said, as if he had something to do with her no longer being indentured. “And I’m not here to play with her. She’ll rule by my side, bear my legacy, and endure me to the point of peace and companionship. Being a warlord is a lonely business. I already have many wives, but none thrill me. Aria does. With her, as you have already experienced, I will share my life with an equal partner.”

“She’ll never truly love you,” I hissed, ready to risk all and jab my fingers into his eyes as the airbus lifted into the air and the distance between Aria and

me grew wider.

“Not at first, of course,” Polonius acknowledged. “She’s in love with you, but time has a way of making one forget. And as shocking as this may sound, since I like you and admire your violent, outspoken, and impulsive acts of aggression, I’m going to give you a bit of advice.” The predator in him was starting to shine through the cracks in his polite demeanor.

“Oh?” I said, hoping to sound disinterested.

“You need to work on tempering your emotional expressions. Someone who has spent a lifetime learning to read others will quickly uncover plots you might be hiding simply by watching your face.” He leaned back and relaxed a little in his chair.

“And why is that?” I said, trying to keep my mounting anger in check.

“When Aria announced you would be coming with me to Brahman’s Peak, you couldn’t hide your shock and, dare I say, anger. Looks like you’re no longer the only one wearing the crown in your relationship.” Wicked glee spread across Polonius’s face. “I look forward to enjoying such a woman for myself. She’s a challenge, and I love challenges.”

“She’s not a challenge, especially for you,” I said evenly, doing everything I could to keep my rage and insecurities bottled up. “She’s greater than you’ll ever hope to be. Sometimes, we have to accept that we pale in comparison to another. You’ll never be a match for her.”

Aria was a fighter who passionately battled for what she believed in. She’d risked her life to find her mage and raise a kingdom from the dead. She’d returned home and hope to those who had been dispersed throughout Tobran without either. She was, to many, a savior, and all she did was be herself.

I didn't want to admit it, especially to myself, but I knew that Aria was much more important to Tobran than I would ever be.

“I don’t mind allowing her to shine,” Polonius said, giving me a slight glare. “My people need someone to love.”

“Why would you want a woman who will never love you to be your wife?” I had to ask, and in doing so, emphasis to Polonius how I would always be the greater man for having Aria’s love.

“I wasn’t kidding when I said she’d probably kill me in my sleep.” He laughed again. “Aria can be ruthless, but she’s also merciful. She spared my soldier’s life when she should have killed him for attacking your sister. She stole Gabrielle and Naomi from me when she could have just escaped herself.



She cares about people. She'll learn to care for me. Perhaps I will make you the head of my army." Polonius sighed. "I could use you as motivation for my dear wife in the event she ever becomes less than enthusiastic about sharing my bed."

"You know I'd have to pass on the offer, so there's no need to make it," I said in disgust, knowing I'd never trust Polonius enough to be anything to him other than his archenemy.

If he married Aria, he'd die.

"You passed the test," Polonius said. "I half expected you'd be a conniver. You'd agree to my appointment, then use it to gain intel on me. Then one day, while dining or walking around the corner, I'd either choke on a bone made of blades or find myself ended in the dark, all for trusting you. I only want to work with loyal subjects, like Amadeus." His eyes narrowed into two menacing orbs.

"I'm here on a diplomatic mission at the behest of my father to strengthen the tenuous relationship between Brahman's Peak and Navarrah City. Also, as you mentioned, I am fulfilling Aria's request," I said, still managing to play the impartial diplomat.

"Why, of course," Polonius dismissed.

Our conversation had been cut short by our landing. I was surprised by how fast the ship reached Brahman's Peak. If Polonius had this fully armed airbus with this kind of speed, what else did he have in his arsenal?

We entered the castle from the landing strip on the roof. We did not have to go through the main doors or security; the guards marched with us as we walked into an interior solarium at the top of Polonius's castle.

"I hope you don't mind returning to your previous quarters, where you so delightfully pretended to be a mage scholar so you could be near Aria," Polonius said. "More diplomats are coming, and we do have the very real task of helping Aria raise Onyx Rah to its full efficiency ahead. I already know you want me dead, and so I hope you understand I've taken measures to prevent my demise. You'll not want to leave this room without one of my guards if you hope to live." He kept his tone unnervingly kind and hospitable as he threatened my life.

"You've made yourself perfectly clear," I answered, feeling trapped.

"I rather like having a jealous nemesis, so please don't make me kill you," were his last words to me as he walked out of the room.

As soon as Polonius left, I was stunned a little. While he hadn't changed

his trajectory, he was being hospitable and quite transparent about his plans.

Even though he'd threatened me with execution should I leave my room unguarded, I wasn't going to stay there. I tried to remember the layout of his castle. Unfortunately, the only thing that stood out in my mind was the pit where the Crypt Claw soldiers brutally murdered each other. I made a mental note to avoid it.

Just as I was about to leave my room, there was a knock at the door. I didn't think that Polonius had telepathy, so it was doubtful he knew I was already planning on walking the halls. He could have had soldiers at my door guarding me, though that would be very disrespectful toward a visiting diplomat.

I opened the door, not knowing exactly what I was going to find on the other side.

"Hey there, brother," Cheyenne said with a wide smile and his usual jovial attitude.

He threw a pack full of my belongings at me, and instantly, I felt relieved. Not being so indebted to Polonius for my basic necessities was a relief.

"How did you get here so fast?" I asked, knowing that the airship we'd ridden on from Onyx Rah didn't even have a fraction of the speed of Polonius's ship.

"Sire Vanoire poofed me here," Cheyenne said, still grinning. "He did this thing with his fingers, and there was some mumbling, and here I am. He told me he was going to do it, but whoa. Mages weird me out a little, I'm not going to lie. I mean, all mages but Aria. She doesn't of course," he backtracked quickly.

"Well, I'm relieved you're here," I said. Though I was glad to have him in Brahman's Peak, having him there also triggered my insecurity.

"Really? I have to say..." Cheyenne began, entering the room and closing the door. "You've been a little distant with me, even at Angeline Falls. I know you don't want to be here, and Polonius is threatening to marry Aria, but I'm your brother. You can talk about these things with me." He put his own pack down and took a seat at one of the two uncomfortable wooden chairs.

"Is Father looking to make you king?" I asked point-blank, unable to frame the question more tenderly.

"What? No, absolutely not. Where is this coming from?" Cheyenne asked, clearly taken aback.

“It’s just, I haven’t been in Navarrah City. I haven’t been training with the Royal Guard or attending council meetings,” I said, suddenly feeling angry. More than that, I was battling with an unfamiliar vulnerability.

“Yes, on Father’s command,” Cheyenne pointed out. “He was the one who asked you to guard Aria as a diplomat representing Navarrah City. She’s alive, Onyx Rah is rebuilding—your mission has been a success, and Father is immensely pleased. He’s not dead yet, nor is he dying. You are still first in line for succession. You’re doing exactly what is expected of you to become a king one day.”

“I’m sorry to come at you, brother,” I said, feeling exposed.

“No, I get it. I grew up knowing I would never be a king. I was the last to be considered. You, then Fallon were the next in the line of succession. Now perhaps you and Jarvis are...who knows? Even Janaya’s future husband would be considered before me.” Cheyenne chuckled. “I have never wanted to be king. I don’t have your ambition. All I’ve wanted was respect, and thankfully, I’ve been able to earn that respect by heading the Royal Guard’s mobile unit. Jarvis is still in charge at home, but I have the troops abroad. Trust me, that is all the responsibility I need.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve been too in my head. Aria has to rule Onyx Rah—there is no one else who wants the job. She can barely get Halo to do more than just logistics and research. Sire only wants the power, which leaves Aria to plan and implement the rest of the kingdom’s resurrection. She and the Goldlaces are the only viable heirs to the throne, and the Goldlaces want nothing to do with it.” I sighed. “I love Aria, you know that, and I want to stand by her side and rule in tandem, but doing so might mean giving up my own kingdom and my birthright.”

I realized I had never actually admitted my worries out loud to anyone before.

“Talk to Aria when all of this nonsense with Polonius has passed,” Cheyenne advised. “Father has many more years ahead of him, and you and Aria will have time to sort this out. Mom and Dad are actually really good at talking to each other. They sort their issues out, as I’m sure you will do with Aria when the time comes. Nothing needs to be decided today.” My brother sounded more wise than his years.

“You’re right. Completely. I’m being oversensitive.”

“You have a lot going on. You’ve put your heart and soul into standing by Aria while she did impossible work. You’re here now, at the point of

Polonius's blade, figuratively speaking. You have the right to be wary. I don't fault you."

Cheyenne had a wondrous gleam in his eye, and my admiration of my brother rekindled. For a moment, I even considered what a great asset he'd be to Navarrah City and Tobran should he be given a territory to rule. He would make a remarkable king.

"Thank you for your wise counsel," I said, then shifted our conversation back to the tasks at hand. "Now, Polonius and I rode here on an airbus packed with ammunition and weapons. It is a lethal warship that I don't doubt could take down an entire city from the air. If sharpshooters and marksmen were aboard, people would have no way to avoid their aim. Considering Polonius used this ship for transport, I fear what other lethal contraptions he might have at his disposal. We need to find out what weapons he possesses and where Amadeus is being kept."

"This can't blow up in our faces, though," my brother cautioned, looking worried. "We need to keep up appearances. It could mean war if we don't. We're here to help raise Onyx Rah."

"I agree, but if history repeats itself, Polonius has no plans to uphold our agreement. The least we can do is ensure he's short a mage," I said with a devious smile.

## Chapter 13

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### *Aria*

After Lex had departed with Polonius, I'd stood in my room, feeling guilty having set him upon a dangerous mission. I knew Lex was fully capable of holding his own in Brahman's Peak; I just missed him and wished that things could have been different. The only way I could help Lex, however, was to continue with my plans.

I was now on my way back to Onyx Rah and had Gabrielle with me. I couldn't just ignore her, though she had been spelled. But she was still my friend.

"I'm sorry Polonius found you," I said to her. "Truly."

"I think Polonius always gets what he wants. He knows that I mean something to you because you bothered to come back for me. He's using me to get to you," she said, walking beside me.

"Luckily, Polonius is being obvious about that," I said with a laugh. "However, there is an upside. You don't have to live in his palace at the moment, nor do you need to spy for him. Instead, you'll be my lady in waiting. Officially, you're the first member of my court." I smiled at her.

"I'd like that. At least until Polonius comes for me," she said, then her face fell into a frown.

"Even then, you'll still be my lady in waiting," I pointed out. "He isn't going to put me in chains after our marriage. I'm pretty sure all of Tobran and likely Voltaire will be against such a thing." I shrugged, being careful not to say anything I didn't want Polonius to eventually hear.

"I hope you're right," Gabrielle said, letting out a sigh of relief.

"Okay, let's go find Halo and Bindi," I said as we walked out of my room.

Outside my door were two Royal Guardsmen who followed us down the hall. I got the sense from both of them that they were not happy with their duty. They seemed to scoff the moment I stepped out of my room, lingering far behind us as if walking with me was an unwanted chore. Like guarding me was somehow beneath them.

It turned out I wasn't being paranoid, as I actually heard one of them say it.

“Why are we following a servant around?” one of the guards asked. “We could be with the others, preparing for war in Navarrah City instead of trailing a brat.”

The guard had whispered to his partner and likely thought I couldn't hear him speak. However, my mage abilities had heightened my senses. I was able to hear, see, smell, and taste things others could not. All I had to do was focus my mind and my magic on it.

I let the comment pass without addressing it. I myself had a hard time reconciling myself with the fact that I was soon to be a queen. I kept expecting someone to show up and take the role from me. The masses were adoring, treating me like some kind of savior sent from the heavens. The royals who controlled and ruled their own territories accepted me well enough, but I got the sense that my own Royal Guards who were meant to protect me and Onyx Rah had a different, less impressed opinion of me.

I found Bindi and Halo deep in their work as they pored over papers spread across the dining table. The rest of the royals were not in the dining room, so must have taken their meals in their private quarters. Servants stood at the ready along the walls, waiting for Bindi and Halo to address them. When I entered the room, one approached me.

“Your Majesty,” the short, worried-looking man addressed me. “Will you be having your supper? The kitchen has prepared your meals. And I fear the food will be inedible if served cold.”

“Have they been making you wait?” I asked him kindly.

“For hours. We’ve reheated and remade the meals. The cook fears the food will be tough and gamey should he have to do it again.” He sighed and wrung his hands. “We have the finest cuisine in all of Tobran.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve tasted the food. Give me a minute.” I smiled at him and approached Bindi and Halo.

“My, my,” I greeted them, clearing my throat to get their attention.

“Aria,” Halo said. “Good, you’re here. I’m drafting a letter to be read in

the squares as a call to come forward.” She picked up a heavily edited piece of paper covered with black lines and scratches. “Tell me if this sounds right.” She was starting to read her letter when I interrupted her.

“I am very excited to hear your call to service, but I believe we have servants here who would very much like for us to eat so they might clean up and find their rest. It is rather late, and I don’t want to take advantage of Angeline Falls’ hospitality.” I spoke with as much kindness and understanding as I could muster.

Just the mention of food had me starving. The fruit basket was nice, but I hadn’t had anything else to eat since morning.

“Oh, heavens, what time is it?” Halo asked in alarm.

“Her Majesty is right. It’s nearly ten in the evening,” Bindi said.

“Where does the time go? Please bring our meal,” Halo addressed the nervous little man who had accosted me.

“I think he’ll be very pleased we are eating,” I said as I took a seat next to Halo.

Gabrielle sat on Bindi’s other side as Halo and Bindi cleared their jumble of papers and maps.

“We have a game plan,” Bindi said with pride. “As soon as we get to Onyx Rah, we’re going to send out the call. I’ll train with the troops, and we’ll begin to populate the palace. We need people to serve. Halo can’t keep using her magic and stay strong enough to fight Polonius if he does something unexpectedly expected.” She laughed at those last words.

“That sounds fantastic,” I said. “Gabrielle will be joining us, and I’m going to have her be in charge of sorting out the house staff. She’s worked in service before, and as my lady in waiting, she will be with me at times when I’m in the palace and act as my liaison during times I’m not there. So, as soon as Midnight Moon Pack members start to show up, we’ll direct them to Gabrielle.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Halo huffed. “I thought I’d have to do all of that on top of sorting out people’s properties and getting the businesses established. Fantastic! Thank you, Gabrielle.” She turned to me. “You do need a court, Aria. Have you thought about who else you want to attend you?”

“I haven’t given it any thought at all,” I confessed, not really wanting anyone to attend me. “Perhaps Janaya Redveign?” I threw the idea out there.

“Poor King Helix. He’ll lose all of his best supporters,” Bindi lamented.

“I believe that Janaya is in the market for a husband, which means she’ll need to stay in the castle and be a wife. Likely, whoever she chooses to marry will have a high position on King Helix’s council.”

“Right. Of course.” I bit my lip, feeling defeated.

“If I may, Your Majesty,” Gabrielle began quietly. It was weird hearing her use honorifics with me. “We could invite the younger female siblings of royal and noble houses, especially those of Solbrook and other places in Voltaire. Spreading your alliances beyond Tobran’s borders will strengthen your kingdom.”

“That is a good idea,” I said, encouraged. “We’ll reach out to noble houses, and Midnight Moon Pack members. We can invite their daughters first. Anyone who wants to be in my entourage and serve at court may come, and we’ll see where they’re best suited. If they aren’t ready for a role at court, perhaps we can employ them elsewhere.”

“I like that. Father would have wanted the daughters of Onyx Rah to have a chance to serve their queen,” Halo said with reverence.

At that point, several servants came in and delivered our food. Despite the little man’s concerns, the food was delicious and perfectly warm. We ate and continued to strategize about how we would build Onyx Rah. By the end of our supper, everyone was feeling confident and determined to make the kingdom thrive. Later that evening, we said our good nights and retreated to our quarters.

Since Gabrielle had not been assigned a place to sleep, and I worried they’d put her in a servants’ quarters somewhere far away, I had her stay in my suite with me. She offered to sleep on the couch in the corner of the room, but I wouldn’t hear of it. We shared a bed that night, chatting the way we did when we were younger, growing up in the palace at Navarrah City. I knew not to discuss any of my feelings about Polonius with her, but neither of us wanted to talk about him, anyway.

“I’m sorry Ulryk used you, then traded you to Polonius,” I said to her. “You must have been so hurt.”

“I definitely learned my lesson. I doubt I’ll ever trust a man again,” she said, sounding hurt and sad.

“Ulryk was a horrible person. I’d hardly consider him a man, and I would never pin all my expectations of love on someone like him. Though I’d be wary, and one must always be on guard these days, when you do find someone to love who treats you as you deserve to be treated, I hope you trust



him and fall head over heels.” I cuddled closer to her in support.

“Remember when we pretended that a prince would sweep us off our feet?” Gabrielle asked, then she gasped. “Oh, my goodness—I just realized that a prince did sweep you off your feet.” She gave a hearty bellow of laughter. “Aria, your dreams have come true,” she squealed.

“Well, sort of,” I said, laughing. “I still have a pesky tyrant to marry. And you can tell Polonius I said that.”

I played it so that she didn’t run to Polonius with the need to share everything I’d said. I understood how truth spells worked, as I’d seen Amadeus use them before on soldiers who went AWOL or servants who lied. The spelled person wasn’t compelled to divulge the truth unless asked. So hopefully, Polonius wouldn’t ask Gabrielle what we were talking about in bed that night.

I was, however, happy I had Lex. Gabrielle was right—my dreams of love had come true. I had a man who I trusted. Lex would do anything to protect me with honor and respect.

The next morning, Halo, Bindi, two of Bindi’s soldiers, Gabrielle, and I took the airship back to Onyx Rah. On our journey, we continued to strategize the development of our new kingdom. We determined that Bindi would work with the Royal Guards to secure our borders and build up an army, and Halo would be in charge of finding ancestors and allotting them properties. Gabrielle would work with me to bring the court together as well as find domestics to run the castle.

I felt good about our plans. As soon as the airship landed and we exited the tarmac, I went in search of Sire Vanoire. It was imperative that I begin training and practicing my mage abilities. With Polonius now insisting that he marry me, I needed to build my magical skills. If I were to ever have to face him one on one, I wanted to have the ability to disable him with my magic.

As we walked across the airstrip, I noticed that the Royal Guards were not standing at attention. Rather, they were shifting their weight and engaging in private conversations with one another. Even when our party had started walking toward the castle, they seemed lazy and disinterested in our presence. The fact that they were not alert and paying attention to us was distressing. Either they were traitors and had enlisted in order to undermine our operation, or they had so little regard for me they didn’t take their posts seriously.

“Excuse me,” I said, suddenly stopping our advance toward the castle. I turned to face the soldiers, who had not stopped chattering with each other. “Are you not guarding your queen?” I asked them.

Bindi stood strong, watching her soldiers, noticing their infractions for the first time. Perhaps she was only noticing now because she’d served with them as a fellow soldier, or was so new to her role that she hadn’t realized they were disregarding their posts.

“We *are* guarding you,” one of the soldiers replied mockingly.

“Show respect to your queen,” Bindi reprimanded with a scowl. “I can send you back to Navarrah City right now and get two more qualified guards.”

“Can we?” the second guard asked. “I’d go back to Navarrah City in a heartbeat,” he laughed.

“It is an honor to be chosen,” Bindi railed against them. “You will be sent back and dishonored for your disrespect.”

“We’re guarding women, and there is no threat,” the first soldier said with disdain. “You can’t expect us to be on our guard all the time.”

Bindi looked ready to shift and go after them, but I put up my hand to halt her.

“Do you know of the warlord Polonius?” I asked them, being careful to measure my words as Gabrielle was still among us.

“Who doesn’t know the warlord?” the second soldier replied as if I was an idiot.

“If the warlord walked into Onyx Rah today with his Crypt Claw warriors, would you be ready to fight him?” I asked.

“Just the two of us against the Crypt Claw?” the first soldier asked dubiously, acting like such a scenario was impossible.

“Yes, just the two of you,” I confirmed, noting the irreverent looks they were giving me.

“As unlikely as that scenario would be, we’d have to fight them, I guess,” the first soldier said, shaking his head as if the entire conversation was pointless.

“Well, Polonius is my fiancé. He may be here any minute with his troops, and then you will need to protect my life. Just the two of you. Do you want to know why?”

“Why?” the first soldier asked, finally listening to me.

“Because you are personal guards to the queen, and at present, Polonius

has threatened the lives of everyone in Tobran so that he may take me against my will. I have yet to agree to this marriage. The glory in protecting my life has untold rewards, yet you will never know them unless you find the opportunity to redeem yourselves.”

This silenced both of them.

Bindi spoke. “You can work toward your redemption by telling the troops that Aria and I will meet with them in one hour in the city square. I want all but a few left to guard the borders to attend a short meeting.” Her stern face crossed into a smile, and I couldn’t help but offer a smile of my own. “Is that understood?” she asked the guards.

“It is,” the first soldier said. Both soldiers saluted, and we continued toward the castle without incident.

We entered the palace, and I looked around, seeing how much we had to repair to make the castle into a habitable space. Things felt slightly overwhelming, and I felt my wolf’s instinct to shift and run just to exert the energy pent up in me.

“I think it’s a good idea that you have a talk with the soldiers. We need them completely committed to protecting us,” Halo said, her expression worried.

“I agree,” Bindi confirmed.

An hour later, we went to the center of the city to wait for the soldiers, all of whom had arrived there rather quickly from their posts. Once we were all assembled, I addressed the soldiers.

“First, thank you for coming to Navarrah City and offering your service here. I know King Helix and Queen Delia are grateful for your commitment. I also know this is not an easy assignment,” I acknowledged, standing before them in the middle of the dirt road. “Rumor has spread, and I’ve heard many of you voice your disdain for my leadership. We can’t effectively protect Onyx Rah if we have dissension among the ranks.”

“Women shouldn’t be military leaders or run kingdoms on their own,” a voice rang out. “Aria Blackbane is unfit.”

Bindi stepped forward to defend me against their accusations. “I’ll prove to you that you’re wrong. How do we enter the Royal Guard? We fight each other to prove our worth in the pit. You must have forgotten that both your queen and I have already proven our valor and prowess in the pit, but if you need a refresher, I’m sure your queen and I will be happy to oblige.” Her voice resonated with anger and venom.

“I’ll fight you,” the first soldier said. Another random soldier, tall with deep red scars covering much of his body, came forward.

“Thank you for taking on our challenge,” I said as Bindi and I squared up on our side to face the two soldiers.

“Go!” Bindi yelled, and the fight began.

The brawl was loud and chaotic. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Halo and Gabrielle rush to the center of town to see what was happening. I could see horror in their expressions as they watched Bindi and me fight. But this was what I was born to do. I felt more comfortable in that makeshift arena fighting those soldiers than I ever had as queen.

The first soldier lunged at me, but neither of us shifted. His brawny frame nearly made me tumble backward, but my knee found his groin and made contact there with the force of my anger and frustration. The other soldier attacked Bindi, and she had him on his back in moments. Without weapons or shifting into our wolves, both Bindi and I had attacked with legs, arms, elbows, and knees. We used stealth moves to jump away from our attackers. Being small and nimble, we were able to quickly escape every single one of their advances, dodging their blows.

The fight continued for hours, but Bindi and I never tired. I had enough pent-up energy stored inside me to go all night if I had to. We got a few good punches in, and several scratches to the skin that left bleeding wounds stripped of flesh. By the time we were done fighting, both of our opponents were breathing heavily and barely conscious. While Bindi and I had suffered some blows and would be badly bruised the next day, neither of us had sustained any significant injuries. We had won the fight.

I heard snickers and cheers around me as the soldiers made peace with the fact that their leaders—two women—had defeated their best warriors.

“I’m not sure what to say,” Halo said, running over to us and inspecting my arms and face for injuries. “You’ve hardly been touched,” she marveled.

“I was a warrior before I was ever a royal,” I told her, feeling triumphant.

“We are a good team,” Bindi said to me with admiration.

I looked at the women assembled around me, the women I’d chosen to lead us into prosperity. We were exactly what Onyx Rah needed.

After the two soldiers were picked up by their comrades, I addressed the crowd again. “I hope you no longer doubt the value of the women ruling this kingdom, but if you do, I will give you the opportunity to leave now. I’ll not tolerate even one person having doubts. If you are not willing to defend our

kingdom and fight for our future, you are not welcome here. Those who choose to stay will be the first to do so. Your loyalty and trust will be repaid with titles and rewards, but not until the hard work we have ahead of us is complete,” I finished, knowing that Halo and I could conjure what the troops needed for the time being.

“You heard your queen,” Bindi said sternly. “Now is your chance. If any of you are not able to support her or Onyx Rah, leave now, and do not ever show your faces here again.”

There were grumbles and whispers among the crowd, and we waited for a minute for the soldiers to think on it. As we all stood there in silence, the soldiers mustered their alliances. I looked upon the seeds of our fledgling nation, and after a long pause, saw that no one was leaving.

“So, I am to understand that no one is choosing to leave?” I asked the crowd.

“We will stay and fight for Onyx Rah!” a soldier who was with us on the airbus shouted.

“Good,” I said, sighing with gratitude. “And thank you for your service,” I added.

Halo came up to me and asked if she could say something to the crowd. “Of course,” I told her. It was her kingdom, too.

“I, too, am grateful for your service and your skill,” she told the soldiers. “What I just saw makes me very proud, as we already have a powerful army with fearless fighters. I want you all to know that we need to populate our kingdom. We need staff in the castle, merchants, farmers, medics, teachers, families, bakers, cooks, cleaners, scholars, strategists—we have vital roles to fill, and quickly. So if you’ve left loved ones back in Navarrah City, invite them to join us. We will find work and housing for them. It will be hard at first, but together, we can bring this kingdom together and make it stronger. Midnight Moon Pack ancestors will be given priority, but there will be plenty of room for you and your families should you want to stay. King Helix assured me at our recent treaty summit meeting that you will be allowed to stay in Onyx Rah should you choose.”

The crowd tittered as Halo spoke, clearly pleased by the idea of bringing their families here, which was something the army in Navarrah City had never offered.

“We are building a new nation,” Halo finished. “Join us so that we might enjoy unlimited prosperity.”

“Then this is settled,” Bindi chimed in. “You will stay, and hopefully loved ones and those you trust will join us. Especially any Midnight Moon Pack member you know. Now, go back to your posts, and you will be fed.”

The group disassembled.

“Wow,” Halo said breathlessly. “That was impressive.”

“Sometimes, you have to throw in a little muscle from time to time,” I told her, and we all laughed.

“As unreal as it all feels, Onyx Rah is becoming a reality,” Halo said, smiling. “My father would be so proud.”

We started to make our way back when Sire Vanoire appeared.

“Where have you been?” I asked, wondering how the mage could have missed everything that had just transpired.

“I was letting you be queen,” Sire said simply. “And you’ve done so beautifully.”

## Chapter 14

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### *Lex*

I was standing on the edge of Angeline Falls. The majestic water tumbled all around me in sprays of iridescent green and turquoise blue. My heart felt light and joyous as love and joy filled me. I was attending an important event because I was dressed in my finest garments.

Suddenly, the scene before me had morphed into an aisle. I was still standing on the edge of the falls, but behind me was a long pathway lined with satin and trimmed with flowers that led to an archway and an altar.

Standing at the altar was Bastien Salt, dressed in black from head to toe. I knew it was a wedding; however, I wasn't the groom, but a king attending as a spectator. Music bloomed from around us as a throng of musicians entered, playing instruments. Their song was melodious and harmonic, and I wanted to feel joy from their rousing, but couldn't. A cold dread had filled my heart, nearly suffocating me.

Then, I saw Aria wearing a white dress that fit her like shimmering clouds. Her long auburn hair was woven with gold and jewels. She walked solemnly forward passing me without even a glance. As the joyous music played, she continued ahead, marching as if she was carrying the casket at her own funeral. When she reached Bastien Salt, she took her place at the altar and bowed her head silently, surrendering to the moment. I wanted to rush to her and have her explain why I wasn't standing there next to her.

Polonius entered, wearing a ceremonial military uniform with a triumphant smirk on his face.

I jerked awake, my body covered in sweat. I had no idea where I was as I looked around frantically, not recognizing the room. As my breathing stabilized and my mind cleared, I remembered I was in the Crypt Claw castle.

I'd had a nightmare, but it wasn't far from the truth. If things progressed without change, the day would come when Aria would become Polonius's bride.

I put on my jacket that had the spelled piece of fruit and my ring in its pocket. I put it on, and suddenly transformed into a man with dirty blond hair and a nondescript face.

I left my quarters. Since it was early in the morning, only a few soldiers were on the march. I didn't look at them, acting like I knew where I was heading. No one seemed to take notice of me.

As I was searching through the halls, I finally saw Cheyenne. I knew he wouldn't recognize me in my disguise, so I discreetly took off the ring I was wearing and slipped it back into my pocket.

"There you are," Cheyenne whispered, sounding exasperated. "I've been looking everywhere. You weren't in your room, and I haven't found any sign of Amadeus. Polonius must have him trapped somewhere."

"I don't doubt it," I said, moving us off into a niche in the wall near a heavy wooden door.

"While I didn't find Amadeus, I did find a hangar with three warships like the one you rode in here with Polonius," Cheyenne said in a voice just above a whisper. "The place looks like it's abandoned but for the ships."

"Take me there," I said, eager to see what Polonius was working on and assess what kinds of weapons he could use to destroy us.

Cheyenne led me through the maze of halls and narrow spaces down to a bunker that at first glance looked unoccupied. As soon as we entered the space, blending into the shadows as we had been trained to do, we saw a light coming from behind a metal door. The door had been propped open just enough to squeeze bodies through.

Cheyenne and I quietly made our way into a workshop, where several people were tinkering with various components and mechanical features. Each of the workers was constructing mechanical components mounted on square metal plates. I figured these were removable parts that could be put into the airships and easily swapped out for ammunition or navigation, things that could change the airships' purpose. Since the workers were dressed in civilian attire, neither Cheyenne nor I stood out, but we still kept ourselves within the veil of shadows and, whenever possible, behind furniture and walls. As we slowly walked through the warehouse, we found an office where General Boris, Polonius's right hand, sat, inspecting a man's work.



“This is rubbish.” Boris tossed the metal plate with a tangle of wires affixed to it. The man ducked his head just before the plate struck him.

“How do you expect arms and ammunition to fit onto this piece of garbage?” Boris growled. “I’ll send you back to the prisons of Vitoria if you submit subpar work again. No breakfast for you this morning. Maybe the sharp blade of hunger will inspire you. Now, get out!”

Cheyenne and I pulled back, hiding ourselves as the man rushed past us.

“We need to get the plans for these ships,” I told Cheyenne under my breath. “I want to make sure that if he’s got flying battleships, Navarrah City will have something similar.”

“And Onyx Rah,” Cheyenne added with a smile, knowing my loyalty to both kingdoms.

“Yes, especially Onyx Rah,” I agreed. “Let’s hide ourselves somewhere and wait until the general leaves.”

Without another word, Cheyenne and I tucked ourselves behind a large bank of cabinets. The tall row of metal shelving held the raw materials workers were using to create individual airship parts. We didn't have to wait long before a bell clanged loudly, and everyone left, including Boris, presumably to eat their breakfast. Even the worker Boris had chastised was gone. As soon as the warehouse was clear, Cheyenne and I made our way to the general’s office, looking as quickly as we could for the airship plans without disturbing anything.

Cheyenne and I frantically flipped through documents, leaving no piece of paper untouched. I rifled through Boris's desk as Cheyenne went through the filing cabinet behind it. There were hundreds of pieces of paper to sort through, so we had to be strategic.

“The plans will probably be in some place that is accessible yet hidden, like a top drawer or in its own cabinet apart from the others,” I mentioned as I went through the first drawer of Boris’s desk.

In the drawer, I found several bills of sale for people, presumably the workers who were building the ships. The mere sight of these documents made my stomach ache. Polonius was truly a monster. He was still buying people to do his dirty work. No one in Brahman’s Peak had any autonomy. If he took over Onyx Rah, he’d ruin the lives of everyone living in Tobran, especially those who were trusting Aria with a new start. This realization made me hasten my search even more.

“This man is a menace,” I muttered, shaking my head as I flashed a bill of

sale at my brother.

“We will stop him,” Cheyenne assured me. “I promise, he’ll not get away with this.”

While those were my sentiments as well, it was nice to hear Cheyenne voice his confidence and be there with me, fighting on my side.

“I got it,” Cheyenne announced with a huge grin. “Right here on the top as you said it would be.” He rolled up the plans and fit them into the deep inner pocket of his jacket. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I’m right behind you, brother,” I said, feeling like we were making significant progress for the first time in ages.

But just as we were leaving, we were seen by two returning workers.

“Hey, you’re not from Vitoria!” one of them shouted at us.

“And you aren’t Crypt Claw!” the other yelled.

Without a real plan for escape, Cheyenne and I took off running as fast as we could. Thanks to our royal guard training, we were both very physically fit and fast. We ran out of the warehouse, up the stairs, and into the tangle of narrow hallways that comprised the underbelly of Polonius's castle. I knew if we kept going forward, we'd be able to tuck ourselves into the one of the many niches that were along the walls. As we looked for a place to hide, we came to the room where Polonius had electrocuted Aria.

I pulled Cheyenne into the room and closed the door tightly behind us. We both leaned against the wall and took several deep breaths. As I looked around, memories flooded back. I could see Aria lying there strapped to the table, fearful yet determined to find her mage. I could see Polonius’s disturbing joy in watching Aria suffer as he threw the switch and allowed the electric voltage to sear her body and nearly kill her. Thinking back on all that Aria had suffered to become who she was made me even more grateful for her tough, badass nature. Her wolf was fierce and undefeated in battle, calling to my wolf with such passion and purpose. We belonged to each other, mated for life, and here we were, apart again. I couldn’t wait to have her in my arms once more.

I vowed to myself that it would only be a matter of days before we liberated Amadeus. I would return to her. She had survived so much, and I owed her no less than my life, devotion, and love.

“Here,” I said, taking the ring off of my finger and handing it to my brother. “Wear this, it will disguise you. Take the blueprints back to Navarrah City, and don’t take off this disguise. You’ll be much safer if no one knows

who you are.”

“I’m not leaving you, Lex. No way,” Cheyenne said, his face hardening with determination.

“A true leader thinks of his country first, not his kin,” I said. “We need to get these blueprints to Navarrah City as fast as possible so that Father can have a team of designers recreate the airships and improve our own fleet. Imagine if Polonius were to attack us—he’s clever and cruel. He isn’t going to just ambush the soldiers, he’ll make sure our citizens suffer. Zonas burned the citizens of Onyx Rah alive, and I expect no less from his grandson. My life is not worth the tortuous murder of thousands,” I finished, feeling desperate and nearly defeated, though the war hadn’t even begun yet.

“I understand.” Cheyenne’s voice was dark and solemn.

“Go now,” I urged as I watched him put on the ring.

He turned to embrace me, and I wondered if I’d ever see him again. Perhaps we were getting into something that would end with our demise and the destruction of all we knew and loved.

I knew Cheyenne understood the gravity of the situation. Whether Aria married Polonius or not, the warlord was planning on ruling us all. The secret building of those airships was proof.

Cheyenne walked out of the room into the hallway, teeming with guards walking at a brisk pace. They must have been looking for the two people who had snuck into the workshop. I watched Cheyenne blend in with his head bowed down, though I still worried that the guards would question him. I tucked myself behind the door and watched through the crack, ready to shift into my wolf and defend my brother if I had to.

As the guards neared, my brother nodded at them and stepped aside for them to pass without incident. The disguise had worked, and Cheyenne was acting unbothered by the guards’ presence, certainly not like someone who was on the run.

I waited for the commotion to pass before I left the torture chamber. I couldn’t stay away from my room for too long, or someone might come looking for me. I was a diplomat with explicit instructions to stay put and had been remanded to my room until the rest of the diplomats came, so I had to get back to it.

When I didn’t hear footsteps in the hallway anymore, I exited the torture chamber and was able to make my way back up near my room without incident. For a moment, I thought I would be safe, but as I got closer to my

room, I saw that there were already guards there looking for me.

My heart sank. I couldn't run or hide, so I walked up to them, feigning ignorance.

"May I help you?" I asked, walking up to the guards.

"You were ordered to stay in your room," a heavy-set Crypt Claw guard with a scar down his forehead rasped.

"I have been staying in my room, but it's getting cramped in there. I just needed some air." I tried to sound as bored and unbothered as I possibly could.

"What have you been doing, then?" the soldier pressed.

"I was walking around, like I said." I remained nonchalant as I tried to reenter my room.

"There were trespassers in the warehouse," the scarred guard continued with his dark, gravelly tone. "They fled on foot. Where is your accomplice?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" I asked, feigning impatience. "I am simply trying to stretch my legs. Being trapped in a room for an entire day is stagnating. Please, I'm tired, and I want to retire." I tried to push past them, but I was grabbed roughly by the arm.

"We have the means to make you talk," the guard threatened.

"About my stroll through the halls? I doubt you need to bring in the big guns for that." I laughed, trying to keep the mood light and non-threatening.

But the guard remained unconvinced. "Why were you in the warehouse, and what have you stolen?" He slammed my arm against the wall and covered my neck with his thick hand.

"I wasn't," I choked out.

"If you won't tell me on your own, I'm sure *he* will find ways to make your tongue say what your mouth won't." The guard eased his grip on me enough for me to see Amadeus walking down the hall toward us.

"Lex." His voice was stern and cold. "It's been a while."

Amadeus was clearly still possessed by an evil magic. I realized I may have underestimated Polonius's power over the mage.

"I hear you've been snooping about the castle," he accused, his voice dripping with venom. "Let's see what you've found."

He raised his arms. Suddenly, my limbs were dead weight, and my mind fogged over into a confused dream.

## Chapter 15

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### *Aria*

I found Gabrielle a room in the castle. It was minimally furnished and pretty well restored, so I thought she'd be more comfortable there. What I didn't realize, however, was that without Lex, who I worried about constantly, or a close friend like Gabrielle to stay with me, I felt lost and alone. Images and thoughts of my past found their way into my sleep as I battled my anxiety.

I was emotionally more resilient in a crisis, or in action. But quiet times and times alone had me thinking too much. By myself, I had time to absorb the stress of the situations I found myself in.

That night, I woke up with a start, sensing that Lex was in some kind of danger. It wasn't a hunch or a fear, but an absolute knowledge that Lex's life was in peril. My wolf somehow knew that Lex's wolf was under duress. I didn't know exactly where Lex was, because I sensed him so strongly, I thought perhaps he had returned to Onyx Rah.

I got out of bed, quickly dressed, then walked through the halls of the nearly empty castle. Letting my wolf guide me forward, I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I could feel Lex, though I also profoundly understood that Lex was nowhere near me. It was as if our souls were aligned and working in tandem in two separate places.

Unable to shake the sensation away, I continued to walk until I found myself in front of Sire Vanoire's room. He, like Gabrielle, had few furnishings, but his were ornately appointed and likely conjured by magic. His room had a large bed with billowing covers in gray and cream, which had been neatly arranged and made; he had not gone to bed yet. A long comfortable couch stood in the corner next to a desk and chair. Sage green and gray tapestries hung on the wall that matched the swirling geometric

patterns woven into the rug.

Sire stepped out into the hallway. “Aria?” He sounded very surprised to see me. “What are you doing up at this hour?”

“A premonition that Lex was in danger woke me up,” I said. “My wolf is alert and ready to shift to find him. I feel like my entire body is on fire,” I confessed, unsure of what I should do with the intense emotions I was processing.

“I see,” Sire said thoughtfully. “Well, once your mage was unlocked, your intuition strengthened, making you feel things more acutely. These feelings will sharpen toward your chosen mate. If you fear Lex in danger, he likely is facing something.” Sire’s aged expression darkened from behind his loose flow of white hair. “While I doubted he’d behave well enough to avoid Polonius’s wrath or schemes, you have to believe he’s able to defend himself.”

“Do you sense he’s in trouble?” I asked, hoping with Sire’s years of wisdom and experience, he could see Lex more clearly than I could.

“Logic tells me he is, but again, you must have known he would be at some point,” Sire said, almost as if he was scolding me.

“What should I do?” I was ready to go to Brahman’s Peak and fight Polonius to the death if I had to.

“Your wolf has chosen Lex as your mate; he is connected to you. Search within yourself and assess the danger. You’ll know if he’s simply facing something challenging or fighting for his life. For my part, I can sense that he is in the eye of the storm, but I cannot get a read on how well he’s faring,” Sire said, looking a little disappointed in his own magical abilities.

“I can’t choose Lex,” I said softly, feeling guilty for admitting it. “He has a kingdom to rule one day. I’ve promised to marry Polonius, or at least make Polonius feel I am free to marry him. Or else, all of Voltaire is in danger.”

“True, but those facts don’t change who your wolf has chosen for you,” Sire said, sounding more like a father than he ever had.

“How would Halo feel if Lex was the king of Onyx Rah and the kingdom’s alpha?” I asked, seeking Sire’s advice.

“Much better than she would Polonius, I’m sure, but I can’t know Halo’s thoughts,” Sire answered. “Lex might be a king beside you, but he cannot be the alpha. He’s not of the Midnight Moon Pack. That role is for you. Convince Halo to be your beta, and that is your kingdom.”

I had never considered this. I was prepared to be a queen, as daunting as I

found the notion, but never the alpha. I'd always assumed that Lex would fill that role, or I'd abandon my duties to Onyx Rah and have Halo replace me so that I could accompany Lex to Navarrah City as his wife and queen.

"I can't ask Lex to leave his world behind," I lamented.

"And I can't answer these questions for you," Sire pointed out. "You'll have to discuss them with Lex when you get the chance. Hopefully, whatever he's dealing with at the moment isn't dire, but even if it was, Aria, you have to put your thoughts and concerns into your kingdom. You must build a court with advisors and strategists. You and Halo are doing an admirable job of planting the seeds of a nation, but it's time you find people whom you can delegate to. Soon, you'll have your hours filled with more work than you'll be able to manage, and you must train." Sire's tone was stern and fatherly again. "I know you're concerned about Lex, but you should be more worried about your kingdom. You are a ruler now, and you have many more than one person to consider."

The trouble was, I didn't know how to be a ruler. I also didn't have anyone who could help me build a nation. I was planning on having Lex suggest people who could come from Navarrah City. We had put out the call to Midnight Moon Pack members. It had gone out days before, and still no one had come. I wasn't discouraged by that fact because I believed we would eventually have people arriving at our gates. There was a lot involved in immigrating from one kingdom to another, and I didn't expect to have any pack members arriving yet.

I realized, too, I wasn't sure how to ask people to take a position under me. All my life, my station was always far beneath everyone else's. I had been the one who was invisible and quiet. I was ordered to do the menial tasks to support the house, never to make decisions. Even though I was fierce and angry and could fight, I'd never been considered anyone of importance.

Even Lex had teased and belittled me when I was young. When our romance had begun, he'd still held power over me. Now that I'd found my mage and my ancestry, I was his equal. And yet, I wasn't sure how to occupy that space.

"We both know I was a servant before I found my mage," I said. "I wasn't given the liberty to know many people other than the servants. As much as I liked and admired most of them, the only one I'd trust with a kingdom is my grandmother, Nana Mavia, and she's certainly too old for the burden." I sighed. "Do you know anyone who might want to raise a kingdom

with me and fight off a tyrant other than Lex?” I was sure my question came off as snide and disrespectful, but Lex and Cheyenne were legitimately the only men I knew whom I could count on to join my court.

“I’m sure when the pack members start to arrive, you will be able to know who is worthy of serving you,” Sire said with an expected kindness. “As to your immediate concerns about Lex, I can do a spell to open a mirror in time and space to look at where he is right now. Your worries may be legitimate, and Lex might be fighting for his life, or he may just be scared. You haven’t the sophistication yet for your mage to know exactly what your wolf is feeling from Lex’s wolf.”

“Do you think his life is in danger? Can you feel it?” I asked Sire for his honesty.

“My mage abilities can, at times, trick me, so I can’t say definitively, but I would venture to guess that Lex is facing a dilemma, though it isn’t something that will end his life. And again, you have a kingdom to run. You must stay focused upon that.” He gave me a hard look.

“Then I don’t want to see him. If I thought he was in trouble, I’d need to go to him.” I bit my lip, feeling like I was making the wrong choice the minute I refused Sire’s offer of magic.

“That is very wise, Aria,” Sire said, his voice warmer. “I will admit...my offer was a test to see how loyal you are to Onyx Rah, and you passed. Creating a mirror would tax my magic more than I’m willing to spend, I would have scolded you for choosing Lex over your kingdom had you done so, but you didn’t. I’m proud of you.”

I hated Sire’s tests and manipulations, but he did have a point. While I’d proven my loyalty, I couldn’t help but worry about Lex.

“I wish I could be more happy about that,” I sighed.

“I honestly believe you are worried because you don’t like being apart from Lex. Polonius can’t kill Lex, and, by that turn, must protect Lex or he won’t be able to marry you. Since you are the key to his delusions of domination over the kingdoms of Tobran, he won’t likely ever kill Lex. If he did, he’d have all of Voltaire to contend with. Up until this point, all he’s done is attempt to marry a servant girl.” Sire laughed. “Not too dastardly.”

“You know he’s done much worse than that,” I countered.

“To the eyes of the world, he has not. But if he killed or injured Lex, he’d have to pay for those crimes. As a ruler of a kingdom in Tobran, he has every right to wed you. I’m sure Polonius doesn’t want to lose his advantage just to



appease his jealousy and envy. Lex might be detained, but he certainly isn't dead." Sire's words assured me, though I still wasn't entirely convinced. "Go back to bed, Aria," he said softly. "You will need your rest for the days ahead."

He was right. I had to keep my strength.

I managed to fall back asleep, yet had a very fitful night of tossing and turning. The next morning, I went back to Sire's room, asking him to help me train and develop my magical abilities. He started by teaching me some defensive tactics should we be attacked. I learned to use my magic to deflect anything that came at me.

He then had me work on spells. The first was the most advantageous for me to know, as it was a spell that could disguise anyone. This way, I could protect my loved ones, even if they were physically away from me.

"Amadeus spelled a ring that Lex wore when he and Amadeus first visited Brahman's Peak, trying to rescue me from Polonius," I mentioned. "Is this a general spell that most mages use?" I asked, wondering why it was the first spell Sire was teaching me.

"It is a common spell," Sire replied. "Amadeus disguised Lex so that he could protect you, which is how the spell is often used...especially if you are trying to save your children." His look told me that he knew Amadeus was my father, and that Amadeus's act of cloaking Lex was a means of protecting me.

"I have visions sometimes," I admitted. "They're like memories. Stuff from my childhood, things I didn't remember, but now know somehow. What do you think that is?"

"It must have been hard for Amadeus to be your father, yet not be allowed to parent you," Sire allowed. "He may have given you memories of his sessions with you, like the one we are having now so that when you unlocked your mage you'd have them. It is a mage parent's job to teach their children. Perhaps Amadeus was doing his best to teach you, as I am now." Again, Sire sounded fatherly. I almost trusted him, but knew better.

"I hope Lex is able to free Amadeus so he can recover from this horrible crim gin poisoning," I confessed, feeling mounting stress for Amadeus's predicament and condition. "And I pray that we succeed in stopping Polonius from his horrible quest. I don't want to be his wife. Not only will I be fighting to survive every day in his presence, but there will come a time when my refusal to help him will be met with my murder. Until then, I'll have to

watch him destroy everything I love.” I didn’t want to be so emotional, especially with Sire Vanoire, but I was feeling vulnerable.

“That’s why it’s imperative that you train,” Sire urged. “Perhaps one day, you’ll become a powerful mage who can defeat Polonius.”

“You’re right,” I said, refocusing.

Sire and I continued training in the parlor of his bedroom. Adjacent to the space where he slept was a small anterior room. The room had few furnishings, just two benches flanking a long wooden table and a dormant hearth. In the middle was open space. The room must have been intended only for magical use.

Sire and I worked on my disguising spell long into the night. By the time I realized how late it was, my arms hung limp at my sides, and I could hardly keep my eyes open.

“How much longer do you think we’ll be at this?” I asked Sire, not even trying to hide my fatigue.

“The more you train, the stronger you will become. Power through your exhaustion. You must build your stamina.” He wasn’t even considering stopping.

It struck me that Sire was a mage in his seventies who was still standing, strong and virile, while I, a woman a fraction of his age, could hardly keep upright. I absolutely needed to build my strength and endurance. Just as I took a deep breath, ready to start again, the door flew open, and Bindi, Gabrielle, and Halo walked in.

“Anyone hungry?” Halo asked as Gabrielle set a large tray of food on the table in the corner of our training room.

“Starving,” I said, looking to Sire and hoping he’d let us take a break to eat.

“I doubt you’re starving,” he scoffed. “But I bet you are very hungry, because I know I am.” Despite himself, he laughed, and we all sat around the tiny table and dug into the food Gabrielle had brought.

Halo spoke while she ate. “Things are coming along nicely with the rebuild. We had a group of Midnight Moon Pack members show up in the morning, and I put them right to work on building a permanent barracks for the soldiers. They said many more were coming.” I loved hearing the excitement in her voice.

“And I had a few people show up to help with the work in the castle,” Gabrielle chimed in. “They are Midnight Moon Pack as well. So we now

have a head housekeeper, a cook, a groundsman, and a butler. The cook brought her two younger sisters. They are teenagers, but they will help with the weaving and sewing so that we might have linens and things.” She smiled. “I sew, too, so I’ll help them. And the housekeeper’s husband is a potter. He’s coming with their sons.” Like Halo, Gabrielle seemed happy with all these developments.

“So we have Midnight Moon Pack members in the house right now?” I asked. “They’re really here?”

“I feel so good being among my people,” Halo said in answer. “I’ve only dreamed of Onyx Rah and the Midnight Moon Pack. My siblings don’t care about our heritage or legacy. Xavier has his politics, and Lara her network of thieves, drug dealers, and criminals. Neither of them have any interest in Onyx Rah nor being a part of the royal family.” She heaved a heavy sigh. “They just left me to my studies, and we did our own thing.”

“And now, hopefully you will be the beta of the kingdom you always dreamed about,” I said lightly, giving Halo a pleading smile. Though she said nothing in response, we continued to eat and discuss our plans for Onyx Rah.

After about an hour's worth of discussion, I could tell that Sire was getting anxious to return to our training. “We better get back to it before you tire out on me,” he said to me, wiping his mouth with a napkin and standing up.

“Okay,” I begrudgingly agreed.

“Just for another hour, then you may rest,” Sire offered placatingly, and I somehow found the strength to stand upright and face him.

“Speaking of training, Bindi...” Halo said, turning to Bindi, who was also getting up as Gabrielle cleared the dishes and put them back on the platter she’d brought in.

“Yes?” Bindi said.

“May I train with you tomorrow? After seeing you and Aria fight, I realized that my wolf is very weak, as am I. I want to be more physically fit.” Halo stood straighter, trying to make herself look eager. “A beta should be, should she not?”

“Yes, she should. I think that’s a great idea,” Bindi said kindly, knowing as well as I did that Halo wouldn’t ever be able to hurt someone in battle.

Bindi and Halo left, offering their goodbyes to Sire and me as Gabrielle followed them out with the tray. As soon as they were gone, my thoughts wandered back to Lex. Suddenly, my stress level spiked again, but this time,

my wolf was demanding that I know what was happening to him. There was no disputing the fact that my wolf was on high alert, and frankly, so was I. Something had changed with Lex in the last few hours, and now he seemed to be in real danger.

“Sire,” I said urgently as soon as everyone was gone. “I do want to see Lex. I have a terrible feeling that something is happening to him. I can’t shake it off as just worry or nerves—there is something wrong. I know it.” I felt frantic, almost inconsolable.

“Okay,” Sire said as he made a circular motion in the air with the palm of his hand. “Let’s see if that gut instinct of yours is correct.”

I hated the casual manner in which he was handling the emergency, but he wasn’t as connected to Lex as I was. He didn’t feel any of my anguish at that moment.

“I want you to do this with me, Aria,” he said. “Use the palm of your hand and make a circular motion.”

I did as he instructed, following his exact motions.

“Great, now I want you to say, ‘See through time, see through matter, cross distance and space, and all barriers shatter, show me Lex Redveign, Prince of Navarrah City.’”

I repeated his words, saying them over and over again, until the palm of my hand grew hot and shook with electricity. Suddenly, the circle I was forming with my hand opened up. When I saw Lex inside the circle, I let out a gasp.

There, in the tiny portal my magic had created, I could see Lex being backed into a wall. He was pinned there, being blasted with magic as Amadeus delivered blow after blow, attacking him relentlessly.

“No!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. But I couldn’t help him.

## Chapter 16

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### *Lex*

Amadeus knew I was never going to talk, and so he intensified his magic. I could feel my bones and organs bend to the pressure. Yet, despite the pain and discomfort, I knew he was capable of much worse. He could have had me screaming and writhing on the floor in agony, but instead, it seemed what he was doing was more for show than actual results.

“Why did you leave your room when you were expressly forbidden?” Amadeus asked me for the tenth time.

“I needed air,” I wheezed. “Like now. I need air *now*,” I choked out.

“What were you looking for?” Amadeus asked as he thrust his palms forward. But I wasn’t hit with any more magic, which was proof that all of it was an act.

The soldiers who had apprehended me were standing there, watching Amadeus as he tried to get me to confess. The guards were fairly unimpressed by Amadeus’s little act, and one of them even commented about his state of mind.

“He needs more gin juice,” he whispered loudly to his partner.

“We’re running low,” the other guard said just above a whisper. “And no new shipments of pitaya are coming.”

That was interesting news.

“Shhh!” his friend shushed as footsteps sounded outside the room.

The door to the torture chamber burst open, and Polonius walked in, poised and calm. From the look on the warlord’s face, he was pleased that Amadeus had me pinned down and contorted in discomfort.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Polonius asked me, walking over to me as beads of sweat gathered at my brow.

“I wasn’t looking for anything,” I rasped. “I needed air; my room is dank and musty. I didn’t want to get sick.” I coughed a couple of times in genuine need, as Amadeus’s magic was still pressing down on my body.

“Hmm, interesting. But I doubt my warehouse is any less dank or musty.” Polonius’s cool demeanor was even more unnerving than his grandiose boasting.

“I didn’t…” But before I could protest again, my voice completely evaporated. My mouth continued to move, but it didn’t produce any sound.

“Ah, I was curious to see if he had any more lies to spin,” Polonius laughed. “Perhaps I’ll have to threaten to cut out his tongue for it to finally speak the truth.”

“I need a moment alone with him,” Amadeus said in a mechanic monotone.

“Alone? I’d rather like to watch.” Polonius’s expressionless face twisted into a disturbing smile.

“I don’t want my magic to injure innocent parties. Yourself included, Lord Polonius.” It sickened me to hear Amadeus use honorifics with the warlord. “I plan to lay waste to the boy,” Amadeus said, his voice still devoid of emotion.

“Oh, don’t kill him. At least not yet.” Polonius laughed again. “And that, I do want to watch. Though I will likely be the one to steal his last breath.” His grin widened to an almost comical smirk. “But since today isn’t that day, don’t destroy the guy. I’ll have the soldiers wait in the hallway, and I’ll be back in a little bit to admire your handiwork.” With that, Polonius grazed his thumb across my chin, and I almost threw up. “And let’s not mess up his pretty face just yet. Carry on,” Polonius ordered Amadeus, then turned and walked toward the door. “You two,” he gestured to the soldiers, “stand out in the hall. No one leaves this room.”

After Polonius left, Amadeus took a deep breath. The magic that had been squeezing me finally released, allowing me to also take a deep breath. As I tried to get air into my lungs, I looked at Amadeus’s hands, which were trembling violently.

“The poison began to wear off yesterday,” he confessed. “I’m going to start experiencing violent withdrawals soon, and I won’t be able to control my magic or my mind. I’ll be a monster. I’ve been fighting the poison, and I can break through it a little, enough to pretend to still be under Polonius’s control. But I can’t stop the withdrawals from distorting me.” His voice was

turning frantic. “We have to hurry.”

“Can you use your magic?” I asked, still finding it hard to speak. “We need to disable the guards outside and disguise ourselves so we can get out of here.”

“I can’t use magic against Polonius’s will. While I still have the poison in me, we are connected, and though our bonding grows weaker as the gin wears off, he can still sense me. All I can do is act, and you’ll have to as well.” Amadeus was clearly struggling to remain stable.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Pretend you are taking me somewhere else to torture me. I’ll thrash and protest, then when we’ve cleared the door, I’ll shift and kill the guards.”

“Do whatever you think will work,” he said. “We must go now.”

Amadeus opened the door and pushed me out into the hallway, grabbing me by the hair.

“Let me go!” I screamed, batting at his hands.

“Taking him to the baths,” Amadeus said to the guards. “I want to see how long he can hold his breath in scalding hot water.” He yanked my hair hard, and I legitimately screamed in pain.

“Ah, water torture! One of my favorite—”

Before the guard could say anything more, I shifted into my wolf and lunging at him, biting into his neck. Amadeus jumped out of the way before the other guard launched onto my back, also shifting into his wolf.

I didn’t have time to think. I bucked backwards, throwing my entire weight against the other wolf as I stood on my hind legs and smashed him against the wall, stunning him for a moment before I leaped onto my front legs and used my back to kick into his face. I heard a loud crack as his jaw broke from the force of impact. For good measure, I kicked him again in the head. I was about to attack him again when his eyes glazed over, and I realized that part of his brain could be seen through the widening crevice I’d created.

“Let’s go,” I said to Amadeus after shifting back, not caring if my clothes were tattered and my mouth was bloody. I needed to get the mage out of there. “Is there a hidden exit?” I asked him as his eyes spun backwards and his head started to tremble. For a moment, I thought I’d completely lost him, but he came back after a few minutes.

“I don’t know of any hidden exit; I’m the one who is usually kept in hiding. You’ll have to find it. You’ve done it once before.” He then looked

straight at me, lucid for a moment. “I don’t know what will happen when I lose my wits, so please let me know, how is Aria? How is Onyx Rah?”

“You would be very proud of her,” I said. “She’s making remarkable progress in such a short time. Let’s hurry, so she can show you herself.” I tugged on Amadeus’s arm and dragged him forward.

“Her mother would be proud,” he rambled, trembling again.

I dragged Amadeus through the halls, trying not to be seen. I scanned every crevice, every nook, every corner to find a door we might leave through. I remembered the last time I was down in the bowels of the castle, I’d found my way out. But there was no way I was going to be able to locate that exit again.

“You mentioned a bath,” I said. “Does it have a water source? Could we swim out of here?” I wondered if we could make our way to the river that ran along the road and eventually meet up with the stream that fed Angeline Falls.

“Just through a spigot.” Amadeus’s voice clenched with pain.

“Okay, okay. I have an idea, if we can get to the wives’ rooms, we can dress ourselves up. Surely, they’ll want to help Aria’s father.”

I knew I was probably being delusional. I had no idea if Olivia or Grace wanted to do anything for Aria or Amadeus. They had both refused to come with us when we’d escaped the first time. We may have been walking right into a trap, but knowing I could be persuasive and charming at times, I prayed that would be enough. The women were also guarded, but I remembered there was a bathing room attached to their quarters. Perhaps there was a way to sneak in through a servant’s entrance.

As we made our way through the halls, I was concerned to see no soldiers guarding the path. However, I remembered from my last time in the castle that there were several stretches of corridors that were unmanned. Since there were so many hidden tunnels and secret passageways in the structure, I was sure it was difficult to keep them guarded at all times.

As we walked down the corridor, Amadeus's magic and his mental health started to slip. Anger, likely building up due to his incarceration, was starting to take over his body.

“I shall not be caged!” he raged, blasting a hole into the wall with his magic.

We were definitely not being discreet. I had to find a way out, but my plan to have us dress up as Polonius’s wives until we were able to escape the



castle wasn't going to work. Despite the fact that it was an ill-laid plan, I still moved us toward the wives' quarters as Amadeus continued to blast doors and walls, even blowing a big chunk out of the ceiling, which nearly crashed down on our heads.

"Come on, Amadeus," I hissed. "Get it together. You want your freedom, don't you? Imagine being in control of your magic again."

Just as we rounded the corner, Olivia, one of the wives who hadn't come with us when we'd escaped the last time, stopped in her tracks. She had a guard with her, and Amadeus, remembering the act we were playing, grabbed me by the nape of my neck and pulled me to him.

"I'm going to drown him!" he roared.

"Lex?" Olivia asked gently with a smile. "Are you okay?"

"I think Amadeus has gone mad," I whispered, hoping she'd understand that my statement was actually a plea for help.

Olivia turned to her guard. "Can you please get a doctor for Amadeus?" she asked sweetly. "He's having another withdrawal episode, I believe. Polonius would be furious if anything happened to him."

"I'm to guard your person, my lady," he stated, and didn't move.

"I know, but Amadeus is in no condition to go himself, and Lex is a prince," Olivia reminded him. "He certainly won't hurt me, but if you don't hurry and get a doctor, I'm sure Amadeus will." At that last part, she raised her voice, sounding frustrated and angered.

"Yes, my lady," the soldier conceded after a moment. "Return to your room at once. I'll find the healer." With that, he marched off, and Olivia smiled at me again.

"That was easy," she said. "Now, we don't have much time. This way."

We followed Olivia to the wives' quarters, and for a moment, I wasn't sure how we were going to get past the guards at the door. But apparently, we'd get through them the same way we'd gotten rid of the other guard. Olivia was good at manipulating, I had to give her credit for that.

"Amadeus is sick," she told the guards. "I need one of you to get a medic and the other to get him a glass of water. Fresh water from the well, not from some stale, musty barrel."

She ordered them around with such authority, they scrambled from their posts. It didn't help that Amadeus had moved on to setting the hem of his robes on fire.

"I've seen him do this before," the guard said before he ran off with his

fellow soldiers. “We’ll get someone, don’t worry. Go in your room and lock yourself in,” he said to Olivia before they took off.

“Come on,” Olivia said to me and Amadeus, opening the door and ushering us in.

“That was almost too easy,” I said, relieved. “Thank you.”

I dragged Amadeus to the open doors that led to the terrace. It was only one story down, so we’d have to jump. As I pulled him toward the balcony, he was about to set the drapes on fire, but I held his hand down.

“Please calm down,” I begged him. “Do it for Aria. Control yourself!”

I pulled at him as hard as I could, but Amadeus wouldn’t budge. We were only steps away from jumping to our freedom when I heard Olivia softly say, “I’m sorry.”

I whipped my head around to see Polonius standing in the doorway to the wives’ rooms. She’d tricked us. We were never going to leave that castle.

“Still trying to get some air?” Polonius asked, his voice laced with malice. “Well, if you found your rooms musty and dank, I’m sure you’re going to hate the dungeon. Take them away.”

The two guards who’d been watching Olivia’s door along with two more soldiers approached, and within moments, Amadeus and I were in chains.

I tried to shift and attack Polonius, but one of the guards had a horse whip he cracked in the air, and it tangled around my throat. As my hands came up to unravel it, more of the soldiers approached me, clamping shackles on my wrists that made it impossible to free myself from the whip. I looked down to find that my ankles had also been chained.

I had a feeling I wasn’t going to get out of this one. Not this time.

## Chapter 17

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### *Aria*

“What is happening to him?” I asked Sire, feeling frantic after seeing Lex being attacked by Polonius.

“You knew sending him there would be a risk, Aria,” Sire reminded me. “He’s a fighter; he can handle himself. Polonius can’t just kill him and expect to live. It would be an act of war just as great as you not accepting Polonius’s marriage proposal. Remember, Lex is a soldier, and he’s been through worse.”

Though he was trying, Sire’s words weren’t calming me down.

“Think about the bond you have with him,” Sire added. “You can feel him and sense if he’s in danger.”

Sire was right. I could feel Lex’s wolf, and I had a clear sense of his well-being. He was stressed and angry, but he wasn’t in peril. He wasn’t going to die. There was no way Lex could have stayed in Polonius’s castle and not be challenged by the warlord. I had to trust that Lex was a good fighter and soldier. That he was capable of keeping himself out of harm’s way.

“Can you help me open the portal again so that I can see him?” I asked Sire, doubting my senses and the connection my wolf had to his. My anxiety had me wanting to see Lex again to make sure he was really alright.

“I’m sorry, Aria, I can’t. I’m magically depleted, and so are you. We need to sleep. We can address this in the morning. You know as well as I that Lex is going to survive this. Besides, isn’t Cheyenne with him? Cheyenne must know something is happening.” Sire suddenly looked very fatigued.

“I can’t trust that Cheyenne isn’t being tortured as well,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t have as great a connection with him, but I doubt Polonius is leaving him alone. We need to get word to Navarrah City that Lex is in

danger.” I suddenly realized that there was a way I could help Lex. “Go to bed, Sire, and I’ll have Bindi take our airship with Navarrah City tonight to get word to King Helix that Lex is in danger.” Just saying the words and knowing I was doing something felt good.

“Do whatever your heart dictates, but remember, people are migrating here in droves,” Sire said. “Tomorrow, you’ll have thousands of potential citizens at the gate. Your priority is to your kingdom. Don’t tax Bindi; she has work here. Find a soldier she trusts to do the job and have the airship brought back tonight. You’ll need to have it on hand should things become dangerous for you. Remember, you are a monarch now. Kingdom over everything.” He bowed his head. “Good night, Aria. I’ll see you in the morning. We’ll train more after you’ve addressed the legions that are almost on your doorstep.”

“Good night, Sire Vanoire. And thank you,” I said, dismissing the mage.

I left Sire’s training room in search of Bindi. It was well past midnight, and most of the castle should have been sleeping, but soldiers never slept. There would be some still awake, so I left the castle and walked into the city in search of Bindi’s encampment. I’d given her a room in the castle, but she’d opted to sleep out in the field with her soldiers.

I came upon the first grouping of tents and approached the soldier standing guard there.

“Your Majesty,” he intoned with a bow, and I realized I was still dressed in my training fatigues. “How may I help you?”

His eagerness to be of service was a great improvement on the complaining and jeering of the days before. Bindi and I had proven to the soldiers that we were tough and could handle ourselves. We weren’t playing house, and this wasn’t a vanity assignment.

“Can you direct me to Bindi’s tent, please?” I asked, feeling an odd sense of longing. There was a time when this was all I’d wanted—to live among the Royal Guard and be a part of their family. I knew my father and Lex had become family to me, but I still was on the outside. Before, I was a servant and a woman forbidden from training or fighting with the soldiers. Now, I was their queen, and I still wasn’t welcome among them.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Follow me this way.”

I walked behind the soldier as he marched me through the tents set up around the city. Soldiers were sitting around fires, eating bowls of food. Most seemed jovial. It took many a moment to recognize me in my attire, but there

were some smiles as I passed. Others just dipped their heads so as not to look at me. At any rate, they were eating and had fire, so Halo and her magic were providing them with adequate comfort.

When we reached the farthest campsite, the one nearest the border of Onyx Rah and Brahmin City, the soldier stopped and turned to me. “This is her tent, Your Majesty,” he said with a bow.

“Thank you.” I nodded to him, and just as I did, Bindi burst out of her tent.

“Your Majesty?” she asked, tying a coat around her waist. “I didn’t expect you at this hour.” She bowed her head.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” I said. “I wouldn’t if it wasn’t a matter of urgency.”

“What has happened?” Panic struck Bindi’s features, but they immediately hardened as she prepared herself for whatever she’d have to face.

“I’m afraid that Lex is in trouble in Brahman’s Peak,” I said. “I’ve seen a vision—a reliable one—and my wolf senses it, too. I need you to send a few guards in the airship to get word to King Helix that Lex is in trouble.” I stood there in the cold night air in my training clothes, but I was really shivering from nerves and fear.

“Of course,” Bindi said. “But should I not send the airship straight to Brahman’s Peak? We can send word to King Helix tomorrow by motorcar.”

She had a good point, but I wasn’t at liberty to send troops into Brahman’s Peak without definitive proof of Lex being in danger. King Helix could, however. Lex was his son, so he could justify the mission as a diplomatic one. If an airship came from Onyx Rah, there would be suspicions raised.

Whatever Lex was enduring, he’d have to face it through the night.

“Then I’ll go,” Bindi offered after I explained the predicament to her.

“I need you here,” I countered. “We have citizens arriving hourly, and many more are rumored to be on the roads as we speak. I need you here. I’m supposed to rule as queen, but to be honest, I’ve only ever lived in royal houses, and I don’t know how to run one myself. I kindly ask that you stay to support me.”

“Of course, yes. We are a military state, after all. Our men and women at arms should be seen and known. Any soldier will consider it an honor to embark on this mission.” Bindi straightened up. “And I’ll gladly support you,

until my death.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate it. I’m not sure if Onyx Rah will be a military state, but we will have a strong military presence, at least for now while we are vulnerable. We only need our soldiers to relay a message. King Helix will know how to support his son. I wish this was within my jurisdiction, but if the troops come from me, Polonius will know. I am politically bound to refrain from any act that would be considered antagonistic, or Polonius will start a war and may kill Lex.” I suddenly felt a desperate anxiety.

“Of course, yes, I’ll send them right away,” Bindi said, frowning. “You look tired, Your Majesty. I think you should rest.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. “Thank you, Bindi, I’ll leave you to your task.”

“With honor, Your Majesty.” She bowed again, and I turned away from her.

As I walked back to the palace, I saw again how much work actually needed to be done. Everything was still destroyed, and the place looked like a relic. A distant, shattered remnant of a glorious past.

I returned to my room, and though I was exhausted, my mind was spinning with worries about Lex. I knew I had to focus on getting rest. Being sleep-deprived and full of anxiety was no way to rule a kingdom. I had to believe that I’d done the very best I could, given the circumstances, to get Lex the help he needed.

I took off my clothes. Too tired for a bath, I simply put on my nightwear and slipped into bed alone, cold and confused. I fell into a fitful sleep filled with nightmares and horrific visions of Lex chained in a damp dungeon, Amadeus raging by his side.

I rose early the next morning, having barely slept. As soon as the sun peeked up over the horizon, I quickly dressed and put on my shoes. I made my way to the city gates, and there before me were thousands of people waiting in lines. Some were eating, some were talking, and most of them looked exhausted from traveling through the night.

“Your Majesty,” a soldier guarding the gate greeted, seeming very surprised to see me. “What are you doing out here?” he asked, suddenly looking panicked.

“I’ve come to see if it was true, but here they are.” I smiled, showing my great joy at the sheer number of people who had traveled from lands all over

Tobran to live in Onyx Rah.

“I think it best if you go back to the castle, Your Majesty,” the soldier advised. “We will open the gates later this afternoon when we have our recorders here. We need to catalog the immigrants and give them their assignments, and for that, Her Majesty Halo should be in attendance.” He still looked worried as he spoke. “You should have guards attending your person, Your Grace,” he added almost scoldingly.

“I understand. Carry on,” I said, feeling awkward for having overstepped some security protocol.

I thought back to Navarrah City and the Redveign estate, then realized that Queen Delia was only ever in the privacy of her home. She didn’t venture into the city, and when she did, it was always with an entourage of Royal Guardsmen to accompany her. I used to think she was as tethered to rules as I was. Strangely, I was more free when no one knew anything about me.

The castle was coming to life. People milled about, cleaning and sweeping. There was a repairman already fixing the cracks in the walls. Gabrielle was awake, directing people to their tasks as they emerged from their living quarters. I knew Gabrielle and Halo had approved thirty or so people to live and work in the castle the day before when I was training with Sire. These people would be the castle cooks, maids, grooms, the butler, the head housekeeper and her staff, as well as carpenters and designers to fix what our magic couldn’t.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” Gabrielle greeted me, smiling and looking truly content.

“Good morning. Everyone is up and about so early,” I commented.

“We are eager to get things in order.”

“I can see that. And why are you all so eager for chores?” I had to know because I never was this happy working in the Redveign and Bevata estates.

“They have their families here, and they are being paid,” Gabrielle explained. “And I told them they aren’t servants but royal domestics, entrusted with the care of the castle and Her Majesties.”

There was Gabrielle’s beautiful smile again. She really was a lovely young woman, plump and pretty. So full of joy and a lust for life.

“Well, this all looks good. I’m trying to find Halo. Have you seen her?” Given that since it was still such an early hour, Halo may have still been sleeping.

“She’s in the kitchen, having breakfast. I’ll have someone bring you yours as well,” Gabrielle offered.

“You mean real food? Not something Halo conjured?” I was always grateful to eat, but Halo’s magic could be a little off with food, sometimes conjuring up strange spices that didn’t taste like they belonged together. For that reason, I usually kept to the soup and bread.

“Alice, the mason’s wife, brought food and seeds for planting crops,” Gabrielle said. “She had several loaves of bread, an entire flat of eggs, and smoked meat. We truly had a feast this morning. She said the wheatberries were salvaged when her grandparents fled the attack on Onyx Rah. They planted them, and the bread and kernels she’s brought are from that crop. Amazing, isn’t it? A piece of Onyx Rah has been returned.”

“It is amazing, Gabrielle,” I agreed with a smile. “I’m looking forward to breakfast.”

With that, I made my way to the dining room.



## Chapter 18

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### *Aria*

I walked into the dining room to find Halo sitting with a guard standing behind her, eating by herself. However, she didn't seem lonely as she was surrounded by papers, maps, and blueprints. I walked over to the table, bare but for a few chairs. The hearth had a fire that I assumed she had set with her magic.

“Good morning,” I said as I took the seat across from her. “Did you see there are actually people in the castle this morning?” I gave a laugh, still awed by what I’d seen.

“There had better be,” Halo said. “We spent most of yesterday weeding through the hundreds of Midnight Moon Pack members who came from Navarrah City and the Obsidian Valley. I like who we decided upon; the others are at City Hall on cots I conjured.” She gave a pained look. “The more people who come, the less I’ll be able to use my magic to feed and shelter them. Already, I’m aching from keeping the soldiers happy, and I know we need the citizens. I’m so happy to have them here, but I don’t think I can sustain them with magic alone. Do you think we can reach out to Angeline Falls or the Obsidian Valley for food?”

Halo’s sparkling blue eyes were glossy and dull, and her lively brown curls tangled and frizzy. She must have been worrying about this all night. We had both been stressed, and it showed in the dark shadows under our eyes.

I sat down at the table across from her, double-checking that we were the only ones in the voluminous dining room. “Do you ever wonder if we might be in over our heads?” I asked. It was a legitimate question.

“I know neither of us knows anything about running a kingdom,” she

sighed as a tall man I'd never seen before entered the room, carrying a plate with a large slab of bread, a pat of butter, two fried eggs, and a thick cut of smoked meat.

"Thank you," I said, my eyes widening with anticipation of the amazing meal made of non-magicked food.

"We can do this," Halo said confidently. "I know my mother and father often doubted their abilities as well. My mother, the former Queen of Onyx Rah, married my father, the Royal Mage, when her husband the king was betrayed and killed by Zonas. Onyx Rah was one of the most successful kingdoms in all of Voltaire, and yet my mother often spoke of needing to lead with her gut. She'd say, 'Instinct is the best advisor.' So, that's been my mantra." She gave a small smile. "Xavier and Lara just thought I was a scholar in love with books, but honestly, I was a kid who wanted to better understand my parents. Why would they have ever left us for a lost kingdom? Now I know. It's because of all those people out there." She turned her head to the window—the window that still had no glass in it yet—and watched the citizens filing into the kingdom one by one.

"Do you think our guts are gonna be enough?" I asked.

"I think you and I are very similar people. We always strive to do what is best. I couldn't do this without you, and you'd starve if you did it without me." She giggled.

"Starve, freeze, get lost, be alone, flounder, fail..." I added, laughing with her. "Without you."

"No, Aria, you'd never fail. This I know, and that's why I'm here. Why I said yes to coming here and being your beta. I trust you, and soon, all those people out there will trust you as well."

"I was a servant, and all I wanted was to fight people and prove my worth," I admitted to her. "Here I am, a queen. And the only person who wonders if I'm worthy is me."

"Well, you better stop that. You burned to death in a lava pit and resurrected, and now you're bringing a kingdom back to life. You're still fighting; it's just a different kind of battle."

Halo had given me a better perspective on things, which I greatly appreciated. "Thank you," I said as I ate my breakfast. "After breakfast, I'll reach out to the other kingdoms for surplus food."

I finished my breakfast and went downstairs to find a guard to take me to the courtyard, where the rest of the royals were standing with Royal Guards

as people filed into the courtyard and waited to be seen by Halo. As soon as I walked out with the guard posted at the front doors, Bindi came up to me.

“Three soldiers went to Navarrah City last night and returned this morning,” she said. “They report that King Helix is worried about Lex, but is going to be strategic when sending soldiers for the same reason you are. He’ll send guards to the gates, who will only attack if they find out that Lex is being harmed.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling somewhat relieved. “I’ll feel much better knowing they are out there. People are coming faster and in greater numbers than I’d anticipated. We are going to need food aid until we can establish crops. I’m going to draft a letter asking the neighboring kingdoms for grain and corn, perhaps some livestock?” I was asking for her advice without actually asking.

“I am at your service, Your Majesty,” Bindi said as she bowed her head. “I can have troops to send your letters and transport the donated food. And we can send out hunters to find fowl and game.”

“Thank you. I understand your passion and your fear, but we must do what’s right for the people,” I told her, then continued on to meet the crowd.

We had not set up a dais or any kind of elevated space for me to get the crowd’s attention. So, I decided to climb up some of the debris that was still piled on the side of the castle. Two Royal Guards climbed up with me. As soon as I was at a higher elevation than the people below, they began to take notice.

“Good morning, everyone,” I started. “I am Queen Aria Blackbane. My ancestor was Duke Ellis Norvali. Some of you may remember him as the beta to King Arnaut Prit and his wife Zerah Prit. Myself and Halo Goldlace, who is a descendant of the queen and the kingdom’s mage, Harlance Valian, have brought Onyx Rah back to you.”

At the mention of this, there was yelling and cheering. There was so much commotion, I had to wait a while until the guards were able to help settle everyone down, asking people to back away from the makeshift dais and stay in their lines.

“This brings my heart joy!” I shouted over the din. “That you are here and are willing to help us rebuild Onyx Rah to its former greatness.”

There was more cheering, and the soldiers struggled to keep order.

I saw the frustrated look on Bindi’s face and wondered where Sire was. Halo had people lined up in front of her, and Bindi was doing her best to help

her troops keep the peace, but Sire would have been a welcome presence because he could have used his magic to subdue the crowd a little.

“I will ask, however, that you please stay in orderly lines.” I was now straining my voice to speak over the din. “We have many different occupations available as well as housing and property for everyone. If your ancestors had land here, we will find it and place you upon it, but this task will take days and perhaps weeks to accomplish, so please be patient. We will have tents, cots, and enough food for everyone soon. Until then we must ration. We’re going to get started now and will be processing you all in small groups. We are all working hard to create our future!”

I stepped down from the pile of rubble, feeling light-headed. There were so many people, and they all needed us, needed me. I better understood now why monarchs put their people before anything else—they were responsible for so many lives.

I had to stay focused. When I reached the table where Halo was seated in the courtyard, I waited until she’d finished speaking to a young family with two small children. The father was a carpenter, and the mother said she could provide childcare.

Things seemed to be moving along nicely. Everyone had their roles to play, and slowly but surely, we were repopulating the kingdom. As I turned from Halo and the line in front of her table, I saw Sire Vanoire walk down the stairs inside the castle, rubbing his eyes as if he had just awoken from a long and peaceful sleep. The idea that Sire had done very little to support our efforts angered me, so I walked briskly into the castle to meet him.

“Where have you been?” I demanded, wondering why he was always absent at crucial moments.

“I was letting you—”.

“Letting me be a queen,” I finished. “Whatever. Now we need your help. Can you interview people to see if they have magic training? If they don’t, we also need scholars and medics. Do you feel comfortable sorting them out?” I hoped Sire would do anything other than train me and conjure up things.

“I’m comfortable with that task, yes,” he said as Gabrielle appeared.

“What would you like me to do?” she asked me, eager to help.

“I would like to elevate your station,” I answered with a smile. “You’ve done very well finding people to manage the castle, and I think Sarah is a great choice. She’s run a regal home before, and I believe she has the ability

to manage the staff, at least the ones we have here right now. I might bring my grandmother over to help her one day. All that being said, I'm changing your role and would like you to be the Manager of Grievances. You'll be with me, and we'll hold a meeting once a week to hear the issues the citizens are facing. Then, you'll help us find solutions to the problems, or you'll explain to the citizens why we aren't able to accommodate their requests."

Gabrielle's face lit up with joy. "I can absolutely do that," she said with enthusiasm.

"Great," I said, pleased. "Today, you will be asking what they need most so we can see what we need to prioritize." Again, the feeling of overwhelm came over me, but I breathed through the tension. "You can sit with Halo and work with her today."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Gabrielle said, then she walked out the front door to meet with Halo at her table.

"It is very wise that you allow me to find advisors," Sire complimented me, and for a moment, I felt like we were equals. "However..." He pulled me aside and lowered his voice. "I don't think that Gabrielle is qualified to hear grievances, and I doubt she has the insight to prioritize the citizen's needs."

"None of us have the qualifications to do any of this, but we have the desire and drive. Do you see anyone else here who is more experienced?"

"Outside of myself, no. But anything said to her will eventually be told to Polonius," Sire cautioned.

"Luckily, the citizens aren't going to be plotting Polonius's death. We should be safe. He knows we have needs."

"And he'll soon know where your weaknesses lie. All I ask is that you consider the danger in having someone so close to Polonius too deeply ingrained in your court."

While Sire's concerns were valid, I wasn't ready to acquiesce to them at that point. "Thank you for your advice," was my only response.

"For your sake, I hope you heed it." He took a breath. "Let's get started. We have a long day ahead of us, and I want to make sure that we have an advisory council in place as soon as possible."

The day progressed without too much chaos. Many people with impressive skills and excellent experience were Midnight Moon Pack descendants. We were able to find so much of what we needed, and people were ready to get right to work. For the first time in days, it felt like the kingdom was actually coming together.

We worked for the entire day and well into the night. While I was very busy and preoccupied, thoughts of Lex and his ordeal haunted me. Since Sire hadn't used his magic yet today, I planned on having him show me the portal to Lex again when we were done for the day.

"Your Majesty," a soldier approached me as I spoke to a man who was going to help us with farm irrigation.

"Yes?" I looked up.

"There is a Crypt Claw guard among those from Brahman's Peak waiting outside of the gates. He needs to speak to you regarding Prince Lex Redveign of Navarrah City."

"I'm coming," I said, immediately worried that something had happened to Lex.

"You can't just go when you're requested," Sire reprimanded.

"It's about Lex," I said, not thinking about being a queen at that moment, but worried for my lover.

"It doesn't matter," he said impatiently, looking at the few people who were left in the courtyard. "No one orders a queen. Tell the soldier he can give the message to Bindi if he wants an audience with you."

"I understand your reasoning, Sire, but this is about Lex. It has to be urgent." I turned back to the soldier. "Take me to the city gates," I told him, and followed him out of the room.

While Sire didn't try to say more, I knew he was disappointed in me for allowing Lex to become my weakness. I had been acting as a queen, and was putting the needs of the people above my own. But this matter involved Lex, and where he was concerned, I was simply Aria, his lover and friend. I had a duty to protect him in the best way I could, and I felt responsible for sending him to Brahman's Peak.

When I arrived at the gates, Sergeant Flint and many of the people I recognized from the ruins of Brahman's Peak were standing outside the gates, waiting to enter and be counted among our newest citizens. I recognized them as the people who had housed Sire, Lex, and I when we were on the run.

I addressed the sergeant first. "I promise there will be a place for you here in our kingdom. I just have to sort through the Midnight Pack members first. But I want you here."

"We understand completely," Sergeant Flint whispered as a soldier pushed his way in front of him.

"I have a message for you from Lord Polonius," the Crypt Claw warrior

said to me without using honorifics or any ceremonial etiquette.

“What is your message?” I asked, trying to seem detached.

“The great Lord Polonius would like you to know that he is considering the fate of Prince Lex Redveign of Navarrah City. Polonius would like to execute the prince for his crimes against Brahman’s Peak. If you do not agree to join him in two days’ time to attend peace accords in the Obsidian Valley, Angeline Falls, and Navarrah City, the warlord will have the prince killed.”

My heart constricted in excruciating pain.

“I wish to further inform you that Lord Polonius would like his first shipment of crimson pitaya to be delivered within two weeks.”

It was guaranteed that whatever the warlord needed the pitaya for would ruin us all.

“I’m not sure our crops will yield a harvest in that time frame,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Tell Polonius I will accompany him to the peace accords, but he must give us more time to plant and harvest the fruit.” I hated acquiescing to any of Polonius's demands, but I had no choice. Lex's life was at stake, and I would not risk it for anything.

“I will be back to collect you in two days,” the soldier said haughtily. “You can discuss the other matter with Polonius himself.” With that, he marched off.

“Wait! I’m in the middle of bringing people into my kingdom. Please tell him I need at least a week before we meet!” I shouted after the guard.

He turned back to me. “I’ll tell him, but make no guarantees.” Then he walked out of earshot.

Likely, Polonius was in desperate need of crimson pitaya, which meant he had none or very little. This was our moment to attack—he was weak and without the means to control Amadeus.

I considered my next move. While I was away with Polonius, Navarrian troops hiding near Brahman’s Peak could descend upon it. Since Lex was being detained there and would possibly be executed, they now had ample reason to attack.

## Chapter 19

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### *Lex*

“I have not committed any crimes against Brahman’s Peak. Polonius is the one who is holding me without cause,” I fumed as I paced back and forth in my cell.

Polonius’s dungeons were dank and cold. We had already been there a few days with no word from anyone, but for a guard who gave us nothing but bread and a ladle of water. Water dripped down the walls from an unknown source, but it wasn’t worth risking illness to drink it.

Amadeus sat in the cell next to mine, delirious and shackled to the wall because he kept magically lighting things on fire. He was still making puffs of smoke, but they weren’t as dangerous as the blazes he’d set before.

I hoped Aria was okay and wondered if she’d gotten word of my incarceration. I hoped she hadn’t, because all she would do was worry.

Just as Amadeus was screaming and railing against his restraints again, Polonius walked in.

“I told you not to leave your room,” Polonius chided me as he approached my cell.

“Since when does a territory lock dignitaries in their rooms?” I asked, wishing I had something to murder Polonius with.

He laughed. “Let’s be honest, shall we? You know as well as I that you’re not a dignitary in Brahman’s Peak, and so I need not treat you as such. True diplomats don’t steal from their hosts.” His voice turned hard.

“You don’t have proof that I stole anything. Because I didn’t,” I argued, still pacing to temper my rage.

“We are still looking for the man you were with. I’m sure he has the stolen item that you and I both know is missing. And so, because you’ve



taken something that is vital to the health and well-being of Brahman's Peak, your punishment will be execution."

I nearly choked. "You're going to kill me for leaving my room?" I sputtered. "My father will wage war against you for such an injustice."

"Oh, I'm counting on it. It will be much easier to become the majority ruler of Tobran with Navarrah City defeated. No one else has such a strong military. I will definitely be confiscating King Helix's armed forces. Either they'll fight on my side—with a pain reception device implanted in their skin for added incentive—or they'll die." His face was stoic as he spoke of the heinous acts he planned to commit against my father's army.

"You will never win," I said acidly. "If you kill me, my father will have a reason to enlist the support of Solbrook and other territories in Voltaire and all the kingdoms in Tobran to fight. You'll find your soldiers outnumbered and yourself executed for threats made against a royal son. Have you thought about that?"

I truly hated him, though I had to admit he'd devised a good strategy. If he wanted to engage in an all-out war, executing me was the way to do it.

"Which is why I'm offering you a deal. I will release you right now, and you can go back to your precious queen," he said without mockery or menace.

"There's no way you'd ever do that," I retorted, knowing this was some kind of trap.

"You're right. I'd never give up the upper hand without strings attached."

"Also, I have no control over what Aria gives you and when." I didn't want her ever giving him anything, so why make it easier for him?

"You underestimate your influence." Polonius looked at me with a knowing smirk. "You certainly do have power over Aria and the choices she makes. I will free you to return to her, but you'll be forever banned from Brahman's Peak. Amadeus, of course, will stay here in the cells where he's safe until he can get another dose." Polonius had never said what he was dosing Amadeus with, but I already knew.

"So, what do you say? Wanna see your girl again?" he asked, smirking at me again.

"Of course I want to see her," I spat, glaring at him as I discreetly put my hand in my pocket and picked up the magical grape I'd been carrying.

As Polonius turned to the guard, his back to me as he ordered them to unlock my cell, I dropped the grape to the floor and kicked it into Amadeus's

cell. He looked at me with wild yet questioning eyes. He was still in there; some part of him was lucid enough to understand what I was doing.

I mouthed to him, *Magic. From Aria. Will stop poison.*

A guard came back to unlock my cell door. While Polonius was focused on me, Amadeus bent down and picked up the grape. I'd done all I'd could. If I'd ever gotten a chance to tell him how to use the magic, I would have.

Amadeus did something strange, though. He smelled the grape, then smiled and put it into his pocket. All I could hope was that he knew what it did and how it could help him.

A guard opened my door, and I walked with Polonius out of the dungeon. "I'm not entirely evil," he said as we walked down the dark, cramped hallway.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." I knew I shouldn't provoke him, but I was doing all in my power not to shift and rip him apart with my teeth and claws.

"I'm sure you wouldn't, but I plan on donating resources to Onyx Rah," he said with pride as if I didn't know exactly what he was doing. "And I just received word that Aria and I will begin our peace accords in a few days' time. Being with her and presenting a united front for peace between our nations will help settle the unrest brewing."

He was planning on traveling with Aria, just the two of them. And of course he was going to donate to Onyx Rah. The faster he could get the people of Onyx Rah to plant and harvest the crimson pitaya, the sooner he could take over the world and follow through with his plans to dominate all of Tobran.

"How very kind and diplomatic of you," I said without emotion.

"So you tell Aria that I'll be sending support to her very soon." An ugly smile then crossed his face. "And that I look forward to spending quality time with my betrothed." He offered this to me with a snide glare as if he thought he'd somehow already won the war between us for her.

"Will you be taking food out of the mouths of your own people to woo her?" I asked wryly, sure the question would irk him.

"My people have enough," he said simply. "Aria's do not. As much as I'd love to stand here and chat with you, I have other matters to address. Hurry back to Aria. I'm sure the guards who have been hiding outside of my gates will be happy to escort you to her."

With that, Polonius left me without another word. I was taken out of Brahman's Peak, and the gates were closed and locked behind me.

One of the soldiers who'd escorted me looked at me. "You are never to return." And then, he turned and left me alone.

I couldn't believe Polonius had let me go. Outside of the gates and free to return to Aria, I hoped Cheyenne had been able to get to Navarrah City with the plans for the airship. If he had, my mission here would have been a success.

I walked a distance away from the gates to Brahman City to be met with two officers from the Navarrian Royal Guards.

"Your Majesty, we were given word of your impending release just minutes ago," one of them said. "It's good to have you back. I'll let your brother know we have you."

I was brought to the encampment a mile away from Brahman's Peak. There, I was given a canteen of water, bread, cheese, and dried meats, all of which tasted delicious after having eaten very little in the dungeons of Polonius's castle. As I sat there eating, Cheyenne approached me.

"Brother!" he exclaimed in a whisper.

"Oh, I am glad to see you," I said, putting out my arms to embrace him. "Polonius knows you're all out here."

"We figured he did, and I'm not unhappy about it—he now understands that we have ways of knowing things and will fight if we have to," Cheyenne boasted, putting his arm around my shoulder.

We hiked with the rest of the soldiers after they had disassembled their makeshift camps fashioned from fallen trees, branches, and logs. Emerging out of the bushes, we journeyed to make our way back to Onyx Rah.

"Were you able to get the plans to Father?" I asked. Even if Cheyenne hadn't been able to get to Navarrah City, he hadn't been captured, so he may have had them with him.

"Yes, I did. I walked all night from Brahman's Peak to Angeline Falls, where I was given rest for half a day before being flown to Navarrah City on an airship, thanks to Queen Nadine's assistance. I think she's ready to jump in whenever we need her. They don't have many weapons but they do have hiding places and transportation. She hates Polonius." His laugh was throaty and robust. "I mean, she really hates him."

"Don't we all?" I joined him in laughter. It felt good to let go and release all the tension I'd been holding in, trying not to hurt Polonius.

"Jarvis got to work right away on the blueprints, and I joined the motorcade back here to rescue you." He clapped me on the back and laughed

again. “Easiest rescue I’ve ever done. You just walked out the gate.”

“About that. Polonius has something up his sleeve.” I walked beside Cheyenne as we put distance between us and Brahman’s Peak. Despite our conversation, seeing Onyx Rah’s towering volcanoes looming ahead gave me peace.

“When doesn’t he?”

“Never, of course, but he let me go. He wants me to pressure Aria into producing crimson pitaya, and they’re going to attend the peace accords together. He’s up to something, so the sooner we have those airships, the better. And if we can get Onyx Rah to produce crimson pitaya, we need the bulk of it to go to Navarrah City.”

We had to find a way to fight Polonius. Just capitulating to his demands was never going to get us out from under his grip.

“If only Navarrah City and Onyx Rah were closer to one another,” Cheyenne mused as we marched to the trucks hidden under foliage in the distance. “I know we’re working on the ships, but we might need more troops in Onyx Rah. If Polonius is coming after the crimson pitaya, and he’s close enough to send troops on foot, we need to have a real stronghold there.”

“All I know is that we have to figure out how to take Polonius down before he gets his hands on any more crimson pitaya,” I said, feeling renewed determination.

“I’m with you, brother. Let’s end this monster,” Cheyenne said eagerly. “He’s worse than anything Amadeus has ever conjured.”

“Yes, and the problem is he has Amadeus trapped. You should have seen Amadeus—he was raving mad, setting things on fire, randomly trying to destroy and kill people. Imagine him used as a weapon. We have to get him out of there.” But I knew it was going to be a hundred times harder, now that I was banned from Brahman’s Peak.

At least I’d been able to get Aria’s spelled grape to Amadeus. I only hoped he knew what it was and how to use it.

## Chapter 20

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### *Aria*

We were in the newly renovated receiving room. The room had floor-to-ceiling glass windows that let in the daylight. It was painted in a warm beige color that was calm and soothing. There were wooden chairs with upholstered padding set against the walls, in four rows of ten. There was also a long wooden table with heavy legs carved into a scrolling pattern. The room was both functional and mildly ornate.

I liked the designer we'd found. He had only just started, but his team worked through the night to finish the receiving room so that we could accommodate citizens in a more organized and official fashion.

I was in there with Halo, Sire, and Gabrielle. Gabrielle had mentioned that the number-one concern she'd heard from people centered on there being enough food and arms to feed and protect them. I assured her that Bindi had a well-trained army, and we'd just heard from Angeline Falls. Queen Nadine was sending over truckloads of grain, dried meats, and preserved vegetables. She had asked nothing but our kingdom's success and protection in return.

"I'm glad Queen Nadine has offered to help," Halo said, rolling the kinks out of her neck. "Working all day and conjuring magical food for a good part of the night is taxing." Her eyes looked glossy with fatigue.

"I am so grateful for her help," I said. "When this is over, I'll definitely make sure that we're able to create a stronghold against any threats as she requested." I made sure to say this in front of Gabrielle to ensure that she didn't tell Polonius that Queen Nadine was fortifying Angeline Falls against his potential attack.

"Did she mention when the food was coming?" Gabrielle asked, ready to continue assisting Halo as she hovered near where Halo sat at her chair.

“The trucks should be here in a couple of days,” Halo said. She gathered a ledger and a clean white piece of paper, preparing for the day’s immigrants.

“I’ll make sure to thank Queen Nadine when I see her next week,” I said, quietly dreading my trip with Polonius. He was coming in the next few days to discuss our trip, but I had already agreed to join him during his peace accords as there was no harm in appeasing this one request. I still had no intention of marrying him, but I had to draw out the ruse for as long as necessary.

As I readied myself to leave the receiving room, Lex, looking healthy and confident, strode in through the door. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest as I stood to greet him.

“Lex,” I said, breathless and overjoyed to see him.

He put his arms around my waist and kissed my lips. “Oh, how I’ve missed this,” he whispered hotly in my ear.

“As have I.” I kissed him back, but not so much as to draw the attention of those whom the guards had started to let into the room. “Let’s go somewhere private,” I suggested as I tugged Lex toward the hallway.

We said nothing as we crossed the hallway into the new training room, which was to be my office. I closed the door once we were in the bare room, which gave off a stark chill. The fires had not been lit yet.

“Why will you be seeing Queen Nadine so soon after the summit?” Lex asked with a dark curiosity as he continued to hold my hand.

He knew I was keeping something from him, though Polonius did say I’d be accompanying him on his peace meetings with the other territories.

“Polonius has asked me to join him on a peace mission. He threatened your life to do it, so I took heed,” I said, trying to tamp down the danger we were facing.

“No,” Lex said as he brought me into his arms. “I can’t watch you go through that. I understand this wasn’t your doing, but I will not watch another man vie for the woman who holds the entirety of my heart unless you want to see that heart shattered. Polonius released me. The threat is over. Rescind your acceptance—”

He was about to say something I couldn’t hear. Wouldn’t hear.

“We need information about what Polonius is planning,” I interrupted. “I’d die for you, Lex, but taunting Polonius, with all of Tobran forced to support his claim to me, is unwise. I will not marry him, but I will play this sick game to find an advantage over him. We have to do better. You need to

trust me more.” I was disappointed, but I understood his fear.

“In front of them, you are their queen, and you are being diplomatic,” Lex reasoned. “However, Polonius wants a private audience with you by his side as his intended. My wolf is your wolf’s mate. Already, I can feel her desire to submit to me. She wants me to guide her, own her, and take her to the heights of passion.” He lifted my face to look at him. “Polonius’s interest in you has increased, and he’s not just playing politics. I firmly believe he wants all of you, and this is his chance to get it.” Lex looked alternately wounded, fearful, and jealous as he shared his concerns.

“Do you actually think I will lay with Polonius?” I asked, feeling frustrated and conflicted. Though what Lex was saying was true, I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. I had to make Polonius believe I would agree for the sake of those I loved.

I could feel the hardness of Lex’s cock against my belly as he drew me into him. I needed to have him inside me more than air at that moment. He was right—my wolf was ready to submit to his. I needed him to be my mate and leader. He ruled my heart and my mind, and I’d have it no other way.

“In the eyes of the kingdom, I’m their queen, their leader,” I murmured. “But here, when it’s us, you’re my alpha, my mate, my ruler. Polonius will never touch that, no matter where in the world he takes me. I am always with you, Lex.” I tilted my head up to his and delivered a soft kiss to his lips.

“Good,” Lex said as he lifted the skirt of my dress to my hips.

I’d been wearing dresses since they were given to me at Angeline Falls. While I felt more comfortable in battle fatigues or a tunic and trousers, Halo and Sire believed that I would present a more regal image if I wore elegant dresses befitting a queen. For this reason, Lex was able to quickly lift my skirt, exposing my thin underwear and bare skin to the chilly air.

“What are you doing?” I asked as my fingers tightened their grip on the hand that held my waist.

“I’m reminding you what I feel like,” he said with a hot passion as he slipped my undergarments down. They fell to my knees as he turned me around. “Bend over,” he ordered, lightly pressing me forward.

“No, Lex, not here. Someone could come in,” I protested, but at the same time, I felt deeply aroused at the thought of being taken in the training room with Halo and Gabrielle and probably Sire holding court across the hall.

My wolf panted with desire, haunches up, ready for her mate to seal himself within her.

“I hope someone does,” Lex said, and his fingers dipped into my already slick and needy center. He then thrust them into me, spreading my wetness to the far reaches of my sex.

He let go of my waist, and I used my hands to brace myself against the wall. The rustle of fabric told me he was pulling his cock out of his pants, and without warning, he thrust it up inside me so hard, I jolted forward, moaning with the brutal intrusion that had set my entire body on fire.

“Lex!” I cried out, then chewed on my lip to quiet myself, feeling him stretch my insides to accommodate his size.

His body covered mine gently until we were breathing each other’s air. He started to pump in and out of me.

“I’m yours,” he growled. “You own every inch of me, body and soul. And you are my mate, my life, my everything. Feel me. Emblazon me into your body, the only person who will ever be there.” He slowly pulled himself out, then painfully thrust back in, driving me insane with need.

His cock grazed over my raw skin, and all I could think about and feel was him.

“Yes,” I breathed. “I’m yours.”

“And I’m yours.” He pulled out and pushed himself in again. “This,” he thrust in harder. “This is yours.” He thrust into me again. “This.” He pulled out and pushed in again. “Will give us our future. This.” He pushed in harder and deeper as he got closer to the edge. “This is where our children will come, and our passion, and our solace. This.” He pulled out again, then held my hips and plowed into me over and over again, thrusting, pumping, punishing with his cock. “Remember this.”

I could hardly hold onto my mind at all, wanting to reach my orgasm. I wanted Lex to take me rougher, make me feel even more. Own me, dominate me, keep me forever.

“Yes!” I cried out, not even caring who heard me.

“This.” He pulled out and flipped me around so that he was looking at me face to face. “This is your betrothed.” He gently pushed into me with sudden tenderness, and my whole body shivered. “And this.” He placed his finger on my clit and softly swirled it. “Is my queen.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

His mouth was upon mine, and I tasted his fire, his passion, and his love. He entered me again and again while his fingers danced on my clit, tickling my flesh. My body coiled in knots, and I came hard. So hard, the heavens and



earth shifted. I saw stars across my vision, yet I didn't want it to end.

I gripped his shoulders and held him in me, daring him not to finish just yet. He brought me into an embrace, slowly moving his cock in and out of my ravaged body.

"The next time you're in Polonius's presence, remember this!" Then he growled as he came inside me.

For the first time, he let his passion land within my body. I didn't worry; there were herbs I could take to prevent pregnancy. We couldn't add a child to the complications we were sorting out, but I loved feeling him inside me, leaving some part of himself there as he slowly pulled out of the place I never wanted him to leave.

Without words, he picked up my undergarments and kissed my lips.

"We'll figure it out," I told him after catching my breath and coming back to reality. "Somehow, there will be a way for us to rule two kingdoms and kill a tyrant." I laughed, feeling so warm and full of Lex.

"Together, we can do anything." He touched my side and brought me into his embrace. "Go back to court and feel me with you."

"I'll need to take herbs."

"Yes, you will. But at least for now, you'll not forget who your mate is."

"That may be true." I still felt the heat of his passion burning me. "But don't undermine me again. I have not chosen you publicly, and there are very valid reasons for that. So until I do, don't make me a possession. I'm ruling a country."

I strode off to rejoin Halo, leaving him in the training room.

## Chapter 21

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### *Lex*

Aria left me there in that room, buzzing on the intoxication of our union. She ruled me in ways no one ever had. I wanted her to succeed at being a queen, but I didn't want her to not need me. Worse, I couldn't have Polonius wooing her.

The better she was at being a royal, the farther she drifted from me.

I needed to cool off, so I went for a walk while Aria held court. I decided to walk around the kingdom and see what was being done. I saw encampments with groups of families and other people all talking, eating, and enjoying one another's company. I waved at one such group, who looked at me with curiosity. They waved back.

"What number have you?" A man sitting on a collapsible chair with a child in his lap asked me.

"What number? I asked, not sure what he meant.

"We're numbers one thousand seven hundred eight and nine. Looks like it will be some time before the queen will be able to see us."

Oh. Those numbers.

"I've seen her already," I said, trying not to give too much away.

"Fantastic. So what number are you? If you don't mind my asking."

I didn't mind, but I also didn't want to give myself away or be disrespectful to people who had come such a distance to live in Onyx Rah.

"I'm going to be an advisor here," I said, but didn't elaborate.

"Wow, impressive. What is the queen like?"

"She's incredible," I said, answering this particular question with ease. "They all are. It's hard to describe, but she's strong, fair, beautiful." I could have gone on all day.

“We thought as much.” The man had an wistful look in his eyes. “Everyone who’s met her has said something similar. I can’t wait until it’s our turn.”

“Your turn will be here before you know it. Have a good day,” I said, leaving the man to his waiting.

I walked for most of the day, looking at the fields that were just starting to be tilled, where crimson pitaya and the kingdom’s food would grow. I sat for hours there, watching a carpenter build a house near a clear creek that flowed through the rubble and debris. The kingdom had been cleaned up, but remnants of the destruction lingered as the magic had not been able to wipe everything away.

I hoped one day, all memories of the sad time in history when Onyx Rah had been destroyed would be forgotten. But for now, the debris and burn marks proved the wounds of the kingdom were still fresh. I admired Aria for stepping into such a difficult role with no training or real experience. As she always has said to me in the quiet moments when she allowed herself to doubt. I was raised with royals, but I had never been one. All I had is my instinct.

I spent most of the day by myself outside of the castle, but as it grew dark, I started to make my way back to Aria. I walked along the well-traversed pathway passing the encampments to the courtyard where I found her standing with several Royal Guards.

Her wolf sensed me immediately, and she turned to me. “where have you been?”

I didn’t like her worried expression, but it was understandable. I’d just come back to her after Polonius had threatened my life.

“I needed air,” I simply said as I stood before her.

It took all my power to suppress the urge to take her into my arms and kiss her. I realized, however, that our relationship had to be kept a secret. We’d experienced a few days of freedom when our love was allowed to be out in the open before Aria had agreed to Polonius’s betrothal. Once more, we were back to pretending she didn’t already have a lover.

“I understand. I also need some air,” she said as she looked at the Royal Guards. “I need a minute alone with the prince.”

Neither of the two guards standing with her made a move to leave her side.

“The prince is a celebrated member of Navarrah City’s Royal Guards, or

have you forgotten?” she asked the guard closest to her.

“We have orders to protect you, Your Majesty.” His tone was resolute.

“I’m sure you do. However, I am only walking the grounds of my castle so you need not follow me. Prince Lex and I are perfectly capable of handling people who are only eager to find themselves housed and employed. You are dismissed,” she said, her tone resonating with a command that I found alluring.

The guards hesitated for a moment as Aria turned to walk with me.

“We will stay on the alert, Your Majesty,” the guard said, letting her go.

“I expect you will,” was all she said in response before walking beside me.

Since I had already traversed most of the kingdom that day, I did not want to take Aria past the encampments of people who were, in fact, very eager to be employed, housed, and fed. I doubted we’d get past the first few groups without being mauled with questions and doted on by the admiring new members of Onyx Rah kingdom. Instead, I took us behind the castle to where the gardens would someday be replanted.

Eventually, the palace grounds would be sprawling. I envisioned flower beds, vast green lawns with rolling hills, spaces for the soldiers to train and for the people to enjoy outdoor activities as a community. At the moment, however, the open field was still covered in charred dirt and hulled-out trees and shrubs. Still, the grounds gave us enough space to still be out in the open air, though not under the public's gaze.

“I’m sorry I said not to overrule me,” she said regretfully. “Spending time with Polonius is dangerous. I am aware.”

“I am, too,” I said. “I know you will handle him better than I do.”

“Someday, it will all be different,” she said hopefully, clinging to the fantasy we both needed.

“Someday.” I let the words linger as we climbed a pile of stones and heavy wooden slabs that must have been a staircase at one time. We trod our way over the toppled pieces to be met with a glorious vista where much of the kingdom could be seen.

“This must have been a beautiful place,” Aria sighed wistfully, remembering how all this beauty had been marred by tragedy and destruction.

“It will be again,” I said reassuringly, squeezing her hand.

Right then, a masked man dropped from one of the few surviving trees

overhead. I was surprised I hadn't seen him, but there he was, standing before us with a long sharpened sword and his face obscured by the cloth mask. The crudely constructed mask had holes cut for the eyes and strange features stitched upon it that left spaces to breathe. He clearly didn't want to be identified.

I wondered how a lone assailant could have breached the magical barrier that only allowed Midnight Moon Pack members to enter Onyx Rah. I assumed because he was alone, he must have been one of the very few people in the kingdom who had an issue with Aria being their queen.

“Can I help you?” Aria asked, yet I sensed her wolf tensing up.

Just as she addressed the man, scores of masked figures rushed at us from all sides.

We had no time to think. Aria and I immediately shifted into our wolves, ready to face the fight of our lives as we were greatly outnumbered. For an instant, I regretted not having the Royal Guards with us. We were, however, a fighting team. We'd overcome so much together. We could do this. We could fight them. We'd fought others, and we could win.

The battle was fierce. Even though I had a million things running through my mind that interfered with my focus, I was still able to lunge at anyone who neared us and bite into their throats. My claws dug into flesh and fur as some of the attackers had shifted. I could hear Aria's growls and the muffled sounds of whining beside me. I knew she was taking down as many of the attackers as I was. We advanced through the hordes, gnashing, snarling, and scraping at anything our claws and teeth could touch.

We battled for an hour before I realized that the attackers were not using deadly force. Some of them had even vanished upon being mortally wounded by either Aria or me. Soon, what had seemed to be an insurmountable battle became less and less of a threat. Was this not an attack, but a kidnapping attempt? Why would Midnight Moon Pack members want to kidnap us?

Perhaps Aria being taken by force would force Polonius to pay a high ransom. The same principle would apply to Navarrah City if I were also captured. Because of this, both Navarrah City and Brahman's Peak were vulnerable to extortion. If the attackers wanted money, Polonius and my father would have to pay.

We continued to fight as they came at us one by one, the others hanging back. The entire group of them could have annihilated us had they'd wanted, and I still wondered why they didn't. I began to feel Aria's fatigue. Her wolf

was faltering. My energy and strength had started to wane as well.

I spoke to her with wolf telepathy once the attackers who had shifted were no longer were in sight.

*“Let’s run,”* I suggested. *“We have a better chance of outrunning them than killing them all. Perhaps we can make it to the Royal Guards.”*

She didn't wait to acknowledge my suggestion, but turned and took off into the distance toward the castle. I followed her at top speed. Together, we ran swift as the wind. I could feel our synergistic energy and motion propelling us forward. We were a unit, we worked in tandem, and were stronger and better together. Running into the forest together felt familiar, like when we'd run the gauntlet to escape Amadeus's horrible beasts during Royal Guard training.

We ran deep into the neglected part of the kingdom. The area directly around the castle had been cleared of debris and was the first place where the rebuilding would begin. We fled to just adjacent to the castle, past where the crimson pitaya fields were guarded by Royal Guards who needed to be near the queen. There was still so much of the kingdom that still was wild and uninhabited. Though the large pieces of debris had been cleared, the area was still unruly, tangled with vines and overgrown branches. It was the perfect place to hide and catch our breath.

“What do you think is happening?” I asked Aria after shifting back, wondering if there had been some kind of upheaval during my absence.

She'd shifted back as well. “I have no idea. Everyone I've met has been happy to be here,” she said, panting.

“That's been my impression,” I agreed. “This is something else. It can't be Polonius. He wouldn't get what he wanted if he injured or killed you.”

“I'm untouched,” she remarked, looking over her body. “I don't have a scratch or any other injury. What about you?”

“The same. I'm untouched.” That was also strange, but I didn't have any more time to solve the mystery when a beast, its height towering over the trees, took three giant strides to reach us.

The two of us sprang back on our feet. We shifted again, and our wolves reared back as we growled and gnashed our teeth. The beast was unaffected by our warning signs, and Aria and I lunged at it in sync with each other. We attacked each side of the beast, clamping our jaws down upon landing. Our legs and claws dug into scales and armored skin. The beast was a monster, its large plates overlapping each other to create an armor of leathery flesh.

It shook us loose, flinging Aria and me to the ground. Without taking a moment to absorb the impact of our fall, the two of us jumped back on the beast. This time, we concentrated on his feet in an attempt to topple his balance. Our strength in unison was its own magic. Without easing up, our relentless attack eventually made the beast attempt to shake us from its legs, losing its balance and falling to the ground. The moment its enormous body touched the dirt, a puff of smoke and magic bloomed into the air, and it was gone.

We shifted back into human form once again, feeling strange and off-kilter.

“Has a mage attacked us?” Aria asked, looking at the beast in bewilderment.

I didn't have time to answer, because the moment I turned around, our masked attackers were marching toward us in military lines. They were a well-trained regiment, not a random grouping of disgruntled citizens. As soon as they cleared the forest, they stood before us. While my strength was depleted, my mind turning foggy, I was going to fight until my last breath. The idea that Aria would fight with just as much conviction gave me strength when I had very little of my own left. We were in love. We fought like lovers, but if we had to, we'd die there in that forest as soulmates.

But instead of rushing us, the masked soldiers stopped at a distance. They parted ways to allow for Sire Vanoire to walk between them in a perfectly orchestrated display.

Aria and I just stood there in front of Sire, dressed in our earlier clothing that was rumpled and tattered from the battles we had fought.

“Bravo!” Sire's voice boomed over the desolate, forgotten place. “This was a test, and you've passed with flying colors.”

The soldiers removed their masks, revealing themselves to be the Royal Guards who had just enlisted to protect Onyx Rah.

“You two were amazing!” one soldier shouted from the crowd.

“I've never seen two fighters work together so well!” another yelled.

“Something's going on there,” still another voice added. “Only my mate and I show so much chemistry.” Then, he added in a raunchy tone of voice, “In bed!”

There was laughter throughout the regiment.

“Aria, I wanted to show you that Lex is your weakness, but here you go and prove me wrong. Aria is stronger with you, Lex.” Sire cocked his head in

disbelief. “It is a fact I was unwilling to accept, and yet here I am, forced to acknowledge it.”

“That’s why I need to be near her,” I told him. “So that I can keep her safe.”

“Perhaps,” Sire said. He waved his arm in the air and started walking back to the castle. “At ease,” he addressed the soldiers. “You’re dismissed.”

As soon as Sire released them, the soldiers came up to Aria and me. They were full of admiration and praise, and suddenly, I was among Royal Guards again. I forgot how much I loved the camaraderie and brotherhood of my fellow soldiers. When we worked together for one common goal, there was nothing like the power and strength of our unity. We needed to reestablish those connections, as Aria and I had been away from the troops for too long.

“We should shift and have a training run, just as we did as recruits,” I said to the troops, feeling invigorated.

The soldiers agreed with robust grunts and hollers, the way we did when we were training and rallying to let our wolves out.

“Perhaps I should lead the run,” Aria said quietly behind me. “As their queen, they can also see me as a fighter.”

I wanted to give her that moment, but she had an entire kingdom depending on her. She couldn’t train the guards because it was a safety risk, and at some point, she’d have to redirect her attention on running the country.

They had Bindi to lead them, but they also needed a member of the royal house to work with them and keep them fighting in shape.

“Let me have this,” I begged her, my voice soft. “You are their queen. They should see you as such. Let them submit to you as I’ll submit to you, because you’re my queen, too. In matters that involve your kingdom, I’ll defer to your rule, but let me have the troops. I’m a Royal Guard and a prince of Navarrah City. I’ve trained my whole life to lead armies. Please give me this.” I didn’t want to upset Aria’s ego or authority, but the military was my jurisdiction. “It will ease them into respecting our leadership with Navarrah City one day. You already have so much to do right now.”

“You’re right, Lex,” Aria said, nodding. “This is yours.” I loved the beautiful smile that spread over those perfect lips, expressing her understanding.

Aria may have been headstrong at times, but she always conceded to reason. It was one of the many things I loved about her. In that moment, I saw ruling a kingdom with her as my queen as being beneficial for us both.



I'd have a place I adored, training the troops and preparing them for battle, and she'd lead her people to greatness. It was the first time I'd ever considered being her king in Onyx Rah, not Navarrah City. I wouldn't be letting go of my own crown, but would be wearing one that fit much better.

I was coming to realize that Aria was much more important to me than a throne.

"Are you ready?" I looked at her, feeling deep love bloom through me.

"Let's run." Her expression was playful and sweet.

It had been a long time since I'd seen the Aria of my childhood emerge from the woman who stood before me. My heart fluttered with passion and joy.

"Come on, troops. Everyone shift," I commanded as I took off running, leading the troops over broken trees and buildings, through charred landscape and mountains of cooled lava.

It felt good to let my wolf out to run. I was weary from the fighting, but I'd found my second wind. Running as a pack, we connected with each other. Aria was with us, and we were a force of nature.

For the next few days, while Aria continued to interview members of the kingdom in her quest to assign the new citizens to roles and find advisors for her court, I trained the troops. I used my experience fighting the Crypt Claw soldiers and training as a Royal Guard in Navarrah City to help the new recruits learn more effective fighting strategies.

When I wasn't training the troops, I was continuing my role as a diplomat in Aria's court. I was needed to discuss matters that involved the territories in Tobran and all of Voltaire. All was going well, and for a while, it felt like we were progressing as a kingdom. I was busy training the recruits and having meetings with potential advisors to Aria's court.

I enjoyed feeling like I was Aria's partner and leader of the military training, but I began to notice Sire sequestering Aria away from the rest of us. I had witnessed this on several occasions. He'd speak with her in whispered tones, and I worried that he might be manipulating her. She was still very new to magic and trusted Sire's judgment too much, in my opinion. But she had to learn from someone, and Sire was the most powerful mage outside of Amadeus in all of Voltaire. She could have learned from Halo, but Halo's skills and expertise were only just a little better than Aria's. Both Halo and Aria needed Sire's guidance.

As I stood there wondering again if I should warn Aria that Sire was

manipulating her for his own benefit, a soldier attacked me and took me to the ground.

“Ha! Always be on your guard, you said,” the triumphant recruit crowed as he pinned me in a death hold.

“That you should,” I said, defeated. “Nice work.”

The soldier let me up, and I realized that Aria was taking too much of my focus. If I weren’t careful, the next person to pin me to the ground might actually kill me.

## Chapter 22

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### *Aria*

Lex and I were in the forest again. We had taken to waking up early and shifting into our wolves for a run before our day began. It felt good to get out and exercise, with all the stress of running and establishing the kingdom. I usually didn't see Lex during the day, so this was one of the rare times when we could be alone together unless we were in bed. Lately, we had been too tired to do anything more than just sleep in each other's embrace.

We had just finished our run, and I was excited to get the day started. I had found many workers to plant the fields, and there were plenty of people to start building the houses and structures the kingdom needed. I'd met a few advisors who talked to me about setting up a hospital and school as well as a local merchants union to start importing the goods we needed. I was going to be meet with a veterinarian later that day to start an Administration of Animal Husbandry, so there was much to accomplish.

"Aria, before you go," Lex called to me as we shifted out of our wolves. I was ready for a shower and a fresh pair of clothes.

"Yes?" I said, noticing that he'd been more irritable today. "What is the matter?"

His lips were pinched, and he was breathing deeply through his nose. Since his role of military trainer had officially begun, he was more at ease. To see him so stressed was worrying.

"I think Sire is trying to poison your mind," he started, and I took all my power to stifle a laugh. There was no way Sire could do such a thing. I was very much in control of my thoughts.

"I think you worry too much when you're away from me," I said lightly.

"He doesn't have your best interests at heart," Lex continued, looking

truly concerned. “He’s only helping us because it serves him—he’s said as much. I’ve seen him have private talks with you. I don’t like him having unrestricted access to you. Private conversations with a lying manipulator are as dangerous as any lethal weapon.”

“I agree, but I need to learn how to use my magic,” I assured him.

“That she does,” Sire agreed, appearing in the forest out of thin air. “And she needs to learn to be a ruler of Onyx Rah. Also, Polonius is here to have an audience with her. She shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

“You may teach her magic, but leave the ruling of a kingdom to us,” Lex snapped, caring little about the line he’d overstepped. “And Polonius can wait.”

“You’ve both gotten too comfortable,” Sire said, and he turned to look at me. “Aria, you’re jeopardizing all of Tobran by letting Lex be too familiar with you in public.”

“We only meet in private now,” I argued. “Where is Polonius?”

“If she is going to meet with him, then I’ll accompany her as her bodyguard,” Lex said as he stepped up to Sire threateningly.

“That is not wise,” Sire countered.

“Aria is betrothed to Polonius, but not married,” Lex pressed on. “There is no one better than me to keep her safe.”

“Not true,” Sire dismissed, holding his ground. “You are a threat to him and will cause him to act irrationally. Send another guard. Perhaps when they attend the meeting in Navarrah City, you may join them, but their first stop will be the Obsidian Valley. And I am going to escort her there.”

At that moment, all I wanted was to kill Polonius and end all the torture and madness he’d created. If only it could have been that simple. Since we were playing a dangerous game, I realized we needed to back down. Lex would have to play the role of a discarded lover.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Lex, trying to sound genuine. “We’ll do better to hide our relationship. But Sire, how do you know Polonius wants to go to the Obsidian Valley first?”

“I just spoke with him,” Sire said, his face unreadable.

“I don’t want anything to happen to Aria,” Lex said, “so I’ll make sure we behave appropriately in public. I’m sorry for my indiscretion. I was startled to hear him apologize to Sire, which must have been very hard for him to do.

“I suggest you stay in separate rooms,” Sire offered.

“Why? I’m not holding court in my bedroom?” It made my heart burn with anger that Sire would even suggest such a thing.

“You’re a fool to think people won’t know what goes on in there, Aria,” he reproved me.

“It’s none of your concern or anyone else’s what happens in my private chambers. We’ll stay away from people in public, but you have no jurisdiction over what I do on my own time. I can handle Polonius. Where is he?”

“I truly doubt you know what he’s capable of,” Sire said, shaking his head. “Just don’t let him catch you in a compromised position. I’ll let Polonius know that you’ll meet with him shortly.” He left us alone in the forest without waiting for my reply.

“I have to say, I’m starting to really hate that man,” Lex said after Sire was gone.

“You wouldn’t say that if he wasn’t prohibiting you for being you,” I said, laughing a little. “But as much as I hate it, he’s right. We can’t be seen in public as a couple. I’m meant to be marrying Polonius. How can my kingdom trust me if they saw me dishonoring a marriage contract?” I tried to get him to understand.

“If they knew you were marrying Polonius, do you think that would make them trust you more?” Lex asked, but his tone was kind, which I appreciated.

At that point, the only people who knew I was betrothed to Polonius were the leaders of Tobran. Sire’s greatest concern was that a citizen of Onyx Rah would see Lex and me together and start rumors that would get back to Polonius.

“No,” I replied. “I hope we kill him before they ever know what I did to protect Tobran from war.” I hated the idea that the people I was coming to know and love would be subjected to a tyrant if I had to actually marry Polonius.

“This reminds me of when we were in Brahman’s Peak and I was disguised as a mage scholar,” Lex said, laughing as he reminisced. “It was so hard for me not to touch you and be with you then, too.”

“Lucian,” I said dreamily. “Oh, how I remember Lucian, the mage scholar. It was so hard to look at you once I knew who you were. Lucian was a scrawny and studious-looking man, but boy, did I want him to do wicked things to me.” I laughed again, and it felt amazing just to enjoy our memories. “We’ve had to hide our love so many times already,” I lamented.

“Like when you were disguised as a man,” Lex said.

“Ah, yes. I think you almost kissed Dimitri, the Prince from Solbrook once.”

“On several occasions,” Lex corrected, looking at me with adoration in his eyes.

“And then when I was a servant and could have been executed for being in your bed, simply because royals aren't allowed to be with servants.” Saying that, I became a little less joyful.

“We've done this before,” Lex said, his laughter ebbing as well.

“We can do it again. For now.” I leaned in and kissed him, unable to help myself.

He didn't kiss me back. He couldn't.

“We've been through a lot together.” Lex touched my hand. “I only wish Amadeus had told us about you. None of this would have ever happened if he had. Polonius would have seen you as my future bride and queen of Navarrah City, not a servant he could steal.”

“Amadeus had his reasons, and they were worth more to him than having a daughter,” I said regretfully. “Even though he locked my memories away, they still come to me when I'm dreaming.” I sighed, thinking of him locked in a dungeon in Brahman's Peak.

“I promise we'll find a way to free him,” Lex said, reading my mind. He kissed the top of my hand, a proper gesture for a diplomat.

“I guess I should go and speak with Polonius.” I dreaded it, but I also had to face the warlord in the hope we could get Amadeus out of his control in time to kill him before I had to marry him.

Lex didn't say anything more as the two of us walked side by side through the forest. As we approached the castle, we went our separate ways without saying another word to one another.

I met Polonius in a small parlor that had been converted into a conference room with a long table and ten sturdy wooden chairs. The walls were still bare, but on the table sat a vase of fresh flowers, likely picked by Gabrielle for this occasion. She was always mindful of situations in which I would need to be perceived as having enough. Flowers showed that things were growing in Onyx Rah.

“Ah, Queen Aria.” Polonius stood up from the table and bowed.

“Polonius.” I gave him a nod and sat across from him. Though I had a mind to sit at the far end of the table, I was determined to seem as amicable

as possible so that I would be given an opportunity to discover his weakness. Or kill him.

“It’s been a while since it’s been just the two of us,” he said, his tone almost fond.

“It has.” I answered blankly. “So, we’re going to the Obsidian Valley tomorrow?” I wanted to get right to business so we could end our meeting quickly. The less time I spent with Polonius, the better.

“Yes. I’ve arranged for us to stay in a rental house with servants enough to attend to your needs,” Polonius said with a wry smile.

“My needs are not great,” I said, returning the smile, “but I will insist upon my guards joining me. You’re not to be trusted.”

“Anyone but Lex.” His eyes hardened into a glare. “Do you intend on having guards in our chambers after we’re wed?”

“I intend on having them guard my chambers, yes.”

“About that,” Polonius said. “I am planning on taking you to wife properly.”

“You mean, as opposed to your other wives?” I felt the heat of rage race through my body.

“Yes, you will be a queen of Onyx Rah and Brahman’s Peak and will provide me heirs, but more.” He paused for a moment, almost awkwardly. Polonius, the tyrant, was apparently faltering. “You’ll also be my... companion.”

The words shocked me. He wanted a friend? A lover?

Me?

“How?” I asked, hoping I’d misinterpreted him.

“As any wife is the mate of her husband,” he said with a softness I’d never heard in his voice before.

“Do you mean to force me?” I started to shake and felt a wave of nausea in the pit of my stomach.

“No.” Again with his gentleness. “I mean to show you who I really am.”

A monster, a brute, a tyrant...I had so many words to describe who he really was.

“I know who you are,” I said simply, glaring at him, hoping he’d understand how futile this attempt to woo me was.

“You know what I’ve wanted you to know. Tomorrow, we will meet with the Lupine Coalition. Our first encounter with them was highly problematic. I want them to understand that as a united kingdom, we will align with their

territory under certain conditions.” Just like that, he’d become a strategist once more, I could breathe again.

“What will you force them into?” I asked. “Giving you money? Allowing you to take their lands? What is the grand plan?” I gritted my teeth and tried not to vomit.

“Peace,” he answered. “It is the same plan we shall share with every kingdom we visit. These are peace accords, and my goal is a benevolent coexistence.” He sat up in his chair, his long hair tied back. He’d donned a white silk shirt tucked into black leather pants, yet was still wearing teeth and bones around his neck. Polonius looked every bit a warlord, despite his grooming.

“And what price are you demanding for this peace?” I tried to breathe through my anger. “How am I a part of it?”

“As long as you learn to love me, Aria, I will allow their kingdoms to thrive as they have without threat of Crypt Claw invasion or discontinuation of their crimson pitaya trade. We know that with Onyx Rah, my access to the fruit will increase and topple power in my favor. As long as you remain a loyal and dutiful wife, I shall not wage war against any territory in Tobran.” He sat back in his chair calmly, as if he hadn’t just detonated me.

“Why do you need me to be a wife to you when all you want are my lands and the magical fruit that will grow on them?” I asked. “As soon as you have the crimson pitaya, the Crypt Claw will be invincible. And with poisoned mages, you’ll be able to wield ultimate power.” How did he think I was going to accept any of what he was saying?

“I’ve never loved anyone,” he admitted. “My need for power and domination are admirable goals for a lonely man. However, if I had a woman who loved me, engaged with me, perhaps I wouldn’t be as set on them.”

What was he confessing? There was a vulnerability I’d never seen in him before dancing in his eyes. His face, while still stern and angular, softened, and for a moment, he was a devastatingly handsome man. I’d never considered Polonius good-looking, but in truth, I’d never regarded his physical appearance at all. I’d always avoided gazing upon him.

“Polonius, you don’t win a woman’s heart by stealing her from her kingdom and the man she loves.” If he was being honest, then I’d be honest, too.

“Alliances have been forged between kingdoms for centuries. Love has never been a consideration. We are forming an alliance, one that will be



strengthened in our bed. This is what we will be telling the kingdoms of Tobran. If our alliance is strong, then they have nothing to fear...these are the terms of our peace accords.” He looked at me. “I know you don’t do well with threats, Aria, and so I will offer you something no one has ever seen or experienced. For you, Aria, I will show my care and affection, as I have both in abundance.”

In that moment, Polonius sounded completely, unnervingly sincere.

“How can you show me care and compassion when you’re trying to usurp my kingdom?” I asked. He was delusional.

“Because I’m not usurping your kingdom. I’m making you the queen of the most powerful territory in the land. For a servant girl to rise up to become the most powerful woman in Tobran is quite a climb.” Polonius stood up.

“You wouldn’t be courting me if I were just a servant girl,” I bit out.

“How easily you forget,” he said, chiding me gently. “I made you my wife while you were only a servant. I saw in you then what I see now: a feisty, honorable woman whom I want to wake up with every morning.” His expression turned hard again. “My cavalcade will come to collect you tomorrow morning. You will spend the night with me, and we will return to Onyx Rah the following day.” He was back to commanding again.

“I will not sleep with you tomorrow night.” My rage had turned to razor blades under my skin.

“I never said you would.” And with that, he walked out of the room.

I stood there for a long moment, reeling from the conversation we’d just had, dreading what I’d have to endure the next day. As soon as I gathered my wits again, I heard shouting outside the window.

“I must see the queen!” a voice yelled.

I walked out into the receiving room as a man rushed inside the castle, shouting, shaking, and holding his arms over himself.

“Yes?” I said, walking briskly toward him.

“Aria!” Halo scolded, trying to stop me.

“He’s badly injured.” I glared at her.

She sighed, but backed down. “You can’t see everyone who demands an audience with you, Your Majesty.” Halo was exasperated, but also new to her role. Perhaps she was also a little overzealous.

“What has happened, sir?” I asked the man after nodding reverently to Halo and eyeing Lex out of the corner of my eye.

“We were attacked on our way here to the city,” the man said, his voice

shaking. “We weren’t the only ones—almost everyone traveling to Onyx Rah has been ambushed. We were interrogated, and the moment we said, we were coming here, the people who attacked us started to beat us and demand our money and valuables.” He shuddered. “I think they are Crypt Claw soldiers because I saw an entire family—a father and his three sons—being taken from their cart. One of the bandits said he was taking them to Brahman’s Peak.” As soon as the man had told his story, he collapsed. Those who were near him helped him up from the floor. “My wife and daughter are still on the road,” he cried, sounding desperate.

“I want these soldiers caught,” I said determinedly without thinking or consulting anyone. I turned to Lex to see him shaking his head vigorously and putting up his hand to stop me.

“We should investigate first, Your Majesty,” Lex said. “We don’t know who is attacking, or if the travelers are members of the Midnight Moon Pack. We don’t want to anger Polonius or bring undue attention to our young kingdom.”

He should have been next to me, guiding my steps, but we were not to be seen together. And so, he was practically shouting at me across the wide distance between us.

“I hate to distress you further, sir, but do you mind shifting for me please?” I hated asking the distressed man, but I had to know if the protection spell on the gates was still working and if these attackers were targeting Midnight Moon Pack members.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said as he shifted into a bleeding black wolf.

“Thank you, sir. Guards, please take this man to the infirmary near the barracks. Also, see if you can’t have soldiers locate his wife and daughter.”

Once again, I felt a wave of nausea. This time, at the thought that someone was attacking my people.

“I want those soldiers captured,” I vowed. “If they are Crypt Claw, then Polonius will need to answer for them. If they are not, they’ll die.”

I took one last look at Lex, and he was shaking his head again as if he was trying to tell me I was making a big mistake.

## Chapter 23

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### *Aria*

The attacks happening outside our gates was extremely distressing. I discussed the matter with Lex while we were in bed that night and decided I would question Polonius about the soldiers who were intimidating citizens migrating to Onyx Rah. Lex was adamantly against my spending the night with Polonius on our tour to the Obsidian Valley and found it hard to fall asleep.

“What would you rather, Lex? That Polonius start a war with Tobran?” I hated that we were having this conversation over and over again.

“Why does he have to spend the night with you?” Lex fumed to the point that his skin heated.

“Because we are supposed to be getting married, so we have to look like we are getting know each other more intimately. But you must understand I’d never let him touch me.” I was growing tired of trying to convince Lex.

“Plenty of marriages have begun on the wedding night. Why does he need any kind of intimacy with you?”

I tried to be patient, knowing Lex’s anger was valid but misplaced. “The more he lets his guard down with me, the easier he’ll be to kill. While I think it is an act, if he is as lonely as he claims, he’ll be easy to manipulate, but only when he thinks what we are doing is private.” I climbed into bed naked, hoping to make love to Lex before having to leave him for Polonius.

“I’m jealous,” Lex confessed with a sigh as he kissed my neck, then the tip of my chin, and finally my lips.

“Of Polonius?” I laughed softly. “Have you gone mad?”

“There was a time when the Aria I knew would have shifted, and her wolf would have fought Polonius for even suggesting she stay the night with him.”

Lex swirled his fingers over my bare breast.

“That Aria wasn’t a queen with hundreds of people arriving daily to a kingdom raised from ruins,” I reminded him. “I can do this. I’m visiting the Lupine Coalition and spending the night in a private house. The night will likely include a stuffy dinner and a hasty retreat to my private room. He will think he is seducing me, but I will be safe with guards at my door.” I began trailing my hand down Lex’s body. “Learning he’s lonely is already a triumph in our favor. I can prey upon his loneliness, which is something I don’t question. The wives he currently has have never been intimate with him.” My hand found Lex’s cock, and I began to massage it.

“Do you think he’s ever?” Lex laughed, bringing levity back to our bedroom.

“Perhaps not. Maybe that’s why he’s so nasty,” I teased Lex, and we made love into the wee hours of the night.

The next morning, I woke up and dressed as Lex prepared to train with our troops.

“I wish I could forbid you to go,” Lex said, about to walk out of our room before the sun rose.

“Then you would have too much power over me,” I said. “If you expect me to rule a kingdom, you should trust me to rule myself. Nothing will happen.” I gave him a kiss for reassurance as he buttoned his jacket against the cold morning air.

He breathed, and in that breath were so many more words, but he returned my kiss and let me go as I watched him walk down the hall from our room. I packed a small bag and met Bindi in the receiving room.

“We have four Royal Guards traveling with you today, and Sire will be at the meeting,” Bindi informed me as we walked to the gates. “Leonore,” Bindi nodded to a female guard, “will be stationed inside of your room, and the others will follow protocol. I know you are a good fighter, so with Leonore and yourself, you should be safe tonight. I will have the hover plane fueled and ready for the first sign of trouble.”

“I’m going to be fine,” I said as I stared ahead at the three mammoth guardsmen and the small but muscled guard woman with cropped blond hair. “I’ll be back by tomorrow evening.”

“I know you will, but none of us like this,” Bindi told me under her breath.

“Such is politics.” I sighed and walked to where Polonius stood on the

other side of the gates, his armed Crypt Claw soldiers behind him.

“Shall we?” Polonius asked as I exited the gates. A Crypt Claw soldier took my bag.

Polonius opened the car door for me, and I slid onto the polished leather as he also entered the car.

“Such a rare treat,” Polonius said with his usual brand of calm sarcasm. “To ride with you.”

“Some of your Crypt Claw soldiers have been going rogue and attacking citizens of Onyx Rah on the road,” I said, getting right to the point as his motor vehicle pulled out into the road. “That’s not really upholding your care and kindness very well.”

“Have they?” Polonius said, sounding disinterested. “My men are not under order to do so.”

“They’ve taken the travelers’ valuables and have beaten anyone who don’t forfeit all they have,” I added, hoping to get more from him.

“And what of the crimson pitaya shipment I’ve requested?” Polonius's face changed as if he knew anything I’d say about that topic would be a lie.

“The fields are far from ready for planting.” I told him honestly. “You must know it takes more than a few days to raise an entire crop. It will be months, Polonius. I considered using magic to disguise peaches we received from Angeline Falls as crimson pitaya, but feared your wrath when you discovered the deception.”

More honesty. I needed time. The longer I could keep him from collecting the pitaya harvest, the greater our chances were of defeating him. So, I told him this small truth I thought might inflate his ego.

“So your magic is strong enough to morph objects. Good to know,” he said, still remaining calm.

“Please hold your soldiers back from people traveling on the road.” I went straight to pleading, needing my people to stay safe. I wasn’t going to be manipulated by him.

A wide grin slid over Polonius’s teeth. “Every traveler will be subject to a search and seizure of valuables and resources. If they defy the guards or are unwilling to part with their belongings, they will be handled accordingly.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” So much for appealing to his compassion.

“The question is, why would you?” Polonius’s face became a mask of evil again. “You see, the soldiers are only collecting taxes that we will tell

them you've imposed on the travelers. As the new queen of Onyx Rah, you need to fund the rebuilding effort, and of course your people need to eat. As you've said, your fields are not yet ready to yield crops, so every citizen has to pay for the food I plan to give them. I already know you've reached out to other kingdoms to give you emergency aid, but they don't have the kind of surplus I do."

"Your people are starving. I saw you break a man's hand for throwing a rotten piece of fruit. Did you expect him to eat it?" My anger surged, and I suddenly doubted I could even endure one night in Polonius's company.

"No. I expected him not to throw it at *me*." His voice was clipped and less civil than it had been. "Brahman's Peak has plenty."

"But you're stealing from immigrants!" I yelled, enraged.

"You asked me for resources, but didn't specify where you wanted those resources to come from. Your people will soon know you as a greedy, inexperienced queen with a pretty face. And when I finally stop the attacks, having tamed you, and give them food and water, especially when most are starving, they will see me as their true savior. The great redeemer of the lost kingdom of Onyx Rah. Meanwhile, you will be seen as nothing more than a power-hungry young woman with no experience or right to govern them."

Polonius was clearly enjoying his destruction of my life and fledgling reputation.

"Then everything you said yesterday about being lonely and needing a companion so you'd extend kindness was a lie," I accused, trying to breathe through my anger.

"It was not a lie," Polonius said plainly.

"Then why would you want your wife to be seen in such a bad light?" I asked, still trying to remain diplomatic despite wanting to scream that he was the last person I'd ever marry—unless I was marrying his corpse. "Why would you try to malign and hurt me?"

"Because I will shine brighter in your darkness. At the moment, we are ill-matched, what with you being a savior of your people and me being so feared and hated by mine. This will even the score." Polonius sounded very proud of himself. "Oh, and I know you don't want this union or to see your reputation ruined and your people hurt. I can call my troops back. At the moment, they are on a pause. But all I need do is give them my command, and they'll start their tax collection efforts again. Or...you can be compliant with me tonight."

Fucking evil bastard.

“So you’ll stop your attacks on the migrants if I allow you to rape me?” I asked, my voice a horrified whisper.

“I will not force myself on you. I want honest conversation and a genuine effort to make this marriage work.”

That was it. He was really that desperate.

“And for this, you’ll stop the attacks?” I had no choice but to try and stomach him.

“Why would I want to hurt someone who is making an effort to understand me?” Polonius’s expression softened.

“You haven’t done many nice things,” I said, looking at his dark brown eyes. “It’s hard to trust or understand you.”

“I wasn’t raised to do nice things. Kindness was never considered in my family. My mother died giving birth to me, and my father inherited my grandfather’s hatred and disregard for any life not his own. Neither of them wanted to raise a child. So I was reared at the point of a sword and the end of a whip. Starvation was the very best teacher, and violence my ultimate playmate.” Polonius looked out the window at the landscape passing by, almost as if his memories were too painful.

“Did you have any friends?” Though I believed his story, I still had little pity for him.

He laughed and shook his head. “No.” He turned back and looked at me. “Did you?”

I had Lex, Cheyenne, Janaya, Gabrielle, and dear, sweet Nan. I realized at that moment how valuable they were. I’d thought I had a terrible childhood, but in retrospect, it was quite rich because of my friendships.

“I had a few,” I answered him. “But my mother died giving birth to me, too.”

A smile lit up his face. “There’s one thing we have in common.”

I doubt we’d discover many more things, but I wasn’t surprised that a tyrant had raised Polonius to be just as tyrannical.

“What happened to your father?” I knew I shouldn’t ask, but Polonius struck me as the kind of man who didn’t care.

“My grandfather killed him the day my father tried to murder him,” he said. “The warlord Zonas simply wouldn’t die, but Harvin, my father, did. My father wanted to rule, but Zonas was still too powerful. I was ten when my father was set upon a funeral pyre, but I don’t have many fond memories

of him.”

“So when Zonas died, you became the next warlord?” I didn’t really care, but it was better than sitting in awkward silence.

“After my grandfather died, I had to fight every Crypt Claw warrior over a year’s time until they fell on their knees and swore fealty. The fights were to the death or total submission, and many times, I’d been brought back from the brink by healers. Still, I fought them all. Many died, preferring the grave to defeat.”

Polonius did not sound as prideful about winning those fights as I’d expected.

“How old were you?” I was growing more curious as his mood grew more somber.

“Seventeen,” he said quietly.

“So, if you’d had a friend…”

“I would have had to defeat him or kill him,” Polonius finished, his voice darkening even more.

“And you never had a woman love you?” I didn’t know why I was asking this. I truly didn’t care, but his story was fascinating in a sort of horrific way.

He laughed. “I’ve had women, but none willingly went to my bed. Which is why I’ll not force you.” His eyes turned soft again, and for a moment, I saw the man behind the monster. “I’ve had enough of it.”

“But your current wives?” I’m sure they tolerated him, at the very least.

“They play a vital role in my court. I wouldn’t want to confuse that role—I need my spies. And it’s hard to make love to one woman when you’re craving another.”

His eyes slid to me, and a shiver ran down my spine.



## Chapter 24

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### *Aria*

We arrived at the Obsidian Valley by early afternoon. Polonius and I talked for most of the ride. I spoke about my childhood and being a servant, focusing on things he already knew. What I didn't share was anything about Onyx Rah and our efforts to rebuild, and he didn't ask, which was a blessing.

As we entered the conference hall, Ellestria Culp, Xavier Goldlace, Mattias O'Halloran, Sire Vanoire, and Lara Goldlace were seated around the conference table. Sire identified Lara as an interested party, though by the look on her face, she wasn't there by choice. Polonius pulled out a chair for me, and then sat in the chair beside me.

"I've called this meeting to establish the tenets of peace between Brahman's Peak and the Obsidian Valley," Polonius began as he passed out printed sheets of paper. "Before you is a treaty agreement. In order for there to be peace between our lands, each of you seated here must sign this agreement as you are all parties to the path to peace either by political standing or by association with my betrothed." He paused to give everyone at the table, including me, a chance to look at the document before us.

"I'm not signing this," Lara blurted out. "This is coercion."

"What political treaty isn't?" Polonius scoffed.

While I knew I had to look at mine, I already had a good idea of what the horrid document said.

"As defined by these terms, the Obsidian Valley and the Lupine Coalition will support my marriage to Aria Blackbane," Polonius stated. "You will not provide her safe harbor, supplies, or financial support should she flee her marital obligations or defect from our joint kingdoms of Brahman's Peak and Onyx Rah. This includes, but is not limited to, aid offered to Onyx Rah for

rebuilding by way of donations, food, money, military, and emergency provisions. In return for your support, myself and Brahman's Peak will enter a peace treaty wherein I will provide a fair portion of crimson pitaya from Onyx Rah's harvests. The amount will be determined by the crop's yield. Also, in return for your support, Brahman's Peak will refrain from any unprovoked attacks on your persons or territory. With your signature, you bind yourselves to the tenets of our peace accord." He spoke without malice, even though he was caging me to him using our allies.

"And if we don't sign?" Lara glared up at him from her paper.

"Then I will consider it an act of war," Polonius said simply.

"My sister will likely be the beta of Onyx Rah, and you plan to steal her kingdom from her?" Lara fumed. "From our rightful lineage?"

"I'm not stealing Onyx Rah from your sister," Polonius swiftly argued. "I'm marrying its queen. We are to join kingdoms, and I'll provide the resources Onyx Rah is lacking so that both our kingdoms will be strengthened by our alliance, and Tobran will thrive without conflict."

"I suggest you sign," Sire cautioned. "We don't want any more trouble in the Obsidian Valley." He gave Lara a spiteful glance.

Lara turned her head to me, giving me a pained look. In my heart, I knew either Polonius or I would be dead before I lay in our marriage bed, so I smiled at her with determination in my eyes. She read my expression and signed. They all did.

"I hope this brings an end to the worry and threats plaguing our kingdoms," Ellestria said with a heavy sigh.

"As soon as the first crimson pitaya harvest is reaped, and Aria has been crowned Queen of Onyx Rah, our marriage will take place, and peace will prevail," Polonius declared.

I stayed silent, knowing that anything I said would show my hand. I just sat beside Polonius, his silent prisoner. After the short meeting had concluded, Polonius and I were escorted by motorcade to a house on the outskirts of the bustling city. The house was large, and as Polonius had promised, there were servants who greeted us at the door.

Polonius had not said much to me in the car. I was happy he hadn't taunted me after the meeting where my allies had signed in support of marital incarceration. He'd left me to my thoughts.

As soon as we entered the house, Polonius stopped to address me. "I'm sure you're tired and would like to freshen up. I will meet you for dinner this

evening.” With that, he followed two of his guards down the hallway.

I stood there with Leonore and three of my Royal Guardsmen, unsure of where to go when a housekeeper dressed in a crisp dark blue uniform approached us.

“If you come this way, Your Majesty, I’ll show you to your room,” she said.

We followed the housekeeper to an elegant residential suite. It had a large canopied bed teeming with cream-colored lace and satin. There was a roaring fire in the hearth surrounded by deep blue velvet couches and a long, low table.

“I will be stationed outside until this evening, Your Majesty,” Leonore said, and I left my Royal Guards to retreat to my room, wanting a moment to myself.

I would have to endure two more such meetings in Angeline Falls and Navarrah City. During each, Polonius would force the leaders to sign a contract that bound me to him in marriage with the threat of war. While these had always been Polonius’s threats, having them solidified by contract was overwhelming. Not only did he want to ensure our marriage took place, but he had threatened the immigrants coming to Onyx Rah with harassment from his Crypt Claw soldiers if I did not willingly participate in this union.

I needed a moment to breathe so I took a bath. After, I sat by the fire, contemplating ways to end Polonius’s life. All too soon, it was time for dinner, and I was escorted by the same housekeeper who’d brought me to my room to a covered terrace overlooking the city.

After my bath, I had dressed in the gown that had been laid out for me. I was informed by the dresser that the gown had been gifted to me by Polonius. Seeing it turned my stomach inside out, and yet I knew refusing to wear the thing would have been unwise. So, I allowed the dresser to fit me in the onyx gown glistening with flecks of black diamonds and rimmed in glossy black feathers. It was as garish and disturbing as it was elegant and beautiful.

The moment I stepped out onto the terrace wearing the gown, Polonius stood with his eyes widened in amazement. I curtsied before him and lowered my eyes, acting every bit the appreciative wife.

“You are more stunning in it than I anticipated,” Polonius said with unabashed awe.

“This is a beautiful gift, Polonius. Thank you.” I tried to keep my words simple and measured.

He approached me, his hand touching my neck. I stiffened. Only pausing for a moment at my tenseness, his hand trailed softly down my neck to the bare, open space beneath it.

“You’re only missing an adornment,” he mused, swirling his fingers over my chest in long, lazy strokes.

“I’m not accustomed to wearing jewelry,” I said.

“But you will become accustomed,” His harsh features, those of a man who knew too many dark days, brightened into a semblance of a smile as he raised his hand. “Bring me the box on the table,” he snapped at the guard standing watch by the door.

The guard rushed to bring Polonius a small silver box etched with flowers and inlaid with gemstones. Polonius took the box from him without a word of thanks and presented it to me with an open palm.

“You’ve already been too generous,” I said as my insides started to tremble.

“This was my mother’s.” He opened the box, and inside was a stunning necklace of black diamonds and pearls with the pendant of magical twisting hues of amethyst, blue, and violet in a never-ending pattern. “And it was her mother’s before her. The magic is but a lick of her power contained within.” He set the box down on the small metal table beside him.

“I couldn’t possibly take this,” I said as he unclasped the chain.

“My grandfather said it had always been intended for my wife.” He fit the necklace around my neck. “And now, at last, she has it.”

I breathed through the urge to pass out into oblivion to escape the moment. The thing felt heavy and ominous around my neck as Polonius took my hand and brought me to the table where two plates sat under silver domes.

“I hope you don’t mind that I’ve had our food brought to us. I don’t want us to be disturbed. We have a wedding to plan.”

I took the seat he offered to me and fixed my gaze on the city below. “No, this is fine,” I said softly as he lifted one of the domes to reveal my meal: a cocked game bird and long green vegetables.

My stomach roiled, looking at the poor beheaded thing. I felt equally as plucked and roasted, wearing his dress and necklace. And just as dead.

Our meal was unpleasant at best. He told me what he envisioned our wedding would be like and the plans he’d made to have leaders of the kingdoms who signed the peace accords attend. I simply nodded and agreed with his choices. By the end of the evening, Polonius was fully aware that

he'd usurped the conversation and dominated our time together, but I didn't care. The less I said to him, the better.

When the hour grew late, I excused myself and left his company, but not without receiving a subtle kiss on my hand before he allowed me to depart.

"I know this is hard for you, but I admire the effort," he said with a sliver of empathy. "I'm leaving early in the morning. Your guards will escort you back to Onyx Rah, and within a day's time, I will bring you to Angeline Falls to meet with Queen Nadine and Bastien Salt. Get some rest now. You look weary." With that, he walked away, and I could finally breathe again.

Not wanting to stay in the Obsidian Valley a moment longer than I had to, I undressed, packed, and had a motor car bring myself and my guards back to Onyx Rah that very night. I rushed to Lex, sleeping in our bed, and crawled beside him, curling up to his warmth, missing the simplicity of our love. It was almost morning, but I didn't care.

"You're back." He turned into me and draped his arms around my body. I had tossed off the dress, but I still wore the necklace. Lex saw it immediately. "Fuck him," he spat.

"Just motivation to kill him, Lex. Nothing more," I said evenly, pacifying his anger.

He kissed me, and we made love into the wee hours of the morning.

Lex left not long after to train the troops, as we had to continue acting as if we were not together. I stayed in bed until the sun had fully risen and continued my duties to the kingdom. Later that day, Halo met me in the receiving room, shock etched onto her features.

"What is it?" I asked, immediately concerned.

"Polonius has just sent ten cartloads of rice, two of dried meat, and three of lentils, beans, and fruit. What did the two of you do?" she asked me with grave curiosity.

"Signed my life away. Is it enough?" I felt guilty for having allowed Polonius to get so close to me, but grateful we had food. If we had enough provisions to establish ourselves, my efforts with Polonius would not have been in vain.

"Plenty," she said quietly.

"Good. Let's just make sure everyone stays fed," I said before leaving to meet with a city planning advisor.

The day passed quickly. I never saw Lex, and by the time I had retreated to our chambers, ready to retire, he was already asleep. I didn't want to

disturb him and still ached from our last joining.

In the morning, we both rose before the sun and made love one last time before I had to meet Polonius again.

“I hate this,” Lex said, touching my necklace, but I knew he was referring to my time with Polonius.

“We have enough food with what was given to us by Angeline Falls and Brahman’s Peak. I’m getting closer to Polonius, and soon I’ll have his trust. Then we can free Amadeus and kill Polonius.” I tried to keep Lex’s temper at bay. “You just have to believe in me.” I kissed him, and we parted ways.

“I do,” he said, looking back at me so defeatedly before walking out of my room.

I met Polonius at his airbus, which had landed on an open patch of land in front of our castle. He helped me board, and Leonore and the three guardsmen who I had traveled with previously also joined us.

“I see you’re still wearing it,” Polonius said fondly, gesturing to my necklace.

“Didn’t you want me to wear it?” I asked, touching the beautiful necklace that elicited so much sorrow and hatred in my heart.

Why couldn’t Polonius just be friends and allies? Why did I have to marry him? Because no one had ever loved him, and in me, he saw a rival and an equal.

“Yes,” he said, giving me a wry smile.

Our conversation on the Airbus was not as enlightening as our conversation in the motorcar days prior. Polonius was more aloof than before, and instead of giving me more information about his kingdom, his rule, and his history, he showed me the weapons on board his ship.

“This airbus can carry twenty soldiers,” he boasted. “Each is armed with one thousand rounds of ammunition as well as machine-operated guns over the wings and in the landing bay. I have five such ships and am building more.”

“Why do you need so much firepower? After the peace accords with Tobran, you won’t have to have all of this.” I looked around at all the deadly weapons surrounding us.

He laughed and put his hand on my knee. “For a man as feared and hated as I am, I dare say I’ll need more. It will take more than a pretty wife to cool tempers.”

“I’ll be much more than a pretty wife,” I huffed, not really referring to my

marriage with him.

“I have no doubt of that,” he said as he smoothed his hand across my knee.

The gesture was not sexual, but more sensual and reverent as if he was admiring me. Since our trip to Angeline Falls was short, he removed his hand and watched out the window as we descended toward the floating island nation. As soon as we landed, two stewards dressed in white robes, a man and a woman with matching blond hair, met us on the landing strip.

“We are to escort you both to the queen,” the female said.

Polonius just took my hand in his. He didn’t look at me or even notice that he’d done it, just held me firmly in his calloused grip.

“Thank you,” I said quietly to the steward as Polonius and I walked hand in hand to our meeting.

The meeting with Queen Nadine and Bastien Salt did not go as well as the solemn signing of the peace accord in the Obsidian Valley.

“You know, Polonius, I’ve been supportive of this marriage in public, but I have my reservations,” Queen Nadine said. “What if you chose to harm Aria or mistreat her kingdom? She has no recourse if you make us sign this. You will choose war over her safety?”

“I don’t plan to harm her. What king destroys his queen? Besides Aria is no wilting flower; she can withstand me. In fact, she is so unafraid of me and the consequences of her actions in regard to our marriage, she would choose to harm herself and those she loves by running at the first opportunity. This makes that harder to do. The terms are simple: Your Majesty, either sign or prepare for war. I do believe that the conditions are fair.” As he spoke, Polonius remained stone-faced and unmoving.

“They are fair to all but Queen Aria,” Queen Nadine said with a look of sadness.

I wanted to speak as little as possible at these meetings so as not to give anything away. I bowed to Queen Nadine and smiled, but it was an empty expression, one that didn’t meet my eyes.

“I hope you will allow Polonius and I an opportunity to vacation here on occasion,” I said to the queen. “Perhaps I may seek respite for a few days when needed.” I turned my head to Polonius. “I’m sure that will not worry my betrothed or threaten your terms.” I widened my smile in confidence.

“We don’t allow any kind of violence here,” Bastien warned.

“Oh, I know,” Polonius nearly growled. “If my wife needs rest, especially

after the grueling feats of labor and childbirth, I don't see any harm in her seeking respite in Angeline Falls for a few days. I will consider that customary, but should she get lost or go missing, well, that will be more revolutionary and in line with a betrayal of our peace accord." Polonius glared at Queen Nadine.

"Oh, I see," she said with a bright, mocking smile. Despite the paper she would sign, I knew I still had an ally in Queen Nadine.

That night, I was gifted another dress by Polonius. This gown was light blue and shimmery, matching the watery environment around us. It was as if he had planned my wardrobe perfectly.

For dinner, I wore his mother's necklace and the billowy dress that mirrored the falls cascading around us. The restaurant we were dining in had a miraculous view of the cascading water plummeting into bubbling pools below, filling the air with the roar of rushing water.

"You're spoiling me unnecessarily," I said as I walked into the restaurant that had been cleared for our use. "I have dresses," I added when Polonius marveled at my gown. "You don't need to keep having them made for me."

He touched my arm. "These are for me. I have dreamed of you wearing such lavish clothing, a testimony to our wealth and affluence. I prefer seeing you like this. Leave the tunics and trousers to the men."

"You know I prefer them," I said as a waiter brought us food. This time, it was glistening meat and fluffy potatoes that looked like the pillowy clouds in the sky.

"Only because you've had to fight. With me, you'll—"

"Please don't say wear ballgowns and adorn your arm," I interrupted, frowning.

"No. You'll conjure spells and strengthen your magic. I intend on my pretty wife to be the most powerful mage in all of history, like my grandfather before me. I have no magic, but my wife will have it in abundance. As will our children, I hope."

I sighed. While I desperately wanted to train my powers, doing so with Polonius was dangerous. He'd undoubtedly use my magic for evil deeds.

"I can't train in a tunic?" I said with a laugh, hoping to lighten the mood, which was becoming too reverent for comfort.

Polonius laughed in response. "You are, Aria, the only woman who has ever truly been worthy of me. I will lavish you in dresses and jewelry. I only hope that one day, I shall be a man worthy of you." He looked at me with



what I believed to be sincerity.

“Then may I ask you a question without you threatening my life?” I shook inside with the honesty I was about to impart, but I was starting to feel more like the villain in this scenario. With our intimate dinners and time we spent together, I was seeing Polonius’s vulnerabilities. The chinks in his armor highlighted places I might use to stab him through. While he was promising me safety, I was planning his murder.

“What is it you want to ask?” His face was guarded and tense.

I slowly cut my meat, buying time to settle my nerves. “You want to be a man who is worthy of me. Do you really mean that?” I stopped cutting to look into his eyes.

“I do. Within my capabilities.”

“Then can we not be friends? Just friends and allies. I know you want to take a woman to bed, and I can teach you how to be a man women will clamor over, but why does it have to be me?”

It was the most honest I’d ever been with him. He breathed harshly, and I was prepared to fight him if I had to. Or jump out the window, praying I’d land in the water.

“When you wounded my guard and protected the Redveign princess, you could have killed him, but you didn’t. In you, I saw great skill and great mercy. When I tried to extract your mage and you endured electrocution, you were brave beyond measure. When Lex Redveign stole your heart, I knew you loved with truth and sincerity because of all the times you’d fought for him, and he for you. There is no woman who compares. And because of your mercy, bravery, and love, you will find a place in your heart for me. This is what scares you the most.”

Polonius looked at me with so much understanding, my heart shattered.

“But I don’t love you,” I whispered.

“Yet, you know that one day, you will,” he said, taking my hand. “Because it is who you are. Politically, our match is better. I can teach you things Lex cannot. Our kingdoms border one another, and I am a ruler. Lex is but a prince. The reason the leaders of Tobran are signing our peace accord is because they know what I’m saying to you now is true. But yes, we can be friends, and I hope we will be after we marry.” He squeezed my hand and then let it go. “You will spend the night here tonight. We’ll meet with King Helix and his court tomorrow in Navarrah City. There’s no need to go rushing back to Lex. My guards have impressed upon Bindi how important it

is that he supports you in the meeting, and she's allowed him out of the spelled gates of Onyx Rah. He is traveling with both his guards and mine to Navarrah City as we speak."

"You're going to make Lex sign the peace accord?" My heart sank in my chest, and I was no longer hungry.

"I'm going to give Lex an opportunity to protect his kingdom. The one he's abandoned for you. He'll thank me one day when he's king. And I'm sure the two of you will remain friends."

"You can't do this," I begged, no longer wanting to convince him that the world could be different if we were friends.

Polonius leaned over, and without warning, kissed my lips. It was a warm brush of flesh, hardly a peck. And yet, fire burned around it.

"I'm giving you the world, Aria. Something he's never offered you." Polonius's fingers lifted my chin, and he stared into my eyes. He kissed me again, another light peck, and pulled away. "I trust without Lex nearby, you'll get enough rest." Polonius stood and turned to one of the guards surrounding us. "Have my meal brought to me in my chambers." Before he walked away, he slid a glance back at me. "Enjoy the view, Aria. Eat, rest, and be ready for tomorrow." His words were almost kind, as if he might be regretting what he was about to do.

The next morning, there was another dress hanging in the reception room of my chambers. This time, the dress was crafted of leather and fur. It held the insignia of Brahman's Peak and was a testimony to Polonius's people, reflecting his style of dress.

The gown made me sick to my stomach. I almost put on the blue fabric I'd worn the night before, but knew I was heading into a tense situation. I had to be compliant for just one more day.

I donned Polonius's dress and met him at the airship with my guards in tow. We never spoke to one another, as it was not their place to speak to their queen, unless I addressed them first. It was, however, nice to know I had people on my side with me.

I nodded to Polonius, sat in one of the few open seats, and buckled myself in. I made sure that there was no empty seat beside me as I situated myself between Leonore and another of my guards.

Polonius took the seat right behind me, and no one sat with him. He said nothing to me until the airship lifted into the sky.

"This dress is my favorite," he said, running warm fingers down my neck.

I didn't look at him but said, "I find the leather too warm and the fur too itchy." I was not going to compliment him on his dress, nor was I going to thank him for it.

He laughed behind me. "More to get used to. I like leather over any other fabric—it's strong enough to contain me. Perhaps that, too, will be something you'll need time to prepare for. I'm not a small man." He leaned back again.

Was he really taking this opportunity to boast about the size of his cock? I just sat and fumed, yet my skin also flushed with heat.

Polonius and I arrived together at the grand parlor in the Redveign estate. My body was tingling with emotions to be in the place where I'd grown up. Memories swirled around me as I walked in with our most hated enemy.

I missed Nan and Janaya. I longed for the smell of the grass in spring, the musty fragrance of the forest, and the bright colors that bloomed in the garden. Everything I longed for was tainted by the fact that I was here with Polonius to ruin my future.

King Helix stood, as did Cheyenne, Lex, and Jarvis. Lex had no readable expression on his face, though I could feel the anger seething from him.

"Lord Polonius. Queen Aria." King Helix bowed, and I made a small curtsy in return. My royal name sounded strange on King Helix's lips. The last time I'd been in Navarrah City, I was still just a servant.

"Let us not stand on pretense," Polonius said as he passed out the treaties to be signed. "I have made a special compensation for Navarrah City, considering how dear it is to my betrothed." Polonius gave me a wicked glance, and my heart exploded in terror. "All that is mentioned about harboring and hiding stands, but in addition, if Aria is found in Navarrah City without one of my Crypt Claw warriors to escort her, or without my permission to be here, I shall destroy everything. Every man, woman, and," he turned his face to me, "*child* will be killed. There'll be no questions, no pleas for mercy. I have outlined my terms here. If I find Aria in Navarrah City without my express permission, I will pillage the village first, seeking out hospitals and schools as my targets."

"My grandmother lives here," I choked out, forgetting the restraint I'd so carefully crafted for the other meetings.

"She is welcome in Onyx Rah or Brahman's Peak. Or I will join you when we visit her together, my love," Polonius had the audacity to say.

"Why impose this kind of restriction?" King Helix asked with a furrowed brow.

“Ah,” Polonius said. “You know very well that your son has claimed my wife. Purity is of no use to me, so I’ve let the deed go unpunished, but she may not come back here once Lex has returned to his rightful kingdom. I’d hate for there to be any confusion about who Aria is bound to.” Polonius’s features flattened into a cold emotionless mask.

Across the table, Lex clenched his fists until the whites of his knuckles showed. His lips were cut in a thin line as his eyes penetrated Polonius with murderous intent.

“To avoid war, we will sign this, Polonius, but that means you must sign our trade agreement, too,” King Helix said. “Anything in and out of our ports will be levied with a tax. You will not launch an unprovoked attack to gain jurisdiction over the ports.”

“Father, I’ll not,” Lex started, but King Helix held his hand up to him.

“No,” King Helix said to his son. “I want this matter ended. Congratulations, Aria, on your success with Onyx Rah. We will continue to support you as a kingdom despite the restrictions of this peace accord. Now, let’s sign these documents and be done with it.”

King Helix took a moment to regard Lex again, then drew his pen and signed the treaty. Polonius did the same with his trade agreement, and I sat there, watching my life crumble.

Just before Lex signed the peace accord, he looked at me and smiled the most vicious, brutal smile. One Polonius did not miss. And I knew from that moment forward, there was no way Polonius would ever survive.

When we were done signing the documents, Polonius gathered the papers and handed them to his guard before standing and taking my hand.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” he said “I look forward to welcoming you to our wedding and Aria’s coronation. I believe her father has finally found a way to magically enhance Onyx Rah’s pitaya crops, so I plan to have you as guests of Brahman’s Peak for a small ceremony in the coming days. It’s been a pleasure.” With that, Polonius dragged me out of the room and down the hall.

“Where are you taking me? The meetings are over.” I tried to halt him, but I didn’t have the strength.

Polonius pulled me into a small salon and closed the door while still holding my hand. “Giving you what I should have a long time ago.” He pressed me up against the wall, making it hard to breathe.

“I thought you didn’t rape women anymore,” I said quietly.

He took a moment to stare at me. “I don’t. You will come to my bed willingly. I’m bringing you back to Brahman’s Peak.”

“I have to go back to Onyx Rah. I’ve been away too long,” I protested, suppressing the urge to kick him.

“Just for tonight,” he said softly, and everything in me stilled to a chilling halt. “Just for tonight, you will share my bed.”

“I don’t want to sleep with you.” I stood up straighter, though he was still pressing me to the wall.

“I don’t want to kill innocent people to make you more compliant.” He was being honest, though what he wagered was grotesque. Have sex with him, or he’d kill innocent people.

“How can I ever choose you or your bed when you’re always so cruel?” I hissed. “I won’t find love in my heart for a man who threatens the lives of children because of his jealousy. I don’t care how lonely and abused you were.” I tried desperately to connect with whatever good was inside him.

“Perhaps if you came, you could teach me.” I felt his cock grow hard where it pressed against my thigh.

“It’s not something you want to learn,” I said in earnest, staring at him.

And then like before, without warning, he pressed his mouth against mine. Only this time, he kissed with passion. His hand rounded my neck, and he held me to him as his tongue lapped with ferocious need to enter my mouth. My mouth only opened because of the force, and yet Polonius withdrew, placing his forehead against mine and closing his eyes.

“I truly don’t want to hurt you,” he said, breathing heavily but staying still.

“Please let me go home,” I pleaded quietly.

“My airbus will take you,” he conceded, lifting his head from mine. Water pooled in his eyes, but no tears fell.

“Are you coming with me?” I asked. I hoped he wouldn’t, but with Polonius, everything had to be spoken.

“No. I’ll take the motorcade with my troops.”

“Is anyone going to die because I’m returning to Onyx Rah?” I had to know.

His eyes held mine for a long time, perhaps considering. “No. But we will marry in a few days. You’ll perform the duties of a wife, which means we’ll share a bed. You’ll submit to me, or someone might die.” He released me and headed toward the door.

“If you want someone to love you, Polonius, don’t threaten to kill children to get their compliance,” I told him. “Do the opposite of what your anger instructs. If you want me to lay with you and be your wife, open a school, plant a garden, let me see my grandmother...be my friend. Be a man who can do those things, and perhaps someday love will find you.”

He said nothing. Just walked out the door.

## Chapter 25

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### *Lex*

“And then what happened?” I asked Aria gently after reuniting with her the day after Polonius’s ridiculous peace accord.

We were sitting in our bedroom, both of us exhausted as we sipped warm tea. When she spoke, her voice was distant and her emotions were raw.

“He is planning on massacring everyone just like he threatened in Navarrah City. Innocents.” She could hardly speak for her anguish. “Children, honest people, the elderly. He plans to use savage brutality to get me to submit to a legitimate marriage.” Her eyes glassed over, and a few tears fell. “He set his soldiers upon the travelers to steal money from them for taxes I didn’t impose. He wants them all to hate me so they will love him.” She was struggling to breathe as she tried to temper her emotions.

“Sire should be protecting you and Onyx Rah,” I said angrily. “He’s the Royal Mage, but what has he done to shield the travelers? Bindi doesn’t have the resources, but Sire does. He barely trains you, offers no counsel in creating a kingdom, and then stands by and lets Polonius destroy your reputation without even lifting a finger to defend it.” I was getting so livid, I had to stop speaking for a moment. “You know as well as I that Polonius will die,” I continued. “Our focus must shift to strategizing ways to kill him before your wedding.” After being forced to sign Polonius’s peace accord, I was ready to have Aria disguise me as a Crypt Claw warrior so I could kill him in his sleep.

“I don’t know what to say, Lex.” Aria was usually so headstrong and determined, but Polonius had defeated her.

He’d won that battle, and her heart and spirit were wounded.

“We have to win, and we will, but we can’t defeat Polonius by wallowing

in today's events or the horrors he has planned. Right now, you must recover your spirit and your strength."

"Perhaps we should speak with Bindi about creating a military strategy," Aria suggested, still sounding dazed. "I'd feel much better with an army behind us. We should meet with Bindi and Halo. Neither of them signed his treaty."

"Do you feel up to it?" I asked, worried about her mental health.

"I do," she said firmly. "The sooner we get a handle on this, the better." She sat up straighter, having found her spirit again. At least a tiny part of it had come back.

Within the hour, we had Bindi, Halo, and Sire assembled for a meeting in the dining room. We ate our supper as we discussed strategies for the future with regard to Polonius.

"There are tunnels under the city," Bindi said. "Most of them were cleared when Aria and Halo's magic resurrected the kingdom. We can use the tunnels as a place for our people to hide. Polonius and his warriors still can't get into the city. As long as you stay here, no other kingdom needs to hide you. We can keep you safe from Polonius." Bindi ate her stew while taking notes in a thick book. "I've kept the tunnels a secret from everyone so that if there were traitors among us, they wouldn't betray our plans."

"Okay," I said. "That's an option should we need to evacuate. I'd like to go down there and see what the conditions are like. With your permission, Aria," I said, hopefully showing the group that I was treating her as my queen. "How are we planning to stop Polonius before Aria has to deliver the crimson pitaya?" I needed us to focus on preventative measures, not just worst-case scenarios. "What about the lava pit? Can we use the power of the volcano?" I turned to Sire. "Perhaps utilize magic to combat Polonius's airships?"

"We could try. I doubt Amadeus is strong enough to hold us off," Sire said, without offering any other solutions.

As soon as Aria and Halo's magic was stronger, I planned on suggesting that they remove Sire as the Royal Mage.

"Amadeus shouldn't even have magic. I spelled a grape that was supposed to suppress it," Aria fumed.

I understood her frustration and felt like I may have failed in that regard. I'd been able to give Amadeus the grape, but I hadn't had the chance to make him eat it.



“You probably did the spell wrong,” Sire said. “You’re not experienced enough to do those kinds of spells. Remember the horror of earlier today when you tried to put a disguise on me—I became a spiked beast with two heads. Your powers are too new, and you are not a skilled enough mage to be trusted.”

Sire was being downright rude to Aria. I badly wanted to say something, but it was her fight, not mine, unless she invited me to it.

“We’ll capture him with a pitaya net the old-fashioned way,” Sire continued. “I’m sure the Royal Guards have a few already. We’ll use those.”

“If we can get close enough to him to cast it,” Bindi grumbled. “With those Crypt Claw warriors out there, we don’t have much of a chance.”

The conversation was upsetting, and I was almost too stressed to eat the simple meal we’d been served. But I needed my strength for the coming days, so I shoveled the thick stew into my mouth while I wracked my brain, trying to figure out a way to stop Polonius.

“Personally, I don’t see any way out of this other than to give him the pitaya,” Sire said. “I can see what can be done with the fields in the morning. I have other matters I must attend to now.” He finished his bowl, setting his spoon in it as he got up and walked out of the room.

“Ugh,” Halo groaned as soon as Sire had walked out. “He is really not the most trustworthy person. I have no idea how he was able to convince you to make him the Royal Mage.” She took another bite of her meal and rolled her eyes.

“Because he’s powerful, and he’s helped me more times than he hasn’t. But I agree, he’s not someone to take for granted.” Aria’s face tightened with worry.

“He’s barely held his own,” I pointed out. “If we had a more powerful mage who could teach the two of you how to use your magic and do the things Onyx Rah needs done, I’d say let him go. But the truth of the matter is, he will not go without a fight. Sire is a manipulator, and I think in his case, it’s best to keep your enemies close.” I didn’t trust Sire at all, but kicking him out the kingdom would come with its own set of problems. It was better to keep an eye on him versus having him try to destroy us behind our backs.

“I remember when he was trying to kick my family out of the Obsidian Valley,” Halo said, continuing to eat. “His motives were so self-serving and narcissistic. He wanted us out of the kingdom because he didn’t like us.” She frowned at the memory. “We had no kingdom of our own, and because his

son was a law enforcement officer, he thought he had the right to toss us out.”

“He said you were causing chaos in the Obsidian Valley, but I’ve never really seen that to be true,” Aria mentioned as she took tiny bites of her food, hardly eating.

“Lara runs a criminal network, but her services keep the people happy, like them or not. And my brother Xavier is an elected official. The people voted for him, and as for me, I just stayed buried in my books, teaching classes. Sire’s only in this for himself. I’m sure when all of this is over, he’ll find some way to take over Onyx Rah.” She looked at Aria. “You and I should work hard to become more powerful than he is.”

“Well, he did say he was always in this for himself,” Aria commented. “Now that we know he isn’t a liar, let’s get stronger, do better, and get to the place where we don’t need him anymore.”

I felt good and vindicated that Aria and Halo had also come to the realization that they’d be better off without Sire. It was something I’d been feeling, but had dared not say.

Aria and I returned to our room and undressed for bed. We were both exhausted after an emotionally draining day and the ordeal we’d suffered in Navarrah City where Polonius had threatened to kill everyone if Aria ever came back to the city without him. We showered together to conserve the warm water that had started pumping up from the lava-warmed hot spring. Once clean, we dried off and tucked ourselves into bed. As soon as we were lying between the soft linen sheets, I began to massage Aria’s neck and shoulders.

“How are you?” I asked, rubbing the rock-hard tension out of her muscles. “I’m not asking the queen of Onyx Rah, but Aria,” I added with a soft smile. As my fingers worked on her, I could feel her tension melting away.

“I miss Aria and her simpler life,” she answered wistfully. “I’ve never been fully content, and I know the moment I met Polonius, there was no way to escape him. But I miss when we were children, and we could just tease each other and be carefree.” She sighed as she turned into my embrace.

“The problem is, you’ve never truly been carefree,” I reminded her.

“Do you think I ever will be?” She looked up at me with those beautiful eyes, as she had earlier that afternoon. They were clearer now, and less pained, but still seeking something she couldn’t find.

I kissed Aria’s lips and held her in my arms. Her head nestled against my

chest, and I brought her in to hold her tighter, wanting her to feel safe and secure. I stroked her softly, and we remained silent for a moment.

“I think that being a queen and running a country is a noble service,” I finally said. “Rulers don’t have simple lives, so by that token, no, I doubt you will ever be carefree. However, will you be truly happy one day? Will you and Onyx Rah be safe? Yes. One day, our lives will be better. As soon as Polonius is dead.” I continued to caress her arms, massaging the stiffness away. “Polonius may be winning now, but in the end, we will see him destroyed.”

My hand gently brushed over her breasts, and I kissed her pillowy lips. “I want to make love to you,” I murmured, kissing her again. “You’re loved and adored, and your heart should feel warm and light. You deserve to be worshiped.” I kissed her bare neck and shoulder.

She took the hand that was stroking her breasts and brought it to her lips. “I need you,” she said. “I already feel loved and adored.” She looked into my eyes. “I don’t need to be worshipped.”

“Oh, no, but you do,” I said with a smile, hoping to bring some light back into that sad and distant expression. I kissed her my way down to her chest, giving each nipple a tiny peck as I descended upon her heaven. I wanted to feast on her that night so she’d know how worshipped she really was.

“I see what you’re doing,” she laughed, tangling her fingers in my hair.

“Do you? Well, here’s hoping you feel it.” I drove my tongue inside her, and she arched into my mouth.

“Ah!” she cried out. “Lex!” Her legs tightened around me as her muscles spasmed.

I plunged into her hard as I sucked and nibbled her soft, sensitive skin. I thrust in and out of her with my tongue until she was dripping for me, then my fingers replaced my tongue, diving in deeper.

“My queen!” I slid another finger into her. “You rule my heart and soul.” A third finger went in, and she started to pant. “And you are my world.”

## Chapter 26

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### *Aria*

I pulled my hands out of Lex's hair and gripped the pillow when he had three fingers inside me and then his teeth clamped down on my clit. The world was stars and pointy edges with razor-sharp desire, fiery hot passion more searing than the lava pits. I needed to explode. I wanted him inside me, a part of me, joined as one.

"Ah, take me, Lex. I need you. All of you." I could hardly speak, I was so blinded with ecstasy. "You're mine."

I grabbed his arms and tried to pull him up onto me. I had to feel his cock. I needed to meld with him, be a part of him.

"Yes, my queen," he answered as he stabbed himself into me, and finally, all the heat, all the fire, all the need bloomed.

"Thank you," I whispered. My body felt whole with him finally inside me.

The worries and fears that had held me captive for days while traveling with Polonius filtered away like a plume of smoke disrupted by the swipe of a hand. I spread my legs wider to take in more of him, and for a moment, all he did was stay where he was seated. As we embraced our connection, he moved ever so slowly, filling me up, then leaving me longing again. Cool air licked the emptiness until his heat erased the cold.

I needed to make love to Lex. It was the perfect distraction from impending destruction. For a while, I didn't think about Sire and his possible betrayal to satisfy his own agenda, or Polonius and his impossible demands. Sire was willing to go to any lengths to get the Goldlace family out of the Obsidian Valley, including helping to create an entire kingdom.

My thoughts warred with intense desire. Lex lifted my legs higher and

pushed himself in deeper as his cock filled the very depths of me. He pulsed further and deeper as he kissed my ear lobe, warming my inner ear while my pussy gushed over him.

“Come for me, Aria,” he said into my ear, his cock pressed against the spot inside me that held an entire storm of sensations. “Let go. Submit to my love.”

His hips rocked softly, driving me to a slow, grinding passion that burned in my belly. Twisted, sharp, aching, wanton, my body shivered with anticipation of my climax.

“More,” I begged, and his rhythm increased. “I want all of it,” I ordered, and he released the weight of his body on me when his arms stopped holding him up to embrace me.

He angled us a little so I wasn’t crushed by him, but his own panting, moaning, and grinding soon had him lost on a path to ecstasy.

“I love you,” I declared as his eyes glazed into a look of such heated desire. “Whatever the future brings, know that I love you,” I confessed with breathless need.

“Forever,” he growled as he held back his release. “I love you. Forever,” he roared for emphasis, and then he kissed my lips, and neck, then moved to my breasts, biting a nipple so hard, I came with a quaking and convulsing that shook my entire body.

Unable to hold himself back any more, Lex slipped out of me and used the bare skin sliding over his cock sandwiched between us to milk a release that coated both of us.

Lex’s deep breaths moved my stomach like we were a singular beast, winded from the fight. We laid in each other’s arms for most of the night, just touching and feeling one another, enjoying our forbidden experience.

I hated to think that there would ever be a day when Lex wouldn’t belong in my bed, or be inside me. I couldn’t imagine a life with Polonius, especially because he so desperately craved what Lex and I had. I knew I could never give him what he needed. Instead, the lonely boy raised in pain would die by the hand he had hoped would guide him.

“We will stop him, won’t we?” I asked Lex, entertaining a moment of doubt.

“His head will eventually be mounted on the wall of our throne room,” Lex said in a sleepy haze.

“How?” I asked.

“We’ll get Amadeus.” His arm wrapped tighter around my waist. “Sleep. We have a big day ahead.”

For the moment, I ignored him. “Will freeing Amadeus serve Sire in any way? If Sire was promised the Obsidian Valley, would he help us free Amadeus to save Voltaire from Polonius’s plans for world domination?”

“Sire is hard to predict,” Lex said as he closed his eyes. “We should be prepared to fight Amadeus at his full strength, expecting Polonius’s influence to be almighty. If it wasn’t, Amadeus would already be here, helping his daughter raise a kingdom.” He sighed as he fought to keep his eyes open.

“Why is Polonius in such a hurry?” I asked, switching directions a little. “He wants me to marry him as soon as we have a pitaya harvest, but he just signed all of those peace agreements. Who is he going to invade?”

“Perhaps shipments from Vitoria have stopped or slowed down. We were heading into a shortage when all of this nonsense with him began.” Now, Lex was almost fully asleep. “Rest, Your Majesty,” he murmured as his arm grew heavy over my middle. “We can continue this tomorrow. I’ll go to my father. Amadeus is his royal mage; he has the right to demand that your father be returned to Navarrah City.” And with that, he fell asleep on my shoulder with his arm draped across my belly.

Referring to Amadeus as my father still felt unnatural and also sad. I’d always wanted a family, and as it turned out, I’d always had one. While I understood the fear and worry that had driven Amadeus to keep my mother and me a secret, I wished that things had been different.

I tried not to wake Lex as I moved into a more comfortable spot beside him. Sorrow overwhelmed my senses, I let my tears drip as they lulled me to sleep. It felt good to just release all that had been pent up inside me and find a peaceful sleep in Lex’s embrace.

We left the drapes open so that the rising sun would awaken us before any of the servants or Gabrielle did. So, just as the cool blue midnight turned to light blue dawn, Lex and I awoke.

“Someday,” Lex said, still drowsy from sleep, “we will be able to lie in and enjoy our bed.” He set two feet on the ground and hoisted himself into a standing position with effort.

He stretched and yawned, trying to awaken his body. I got out of bed and joined him at his side. When he’d put his shirt, trousers, and coat on, I turned him to me and kissed his lips.

“I want to join the morning training with the troops,” I said with a big

smile.

“Coming to work with me, then, Your Majesty?” Lex teased.

“I legitimately need to train so I don’t get rusty.” I adopted a somber demeanor.

“Yes, of course.” Lex did the same. “Will you be coming with me now?”

“I need to freshen up, but I will see you on the training field,” I said, feeling like we were a married couple planning our day.

“Then I look forward to seeing you there.” Lex kissed me and he left.

When I joined the morning training, I saw Bindi working with Halo, practicing on the side away from the Royal Guards. Bindi was teaching Halo various fighting techniques and shifted to show her what her wolf could do.

“Oh, I can’t reveal my wolf,” Halo said in a panic. “I’m not allowed. My siblings have always said not to.”

“She’s right,” I said to them as I walked up from the castle. “Wolf mages are not safe, especially around Polonius. Halo needs to keep her wolf hidden until she’s much stronger both in magic and in muscle.” I flashed Halo a sweet smile so she knew I appreciated her efforts to train.

Halo laughed. “Exactly.”

“This is why I’ve told the troops that Sire Vanoire is the only royal mage in the kingdom. That sounds solid,” Bindi said, and she continued to work with Halo as I joined Lex’s training.

Halo and I worked all morning before meeting citizens in the receiving room. The crowds were still coming in strong, but their numbers were dropping off a bit, which gave us some time to catch up and take a breather. We still saw about a hundred people a day, but I was happy that many of those who had joined our kingdom were building houses on their land and setting up farms, shops, and businesses. Many were Midnight Moon Pack members, but we were starting to let in others, especially in professions that were vitally needed.

After training, Lex followed me back to the castle. On our walk we talked.

“So what is our plan if we can’t get Amadeus?” Lex was ready to talk strategy.

“I could marry Polonius—” I started to say my piece.

“No,” Lex shot me down without even listening.

“As soon as Polonius trusts me, I could make sure Amadeus was no longer being poisoned. And Amadeus and I could find a way to kill him.”

“No, it's too risky,” Lex dismissed. “First, Polonius is not going to leave you alone, you know that. It won't be like last time. And you can't just kill him because you don't want to marry him—that's murder. You'll end up in prison. Polonius is smart, he's just spent three days signing a peace treaty. He's trying to make himself a good guy in the eyes of Tobran and the law. We need to make sure that you don't marry him.”

“Maybe raise an army behind his back because his peace treaty included threats,” I suggested. “Without Amadeus, all he has is a bunch of brutal warriors. With all of Tobran fighting Polonius, he couldn't win.” But I felt like I was grasping at straws.

“They signed a treaty because they don't want war,” Lex said.

Suddenly, there was commotion at the front gates. Loud shouts and screams came through the window from the courtyard below, and Lex and I immediately took off running toward them.



## Chapter 27

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### *Aria*

When I got to the city gates, Polonius and Amadeus were on the outside. Amadeus's arms were in the air, and just as I got near, intense magic started dragging me toward him. I fought hard against the force, but I wasn't strong enough. Amadeus was able to move me inch by inch toward Polonius, who remained outside.

"Get away from her!" Halo screamed as she ran out of the castle with her hands in the air, launching a magical counter attack.

Magic sparked and flew in the air. Halo and I were barely holding our ground. I held myself back as best as I could, but still Amadeus dragged me forward. Bindi called her troops together and was soon surrounded by armed Royal Guards who carried crossbows aimed at Polonius as the other troops fell into line in marching rows. They were well-organized and ready for a fight.

"Protect the citizens," Bindi ordered at the top of her voice. "Get to the encampments. No one leaves. Tell them to get inside of their shelters and wait for our command. The rest of you, surround the gates. Don't let any in. If they breach the barriers, fight to kill."

"What are you doing, Polonius?" I continued to struggle against Amadeus' magic as Lex held me back. "I've done everything you requested of me."

Polonius looked at Lex and scowled. "I thought I made myself clear. He's not to be with you."

"We're not married," I said, clenching my teeth, holding back with all my might. Bindi and several royal guards formed a circle around me. "I'm free to do as I choose."

“You signed a marriage agreement,” Polonius said, his voice bubbling over with hatred.

“Stop this nonsense!” I shouted. “Is that why you’re here? Are you dragging me to Brahman’s Peak?” I stared at Polonius, still fighting Amadeus’s magic.

“You can come of your own free will.” Polonius smiled with sadistic glee.

“Never!” Lex shouted back.

Just then, Crypt Claw broke through the gates after rushing it en masse. How did they get through? Amadeus had clear signs of strains on his face, and his body faltered with fatigue. Halo and I hit him with a unified blast, and Amadeus faltered ever so slightly. Halo broke from me and ran to Amadeus just in time to grab him and puff away in a cloud of smoke.

A Crypt Claw soldier jumped on my back, and I shifted into my wolf. I flipped backwards, landing on the soldier in the perfect position to bite into his neck before he shifted. Another one came at me, and two Royal Guards ran him through with their swords. All around us, Crypt Claw soldiers fell to arrows shot in their heads from crossbows held by sharpshooters positioned throughout the ruins that had not yet been cleared.

How had the Crypt Claw broken the curse? Why had they been able to enter so easily?

When Amadeus had vanished, Polonius started shouting at his troops. “Everyone fall back! Fall back! Regroup! Everyone, retreat!”

I was shocked he’d do such a thing as the Crypt Claw had finally encroached on the city. Had they broken the spell? I had two Crypt Claw poised and ready to fight me, but both turned and ran from me the moment Polonius sounded the call.

It wasn’t like him to retreat. Something was wrong and I had to know what it was. I followed the fleeing Crypt Claw, trying to grab one to ask them how he was able to enter the city.

Just then, the Crypt Claw who had slowed down to scabble over a rock paused when Polonius yelled, “Slaughter!”

Suddenly, the Crypt Claw soldiers who were surrounding Polonius, the ones who hadn’t entered the city, started to kill the retreating Crypt Claw warriors. Each and every one was mercilessly attacked and left in a bloody heap on the ground. The entire scene was a bloodbath, and all Polonius did was watch his soldiers die. What was happening?

I looked over at Polonius and wondered why he'd kill his own men? The look on his face was one of pride and triumph.

"You've gone mad," I said as I looked at Polonius.

"Ask me who they are? The ones who are dead and bleeding?" Polonius's face was calm and cold.

"Who are they?" I rasped, not wanting to know.

"Those who could not pay their taxes. Amadeus spelled them to do my bidding;. You've just killed your own. My Crypt Claw soldiers told those they captured if they were Midnight Moon Pack descendants, we'd spare them. They gave up their birthright quite easily when staring down the end of a crossbow." He glared at me. "Are you ready now to come with me?"

For a moment, it felt like it was only Polonius and I standing there. We were back on tour, alone together.

"No," I said through my shattered heart. "You cannot make me care for you with cruelty. You've killed my people. I need to give them back to their families and mourn their losses with my kingdom. I doubt you will ever learn kindness if this is how you choose to show it."

"Then I'll be back," he said with an icy promise. "You are welcome, Aria, for the return of your father. I'm sure that unexpected kindness will be forgotten." He turned to his soldiers and marched away.

I looked back at Bindi and Lex. "Did we really get Amadeus away from Polonius?" I asked, shocked and saddened by the losses we'd just suffered, but grateful for my father's return.

"Yes," Lex answered, stepping forward to take me into his arms. As we walked back to the castle, he kept me tightly in his embrace.

"Did he do it just to torment me?" I was still so overwhelmed and numb.

"He did it to show you that he won't take no for an answer. He understands how strong you are," Lex said comfortingly. "We had discussed taking Amadeus to Navarrah City the moment we got him, so I hope that's where Halo is. However, it's best if we do not know for now so that we can't be interrogated if either of us is captured."

"Maybe I should just go to Polonius," I said, feeling defeated.

Lex sat me down in the dining room and ordered us both some tea. "No. if you go now, we will never get you back." He touched my face with the palm of his hand. "You're not a sacrifice."

My heart was suddenly heavy. "Maybe marrying Polonius is the right thing to do for my kingdom," I offered, though with deep sadness.

“You know it’s not.” Lex frowned, removing his hand from my cheek. “Why would you even consider it?”

“I’m struggling with the idea that one day, I’ll have to walk away from my people to be your wife. I love you, but I can’t give up my kingdom for you.” I started to cry after saying the words I’d bottled up for so long.

“You wouldn’t be giving it up,” Lex said. “We can work our way around having two kingdoms.” But his voice had gone quieter. He knew that was an impossibility.

“One of us will have to choose eventually. We can’t govern from such a great distance. Navarrah City is two days away from here, even with airships. I need to be where my people are, and one day, so you will you.”

“And so you are choosing to marry and sleep with a man who kills your people to force you into his bed? This is him being good to you. Remember that.” Lex was fuming, but held a lid on his anger.

“I can make demands on him, too, when we’re married. I can ensure that he becomes more benevolent,” I said softly.

“He will not.” Lex shook his head.

“I don’t want to sneak around to be with you because I belong here,” I said. “This is my home. However, you deserve to decide what you want. I can’t be the reason you have to make a choice between a kingdom or a queen.”

“And you would sit by and watch me rule Navarrah City with another woman one day while you are forced to endure Polonius?” His words were cold, but they spoke a harsh truth.

“If it were best for my kingdom and yours, yes, I would have to.” My words burned like acid in my mouth. “If I give into Polonius’s demands, he will be less cruel.”

“You have no guarantee of that.” Lex glared at me, but I understood why.

“I do, because he’s in love with me. If I give him a fraction of my love in return, he’ll back down.” That was the truth I’d been holding from him. “Perhaps a marriage with Polonius is what’s best for my kingdom and yours.”

My few days with Polonius had proven one thing: he was vulnerable to love, thus susceptible to me. Should I offer him what he craved, I believed he would endeavor to be kinder.

“So this great love of his will suddenly make him a benevolent ruler?” Lex said, incredulous. “I think that’s a very naive thing to believe. I, however, have to consider my life, too.” Lex looked hurt and dejected, as if

hearing the very word “love” in association with Polonius had broken him. “I’m a diplomat now, and yet, I’ve done very little that is diplomatic other than try to free Amadeus and spy on Polonius. I might want to explore that role a little more before I’m king.” Hearing him say that struck my heart. “I don’t think marrying Polonius is the right decision at all, but maybe marrying me isn’t, either.”

Was this goodbye? I didn’t know what I’d been expecting from our conversation, but I wanted him to understand that I was planning on staying in Onyx Rah. I couldn’t claim to love him if I forced him to stay with me, I knew that. But still, having him not say that he was willing to stay hurt.

“Does this mean you’re leaving?” I could hardly ask without crying.

“I think the two of us need to take a pause until Tobran is safe from Polonius,” he said. “We aren’t living as a couple right now, and you and I don’t like sneaking around. You have the Royal Guard and Bindi to protect you. Polonius didn’t cross the barrier, so if you stay here, you’re safe from him. More and more, I find that I’m not included in your meetings, which is understandable, but I left a kingdom behind.”

Lex looked anguished, but he was right and thinking like a true monarch. I couldn’t fight for my people and not expect him not to want to go home and stand up for his. He truly was my partner, our values were aligned, and yet because of that, we may not ever be able to marry. Each of us had a duty to fulfill.

Just as I was about to say more, Gabrielle knocked at the door and came in without waiting for my answer.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, but you’re needed for an emergency meeting. They are waiting for you,” Gabrielle said with a bow of her head.

“Can we continue our conversation when I return?” I asked Lex, even though I knew we’d said all we could say on the matter. He had a kingdom that needed him just as much as I did. We were at an impasse, and no amount of love would solve our problem.

“I’ll be back,” I told him when he said nothing, leaving him in the dining room as I walked with Gabrielle.

“I’m sorry Polonius attacked,” she said, seemingly at a loss for words.

Since she was still under the truth serum, I didn’t want to say anything that would give her ammunition for Polonius to use, so I remained diplomatic. “I am, too, but I understand he wants to move his plans forward. They are desperate for crimson pitaya, and he wants his fiancé’s kingdom to

provide it. I also think he's eager for a wife."

"Likely," Gabrielle said with a shrug. "I truly don't understand Polonius."

"No one really can," I empathized with her, realizing that she was just as trapped as I was.

Back in Navarrah City, she was carefree and lusty. She'd enjoyed life and seemed happy with her status as a servant as it had provided a place to live and food to eat. Being Polonius's wife was a powerful position with a very dangerous man.

"We'll get you away from him," I told her. "I promise."

"Don't make promises, Aria," she warned quietly.

"Dreams, then. I'll relegate my promises to dreams of the future," I said and gave her a smile.

"Dreams," she echoed with a wistful smile.

When I walked into the receiving room, it was teeming and bustling in chaos, which lulled as word spread that I had entered. When I was seated in my chair on the dais, I noticed that neither Halo nor Sire were there. Halo was likely still with Amadeus, but why wasn't Sire there?

"Where is the Royal Mage?" I asked the crowd.

I got confused remarks stating that no one had seen him that day. That was definitely worrying. We had liberated Amadeus, but was there a chance that Polonius had abducted Sire?

"I want Sire Vanoire found, please. He needs to be in this meeting. And Bindi?" I was growing irritated now. "Where is she?"

A small man who I'd chosen as our Minister of Administration came up to me. I felt like a giant towering over him as I sat on the dais.

"We've assembled the Ministry of Infrastructure, Ministry of Agriculture, and myself. I believe when Bindi arrives, we have enough of the court to address this crisis. We don't have to wait for the Royal Mage and Her Royal Majesty Halo," he said with a bow.

"Okay," I sighed, feeling very alone and wishing that Lex was with me. However, I had just said I wanted to be the queen. Ruling alone was part of the job.

"Please," I said to them, "take your seats." Each sat at a desk with their name and their position.

Bindi rushed in just after I sat down. "I'm here, Your Majesty," she said breathlessly as she came in, perhaps after making sure that the kingdom was secure enough to operate for a few hours without her.

“Thank you, Bindi,” I said. “Please take your place.”

Bindi joined me on the dais and sat.

“May I speak?” The Minister of Administration raised his hand.

“Yes, Minister,” I said as the frantic little man stood up from his chair.

“We need to make sure that our borders are secure,” he said. “We also have travelers on the road still en route, and families in the encampments.” He was about to go on when Bindi stopped him.

“We have asked for reinforcements from Navarrah City, and they have just arrived,” she said with crisp efficiency. “We also have guards situated on several of the routes to Onyx Rah. We’re ready for the Crypt Claw if they come again. We also have a soldier guarding each encampment for the families, and as many as two or three soldiers stationed around larger groupings. I’ll have three guards on the queen at all times, and there are about twenty soldiers guarding this room.”

“In light of this attack, I think we should solidify the court and have a coronation for our queen,” the Minister of Infrastructure said, standing to his feet. “We need to make political connections in Voltaire, not just Tobran. The queen needs to be recognized and supported throughout the territories.”

He was a tall, dark-skinned man with hair shorn to his scalp. He had to be around forty years old, and like the Minister of Administration, he was serious. It was why I’d chosen the both of them—they had previously worked together in similar positions in the Obsidian Valley. While they had not been ministers, they were high-ranking with vast expertise. Both had a letter from Ellestria Culp highlighting their qualifications and giving her blessing to them as they embarked on their journey back home to Onyx Rah.

“What are you suggesting?” Bindi asked the minister as she looked at me. “When you say you want to solidify the inner workings of our court?”

“The queen must be crowned and named alpha, Halo must accept her role as beta, and our ministers must be officially appointed for the administration of Onyx Rah to be sound.”

“And when I’m crowned queen, I’m to marry Polonius,” I sighed.

“Then we will have a wedding following!” The Minister of Administration shouted.

“None of these can be costly affairs,” the Minister of Infrastructure added. “Something small, legal, and binding is all we need, unless Polonius is willing to pay for it.”

“I suggest we adjourn the meeting for today so we can make

arrangements for the coronation,” I said. “We’ll have that ceremony first, then send out word to Voltaire and the other kingdoms of Tobran that I have been crowned. As for the matter of Polonius, I’ll have to discuss the wedding with him. ”My head was spinning with exhaustion. “This meeting is adjourned until tomorrow, but we will move forward with both the coronation and the wedding if that’s what serves my people best.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” The Minister of Administration said with a bow.

When I returned to my room, Lex was there, but his face was drawn and his eyes were dark.

“Is there anything the matter?” It was a silly question. We had the world on our shoulders, and there were plenty of things to fret about.

“I’m going to be going back to Navarrah City tonight,” he said in such a low and saddened tone, I could hardly hear him. “I need some guidance. I’ll make sure that we supply Onyx Rah with more seeds and emergency food supplies.” His voice was so distant and detached. “I don’t want to leave you, especially now, but I think my being here is what drove Polonius to attack. His jealousy is going to make him a danger to innocent people.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” I said, tears slipping down my cheeks.

“And I don’t want to go, but I must,” he said with a heavy sigh.

“We will have a coronation soon. Something small. I’m sure you and your family will be invited.”

“And a wedding?” Lex choked on his words.

“Until I can find a way to legally kill Polonius, I believe there will have to be a wedding.” I closed my eyes to drown out the pain.

I could feel a void growing between us. Even though we loved each other and deeply understood our dilemma, it still felt like we were choosing to live separate lives.

“Even if you have to marry him, we’ll get you out. This marriage will not be forever,” Lex assured me.



## Chapter 28

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### *Lex*

I hated the disappointed look in Aria's tear-stained eyes. It was hard not to think of this as goodbye.

"I genuinely need to return home," I told her. "I've been away for a long time, and you have the support of Onyx Rah. I need to consult with my father about his plans for Polonius and see if I couldn't get the kingdoms of Tobran more aligned to fight him." I was determined to either halt the wedding or get Aria out of it as soon as possible. "Polonius forged your signature—that must account for something. There must be some legal recourse for you."

"I appreciate your efforts, Lex. Do what you can, but go home and be where you are needed," she said, knowing she was where she wanted to be, but perhaps it wasn't the place where I needed to be.

I rode with the Royal Guards who were replacing those standing watch on the road to Onyx Rah. When I got to the end of the ten-mile stretch that was being guarded, I hiked into the Obsidian Valley and hired an airbus to take me the rest of the way to Navarrah City. The journey home took me all night and part of the next day, but when I passed through the gates of my childhood home, smelling the familiar scents, I felt rejuvenated.

I already missed Aria and wanted to be with her, but I had to find my own place. I was losing my identity. True, I'd trained her guards and found joy in toughening them up, but I couldn't continue to play a diplomat. By going home and finding ways to support Aria's efforts though Navarrah City, I felt more productive. And more like myself.

On my way out of Onyx Rah, I'd run into Bindi and asked her to personally make sure that nothing happened to Aria.

"I'll guard her with my life, as I've pledged to do," she said with all the

seriousness of her rank and station.

“I don’t know when I’ll return, or when Polonius plans on forcing Aria to marry him,” I said, feeling my stomach bottom out for not staying by Aria’s side and protecting her. “Just keep her safe.”

“I’ll guard her with my life for the rest of my days,” Bindi replied. “And thank you, Lex, for working with the troops. They are in the best shape they’ve ever been. When you return—if you return—I’m positive I’ll have more for you to train.” She looked at me with a hopeful smile, and again, I felt like I was abandoning them.

“Keep me updated with your military progress,” I said. “You can send messages through the troops, and I’ll get word. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask. Just use your airship if there’s an emergency. Get Aria away from Polonius at the first sign of trouble.”

Onyx Rah had one airship, which was being used daily to bring in supplies for the encampments from Angeline Falls and the Obsidian Valley. The vehicles Lara Goldlace had gifted Onyx Rah were also being used to transport soldiers to their posts.

Bindi knew that I meant for her to drop everything and rescue Aria from Polonius, above all things.

“I warn you, Lex, don’t do any kind of investigation without Royal Guards accompanying you,” Bindi cautioned. “We have no idea how far Polonius’s influence has spread. Don’t do anything dangerous.”

I understood her concern, but she didn’t know me very well. Danger never bothered me as long as Aria and my loved ones were safe.

I then said my goodbyes and made my way back to Navarrah City. I was surprised that we didn’t encounter a Crypt Claw soldier or any of the bandits I’d heard mentioned at court by the travelers. Perhaps this was because Bindi had stepped up the guard along the route to Onyx Rah. At any rate, we didn’t have any incidents on the road.

I walked through the garden where Aria and I would play as children toward my father’s palace. As soon as I arrived, I was met with genuinely joyous greetings but also with several worried faces, including my brother’s as he came out of the Grand Salon where he’d been in a meeting with my father, Jarvis, and their advisors.

“This is unexpected,” Cheyenne said with a smile, but I could tell he was stressed.

“I’ve come to check in and see if we can send more food to Onyx Rah.

What is happening?” I asked, feeling the heavy tension in the air.

“Well, Father and Jarvis are working on solutions as we speak, but the ports are being attacked. Hundreds of soldiers are descending upon the ports, fighting past our guards, disrupting our trade and supplies. We’re struggling to maintain peace. We’re outnumbered by the soldiers, and many have gotten past us. They run into the mountains with bags of supplies. We’ve killed a lot, but we’ve lost a lot of troops as well.” Cheyenne looked utterly frustrated and defeated.

“How long have these attacks been happening?” I asked, feeling sick.

“It’s been going on for the last few nights. At the moment, Navarrah City doesn’t have anything to give Onyx Rah.”

“Do you think it’s Polonius? Didn’t he just sign a peace treaty days ago?” I knew no other tyrant who would want to wreak such havoc.

“Of course it is,” Cheyenne said with a scowl. “He knows we’d give Aria anything she needs, and he’s trying to cut us all off. The weaker he makes Tobran, the easier we are to conquer. We’ve held our end of the bargain—Aria hasn’t come here, but I don’t know if you returning to Onyx Rah with Aria is being perceived as a violation of the treaty since the point of it was to keep you away from her. The soldiers attacking us aren’t Crypt Claw; that’s the most disheartening thing. We don’t know for sure if they’re with Polonius, or if a territory in Voltaire is trying to invade our shores.”

“It’s got to be Polonius. I thought after Aria and Halo got Amadeus away from him, Polonius would weaken,” I said, more to myself than to Cheyenne.

“Aria and Halo got Amadeus out?” Cheyenne asked me, shock widening his eyes as his mouth fell open.

“Well, Halo, mostly. So, he’s not here?” I’d thought for sure Halo would have brought Amadeus to Navarrah City.

“We haven’t seen him yet,” Cheyenne said quickly. “Come, brother, let’s get you something to eat. It’s been a long journey. I’ll have a cook bring something to your rooms.” It was weird for Cheyenne to change the topic so abruptly, but he clapped me on my back. “I’ll see you up there.”

More out of curiosity than hunger, I went up to my room, where Cheyenne and a servant I didn’t recognize came to me with a tray of food and a pitcher of water.

“Is this Aria’s replacement?” I asked my brother once the soft-spoken woman with long blond hair and a thin build left the room after bringing me a tray of meat, potatoes, and bread. The meal was heartier and less

sophisticated than what we usually ate, but alas, we were under attack and probably rationing. Even in the palace.

“We’ve hired several new servants, and converted the contracts of the rest,” Cheyenne answered. “They now work for their salary and live in the city in their own houses. The servants’ quarters are still used for overnight workers who have to be on call during the night. But mostly, the rooms have been converted into supply storage or temporary housing for new workers who are looking for a place to live.” Cheyenne took a seat at the table and started tucking into the food.

“Aria will be happy to hear that. So, is there a reason I’ve been sent to my room?” I teased, still trying to keep the mood light in spite of the horrors unfolding around us.

“Amadeus is in the palace,” Cheyenne whispered. “Halo brought him here, just as the attacks started happening. No one but me, Nana, and Father know. Halo brought him, and Nana set him up in his workshop with a bed and some provisions. He’s completely delirious, so she’s been staying in there with him. Halo left shortly after she appeared.”

“Halo left?” That wasn’t good news.

“Yes, almost immediately after bringing him,” Cheyenne said, giving me a confused glance. “Why?”

“She’s not been seen back in the castle at Onyx Rah.” I shook my head as my worry spiked.

“Do you trust her?” Of course, Cheyenne asked the first question I would.

“I don’t trust anyone but Aria. So, no. However, she doesn’t strike me as the type to do something risky like liberate Amadeus, then turn around and betray Onyx Rah. ”

Halo would never have put her heart and soul into raising a kingdom, just to betray it.

“It’s strange that she’s missing, though,” Cheyenne commented, pondering the mystery of Halo’s disappearance.

“When Amadeus recovers, we’ll have his support in fighting Polonius. That will account for something.” I hoped we were making the right decisions.

“Here’s hoping he recovers quickly because we’re going to need something soon,” Cheyenne said. “The ports have been under constant attack for several nights now, and we’re exhausting our manpower keeping them at bay. As soon as we defeat them, more come. It’s a never-ending stream,

boatloads of them.”

Just then, a flash of insight came into my head.

“Prisoners,” I said.

“What about them?” Cheyenne asked, confused.

“From Vitoria. Polonius has jurisdiction over the prisoners of Vitoria. That’s why the crimson pitaya shipments have stopped. The prisoners are no longer harvesting crimson pitaya and are being trained as soldiers.”

How had I not figured this out before? I stood up and stared pacing the room.

“While I was being held in Polonius’s dungeon, I overheard the guards saying something about the island. At the time, I thought they were referring to Vitoria, but why would they know if they were Crypt Claw? They knew because they weren’t Crypt Claw. Polonius must be bribing or threatening prisoners to work with him. That’s how they were able to get into Onyx Rah. If that’s the case, Aria and the rest of them aren’t safe.” I felt a wave of panic.

“The prototype of the warship we built based on the plans we stole from Polonius and our own modifications is done,” Cheyenne offered with a slight smile. “We’re in the testing phase, but it still needs pitaya silk, so we haven’t finished weaving the protective layer yet. But it could be ready to fly in a week or so.”

“I appreciate how fast you’ve been able to get the warship prototype done,” I said, but I couldn’t keep the disappointment out of my expression. “But we don’t have a week.”

“We’ve been working on it day and night. As soon as we have a working ship, we can mass-produce more. We’ll have to pull people from the city away from their businesses to focus on the effort, as most of our troops are busy defending the ports or are in Onyx Rah.” Cheyenne also looked disheartened, as if he wanted to offer more.

“Do whatever you have to,” I said, and at that moment, Amadeus walked down the hall.

I’d always loved the way the light shone through the tall windows of our palace, but that very same light cast on Amadeus looked eerie. It made his pained, confused features seem nearly crazed.

“Who are you?” Amadeus asked me and Cheyenne as he stopped before us. “Where’s my little girl? I seemed to have lost her. She likes to play in the halls.” He had with a distant, glazed-over look in his eyes.

I assumed he was talking about Aria, and he knew where she was. Only,

he clearly wasn't himself.

"Perhaps I should postpone returning to Aria until I know that Amadeus is well," I said quietly to Cheyenne as Amadeus stared into the void, not truly seeing or hearing anything.

"I agree. I'll send more troops to guard my *sister*." Cheyenne winked at me, and I understood that he was referring to Aria as his sibling. "We don't have many to spare, but they will be eager to get closer to Polonius and help on the front lines as well as keep her safe. It will be an honor for most. "

I was grappling with my choices. I had come back to Navarrah City to see what was happening, get more help for Aria, and more realistically reassess my place among my own royal family. Being a diplomat, though more Aria's hidden lover than a person of real power or influence, had started to wear on me despite my great love for her. The fact that her kingdom was so new, and she was so inexperienced at running it, had me spinning. I wanted to support and guide her, yet she had good instincts. I had to step back and let her grow into her role, as every monarch before her had done.

Currently, Aria had a brand-new battle commander, a fledgling mage, and a devious mage to rely on. Not the most supportive company. She'd also had me, but I'd left her, feeling unimportant and frustrated with the fact that even if we moved closer to being together after defeating Polonius, our rulership crisis still wouldn't be resolved.

"What are you doing here?" Amadeus demanded, his lips pursed into a scowl. "What have you done with my daughter?"

"Your daughter is safe," I said softly. "Do you know where you are?" I took the mage's arm and directed him toward his workshop, hoping the room where he'd spent countless days would jar his memory.

Amadeus stared at me with a blank look on his face. "I believe I may be lost."

"Do you remember your name?" I asked him, hoping he hadn't completely lost his memories.

"All I know is that I have a daughter and she's been taken. She's in danger." His eyes began to water.

At that moment, Amadeus and I shared a similar sentiment. We were both worried beyond words about Aria.

## Chapter 29

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### *Aria*

“And what of the coronation?” the Minister of Administration asked. “We need you crowned queen. The longer we go without an established sovereign, the more vulnerable we are to take over.” The short man with a grim countenance had a point.

“We’re waiting for Halo,” I said. “Bindi and Sire are trying to find her. I must have my beta here before I can make any decisions. Halo, Sire, Bindi, and myself are the final word. I must consult with them before we move forward with any plans. I’m sorry to keep you waiting, but we have people out looking for her now.”

I was in the newly decorated Grand Salon, where I would meet with my beta, mage, and head of the Royal Guard, and, on occasion, other advisors such as the Ministry of Administration. While I understood the minister’s intentions to be well-meaning, he was a frustrating man to relate to because he was relentless. The fact that Halo couldn’t be found, however, was deeply worrying, all the more so because the minister’s urgency regarding our meeting made her absence suspicious.

“Fine,” the minister replied huffily. “I’ll return when she’s been located.”

While I waited for Halo, I tried a few incantations to locate Halo. None of them seemed to work as there was no electricity or fire, which I usually felt when my magic was working. I tried again, feeling frustrated, when Sire burst through the doors. He was out of breath.

And he had been beaten from head to toe.

“Halo is a traitor,” he choked out before he keeled over with his hands on his knees, bracing himself as he tried to suck in air.

“What happened to you?” I demanded, standing up and approaching Sire.

Halo never would have beaten Sire up and caused such injuries to his face unless he had provoked her, which I fully believed he had.

“Halo left Amadeus alone and fought with me when I approached her, offering to shelter him in the palace,” Sire gained enough of his wits to say. “She then fought me and locked me in a room under the palace. She wants to take over Onyx Rah, and she plans on using Amadeus to do it.”

That didn’t make any sense at all. Halo didn’t want to be queen or lead the kingdom. I’d offered her the chance several times. Something wasn’t adding up.

In a split second, Sire shot to his feet, fully healed, and nearly toppling me backwards with a blast of hot, lancing magic. He threw another blast at me before I had time to recover.

I glared at him. I should have listened to Lex and my wolf, who had both pegged Sire as a traitor long before we’d ended up in this room with him blasting me with magic.

“All I’ve strived for was a peaceful life free of pesky mages and interlopers,” Sire said. “I wanted to be the omniscient power. I deserve to be the most celebrated mage in all of Voltaire. I’ve the age, wisdom, and experience, but you, a slip of a serving girl—a nothing—comes and threatens all that I’ve devoted my life to achieve.” He sneered. “I played your game for a while. What better way to rule an empire? Well, steal its most valuable asset, which would be Onyx Rah. You were so naive and trusting. So self-loathing and wide-eyed. You would have walked through fire, and you did, only to find a mage with such weak abilities.” He chuckled at the irony. “You’re not a queen, Aria. You’re a servant girl who’s been given a pretty dress. You’re no more than a vessel for Polonius’s heirs. Yes, you resurrected Onyx Rah, but any Midnight Moon Pack mage with the will could have.”

I deflected his blasts and tried to throw back magical blows of my own, but my body was weakening, and my magic failed me. No, it wasn’t my magic—it was me. I was failing myself. I was letting his words hurt me, destroy me even. If I didn’t believe I deserved to lead a kingdom, how could the world give me their trust?

“You’re wrong,” I hissed. “You’re just a selfish, self-serving opportunist. A true wolf mage, one with valor and honor, would live for the people, not their own interests,” I growled at him.

“An omnipotent mage wouldn’t have to. But I’m just following orders,” he said as he not only hit me with a blast of magic, but shards of debris from



the floor started projecting toward me. I dodged them and continued to deflect his magic.

“Orders?” I used all of my dwindling strength to continue to mirror his magic back at him and dodge the flying shards of debris. “Who has ordered you to attack me?”

“I already told you not to trust Halo,” he said, still pelting me with incredible blasts of magic.

*Come closer*, I thought to myself. My magic may not have been enough to fight off his, but I could bring an old man like him down to his knees with brute strength. As soon as he got close enough, I jumped into the air and jutted my foot toward his arms, hearing one crack before I landed on my feet again. He gripped his arm, but still had a finger free that he used to continually blast me until I kicked it.

A stronger thrust of magic, more powerful than I’d felt before, erupted out of his eyes. It threw me into the air and then against a wall, creating a physical distance between us before my back hit with a painful thud, and I slipped to the floor. I fought to stay conscious as he moved toward me, using his uninjured arm to continuously pelt me with searing magic, robbing the very breath from my lungs.

Suddenly, the Royal Guard burst into the room, distracting Sire while I had a chance to get to my feet. I joined the troops who were marching toward him as I leaped through the air and kicked him square in the face.

More magic seared me, and I lost my balance.

## Chapter 30

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### *Lex*

I tried working with Amadeus to access his memories and restore his spirit, but he was so lost to the chaos of his own mind. I hoped his amnesiac state was only temporary. It was strange that he had retained some of his memories, but not all. He referred to me as if I was still a child, even calling me by my father's name on occasion.

"Come on now, Helix, don't indulge the boy," he scolded me as I brought him into his workshop. "With the queen pregnant, you can't have him running about like a wild stallion. He might topple her over in the halls unexpectedly."

I led him to where a comfortable bed had been arranged for him.

"Prince Cheyenne was born twenty-one years ago," I said, trying to jar Amadeus's memory and remind him of where he was. But whenever I did, he just looked at me as if I was the crazy one.

Then, as if things weren't bad enough, my wolf felt that Aria was in dire distress. Every nerve and muscle in my body had pulled taught, and I stilled my mind to try and sense what kind of danger she was in. Had the prisoners made it to Onyx Rah? Was someone attacking her from within the kingdom?

Just when my wolf was on high alert, Cheyenne passed by on the path outside of Amadeus's window, marching with the troops. Various soldiers were breaking off from the march to stand guard at different entry points around the palace.

The converted prisoners turned soldiers must have been approaching the city. The invaders were coming closer and would eventually reach the palace. While I had to get Amadeus out of there before he was captured, he was safer in his workshop than anywhere else in Voltaire at that moment because he'd

put warding spells on it. As much as I wanted to take him back to Aria, she couldn't see him as he was. Also, Polonius could not recapture him.

"Nonsense," Amadeus said. "There is no Prince Cheyenne." He looked at me like I was feeding him lies.

"You have a daughter," I said, attempting a different approach. "Aria. She's twenty-two years old." I looked at him, and he shook his head.

"My daughter is a baby," he said. "She has such a light in her eyes, so much fire. See here." Without warning, Amadeus lifted his arms, arching a bow with them to reveal a portal to Aria. "The portal is tied to her heart. It's the only way I can watch her grow up." His face was sad but loving until he looked into the portal, and his features instantly curled and hardened with distress. "Where is she?" he demanded. "And where is India? And Nan? Or Fallon? Where am I?" As Amadeus grew more and more distressed, I craned my neck to see the tiny image before him.

I froze when I saw Sire attacking Aria with magic. She looked exhausted, about to pass out. I had to get to her.

Just before the tiny image snuffed out, Royal Guards came to Aria's defense, but I had no way of knowing if they had succeeded in protecting her. I could only hope they were able to capture Sire and save her. I knew Polonius wouldn't kill her, but she could still be delivered to him.

I had to get back to Onyx Rah as fast as I could.

"That was Aria," I said flatly, mostly to myself because I knew Amadeus wasn't going to understand me.

"She's gone." Amadeus's face fell, and he slumped on the bed, succumbing to despair.

I didn't have time to feel bad for Amadeus or comfort him. He and Aria were both victims of the rules of our kingdom, but there was nothing I could do to heal their past. At the moment, the future was also looking grim for all of us. I had to help Aria fight for our chance for a better life.

"Perhaps there's a potion here that can help us find her," I suggested as I looked over the dusty shelves, trying to find something that would knock Amadeus out so I could leave him and return to Aria.

I needed to get out without elevating his distress. I picked up a shimmering blue bottle that caught my eye. The tiny vial was nearly full, and it glowed in the setting sunlight.

"That won't help you find her," Amadeus laughed. "It's a sleeping potion. I used it on Fallon to knock him out for a few days because I was

tired of his relentless scheming.”

I couldn't help but laugh, because I could see Amadeus doing just that. “Did you?” I asked, laughing harder. “Do you think you might have anything here that can enhance your vision? Perhaps you'll find Aria if you use mental foresight.” I was grasping, as I had no idea if such a thing even existed, but I had to get Amadeus to believe that I was trying to help him find his baby.

“Yes, maybe,” he said. “There is a green and purple vial behind the row of sage powder and reishi crystals.” I wasn't sure what he was referring to, but I did see a few jars of green powder next to a jar of hardened mushrooms. I carefully moved the bottles and found two green and purple vials. “These?” I asked as I held up one of the vials.

“Yes, that. I can drink that, and it will enhance my magical visions.” He perked up a little at the idea of using a potion to find baby Aria, who he'd never see again. She had already grown up.

Now all I had to do was find a way to switch the vials and serve the sleeping potion to Amadeus. On the table next to the water basin and pitcher of clean water set out for him was a cup. I picked it up, turned my back to Amadeus, poured the blue sleeping potion vial into the cup, and handed it to Amadeus.

“Here,” I said. “I poured it into a cup for you.” I turned away from him and put the empty blue vial back on the shelf.

“You shouldn't have.” Amadeus looked taken aback. “One must drink the potion from the vial,” he scoffed, holding the cup out at arm's length.

“Does it matter?” I said with an arrogant nonchalance.

“It might change the potion's properties.” Amadeus shook his head in disgust.

“I'm so sorry,” I said, sounding contrite. “There's another one, but that would be it. I guess if you needed to see her again, you wouldn't be able to.” I was starting to shake, knowing Aria was in trouble, but that I was still a long way away from her.

“Ack, incompetence. Why do I need a mage assistant? You're useless. I'm perfectly fine on my own.” With that, Amadeus drank the contents of the cup.

I'd never told Amadeus I was his assistant, but he must have assumed I was. In any case, the ruse worked well enough for me to assess his condition. Within a few minutes, Amadeus fell back on the bed, and I covered him with the duvet before I left his workshop in search of Nan. When I found her in the

nursery with the children. She was trying to keep them content so that they didn't worry about the impending battle.

"I'm going to have to get them to safety," she whispered to me so her little charges didn't hear anything.

"Amadeus will need a safe hiding place as well," I told her.

"Yes, of course. When he wakes up, I'll go to him. The royal guards are moving us to a hiding place within the hour. I'll make sure that Amadeus comes. I know he's not in his right mind. It will take time." She sighed, and mingled in that sound was a deep level of pain.

"I look forward to the day when this has all ended," I said. "I know Aria misses you terribly." Nan hadn't even seen Aria since her transformation.

Nan was needed in Navarrah City as her little charges, the children of the aristocracy, didn't understand politics or marriage contracts that could save us from war. She had a vital role to play, and while her own granddaughter was fighting on the frontlines of the conflict as the object of Polonius's obsession, Nan couldn't help her, so she helped the other children in her care.

"One day, I hope, our lives will be peaceful and joyous after so much loss and suffering," she told me with a pat on my hand.

Her skin was soft, but her hand felt feather-light. She was aging, and it wasn't something I wanted to admit, but we had to see this horrible crisis ended because Nan deserved happiness as much, if not more, than Aria and me.

"I promise, we'll bring you to Onyx Rah as soon as Polonius is defeated and another caregiver can be found for your children." I offered her a smile and a kiss on the cheek, then left her to find Cheyenne.

I was told he was outside in the garage where we kept our motor carriages and was waiting for me. I approached my brother where he stood by a car with its engine revving.

"I've made some modifications based on the blueprints we stole for the airships," he told me. "Polonius's engineers have crafted a faster combustion apparatus that enhances speed three times more than our current combustors. I crafted this vehicle with a new engine using the modifications. I should get you to Onyx Rah in five hours versus a day and a half. Just be careful and watch out for other vehicles and pedestrians, but this, until the airships are done, is the fastest mode of transport." Cheyenne was smiling with pride.

"You're a genius," I said, clapping my brother's back. "Have you got more of these?" I asked with a grin. "Navarrah City needs them. I don't want

to take your only one.”

“I’ve got three more, so go get your queen! Hurry!”

I didn’t need any more convincing. After giving him a brief hug, I entered the vehicle. He was right—the thing tore through the streets of Navarrah City. I’d never been in a ground vehicle with so much speed.

I got to Onyx Rah in record time. As soon as I entered the kingdom, my stomach clenched and my breath tightened. Where was everyone? The place was eerily quiet. My wolf was pacing inside me, wound tight with anxiety.

Something was very wrong. My wolf couldn’t find Aria, didn’t smell her or sense her. It was as if she’d been abducted...or worse, was dead. His worry inflamed my fear as I raced through the city streets, calling Aria’s name. The encampments were empty, and the castle was still and abandoned. Panic raced through my veins, and I almost shifted to move faster. My wolf wanted to take control, and I almost let him, but that’s when I saw her, lying atop a heap of bodies behind the castle, discarded like trash.

“Aria!” I screamed and raced to her.

I dragged her off the pile and laid her on the ground, shaking her vigorously. I noticed she was breathing, as were the rest of the bodies on the pile.

“Come on! Please, Aria. Wake up!” My nerves were ablaze, terror slicing through every organ within me.

Just as her eyes started to flutter open, Sire Vanoire appeared from behind a fortress of rubble. He had several soldiers behind him, and Bindi was being held by one of them with her arms pinned behind her back.

“Prince Lex Redveign,” Sire said, acid bubbling over his words. “Finally,” he breathed.

“I knew you were a traitor from the minute I met you,” I snarled, trying to grab Aria. Our only escape was to run.

She was in no condition to run, let alone stand, so I was preparing myself to carry her when Sire stepped closer.

“You have an impeccable judgment of character,” he said. “Too bad your instincts aren’t as good. You knew not to attempt to take Aria after you signed Polonius’s peace accord. Yet, you returned with her to Onyx Rah and continued to defile Polonius’s bride.”

“No,” I shot back. “You’re mistaken. I signed a treaty that said I wouldn’t hide Aria in Navarrah City. It didn’t say anything about what Aria could do in her own kingdom. Polonius has no jurisdiction over her lands.” I seethed

as I tried to get Aria away from him.

“For the crimes of treason against Brahman’s Peak, Tobran, and the Warlord Polonius for theft of classified documents and the attempt to seduce and kidnap his intended spouse, I sentence you to death.”

But just as Sire made his accusations, Bindi broke free of the guard holding her. The guard had momentarily shifted his focus to Sire, and Bindi used his instant of bemusement to kick him in the balls with the heel of her shoe. He let out a loud grunt, freeing her to escape and attack Sire.

I didn’t wait a second longer. I hoisted Aria over my shoulder and ran as the guards took off after me.

Onyx Rah Royal Guards appeared from hiding places around the kingdom as I ran as fast as I could toward the castle. There, Aria had a workshop much like Amadeus’s. I knew would be able to seal us inside it as long as she had a little of her strength left.

## Chapter 31

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### *Aria*

I was being bounced and jostled, which made my head ache more. I felt as if I'd been sedated for months, though I knew I was experiencing my first bout of magic fatigue. I'd fought Sire with every ounce of strength I had, drawing magic from the depths of my soul as my wolf and I battled. He'd betrayed us. I should have listened to Lex. I should have trusted his instincts. I'd been too determined to be a mage and rule Onyx Rah that I hadn't listened to reason.

I didn't realize the bouncing was from Lex carrying me until we entered my workshop. He set me on my feet and quickly locked the door. I moved as fast as my throbbing body could to throw my arms around him in a wordless hug. I didn't have the strength to speak, but I did have the desire to hold him. Too much had happened.

His hands rubbed my arms, and his head tilted back to look down at me. "Amadeus is safe, but his mind has suffered from the ordeal. Time will tell when and how he'll heal, but I want you to know I found him. We don't have time to go over what happened here, but I can't leave you again," he said with conviction.

Still not able to talk, I used my hands to open a portal to Amadeus, something I'd learned to do. My wolf had felt Amadeus's tether a few days before, and when I'd been playing with magic, I discovered I could open a portal to see him. I assumed, like a magical window, he could use it to watch me as well.

After opening the portal, my father appeared, sleeping in a bed, covered with a warm blanket, but his face was older than his years. It was bowed into a frown that twitched and jerked with nightmares.

"He's safe," Lex reiterated, and I looked at him, summoning all the



strength I had left to use my voice.

“Thank you.” I took a breath. I realized for the first time in longer than I could recall, I had no plan.

I usually viewed crises with determination and action; at the very least, I had to fight. But I stood there with Lex, the love of my life, and I had nothing. I looked around the room that was filled with the texts Polonius had collected, some vials and potions I’d been working on, and a lot of Halo’s research. Nothing was jumping out at me. I had to find a way to boost my magic and maintain my stamina so I didn’t pass out from exhaustion when I was in the middle of a fight.

Just as I was about to open one of the spell books we’d collected from Polonius’s archives, there was a loud knock at the door.

“Let me in!” Sire yelled, and Lex came to my side, covering me with his body.

“We won’t be able to stay here forever,” I said to Lex, realizing that there truly was no place for us to hide.

My magic was never going to be a match for Sire’s. Only if Halo and I had been able to work together could we have had a fighting chance.

“Either you open the door and send Aria out, or I will kill ten civilians every hour by marching them into the pit. You don’t want to repeat history, Aria,” Sire warned.

Sire sounded just as maniacal and depraved as Polonius. We had well-meaning people defending us, but they were no match for a tyrant and a mage. Especially the citizens who had traveled over many miles to be here and had lived on food rations in makeshift huts without the comforts of home. That kind of existence took a toll on one’s body, and none of the people guarding Onyx Rah had the strength to fight magic and vast armies of super killers.

“Cheyenne has troops coming,” Lex assured me. “We can open the door, and the two of us will jump Sire. We can shift into our wolves and kill him. It’s time he died.” Lex was frantic, but we had both been through too much.

“He has magic enough to stop our wolves,” I countered. “Two of us, two hundred of us, two thousand—he can and will defeat us. I have to find another way.” I felt so lost at that moment. “You know the tunnels under the Genesis Pit? Get as many people as you can to safety there. Don’t let history repeat itself,” I told him, preparing to surrender, at least for now.

I needed to keep fighting, but I just couldn’t.

“What are you saying?” Lex looked at me like I was choosing to give up.

I wasn't giving up, but giving in. I had to regain my strength. I needed to try another strategy—fighting and magic weren't leading us anywhere. So, I walked to the door as Lex lunged for me. I used the last of my energy to hold him back with magic, and I opened the door to face Sire.

“I don't want anyone to die,” I told the mage in a somber tone.

“I know,” was all he said as he opened the door wider, and guards moved inside the workshop.

I had spelled the workshop against anyone whom I didn't want in there so Lex could be there, but so could Sire. I'd truly never thought he would betray us. I'd believed in him, and learned just how I've been with his treason.

I focused my mind on conjuring up a stronghold of protection that no one could pass. I had to keep Lex safe, and I only thought of Cheyenne and Gabrielle as trustworthy enough to release him.

I felt the burn in my veins and knew the magic worked. As soon as the soldiers approached the door, they were zapped and burned by magic, making them cry out.

“Allow them in,” Sire demanded, grabbing my arm.

“I don't know how. Halo and I both set the protection spell, so you'll need both of us to break it,” I said, pretending that the spell I'd just cast hadn't completely drained me.

Sire wasn't perceptive enough to know what I'd done because I made sure to block thoughts of him while casting the spell. All I had to do now was pretend I hadn't done anything. Since he'd attacked me so relentlessly, I was genuinely drained and fatigued.

“I can break any spell the two of you novices could have cast, but I'd rather you submit to my command. The sooner you admit defeat, the better it will be for the people of Onyx Rah and yourself. When you finally submit to the fact that you have lost, you'll be able to better serve your people by helping them accept Polonius as their master.” Sire puffed up and gloated as he spoke.

I tried hard not to be sick. I couldn't let this happen to the people of Onyx Rah again. I had to prevent another genocide.

I didn't say anything to Sire, just nodded. We walked out of the workshop without saying anything at all. What was there to say? *You betrayed me. I was an idiot for trusting you after you tried to kill me several times. I only have myself to blame.*

Sire brought me to the gates of the kingdom, where I was not surprised at all to see Polonius standing there with a battalion of his Crypt Claw warriors.

“There’s my blushing bride,” Polonius said mockingly.

I was far from blushing. Rather, I was an unwilling bride desperately holding on to the last wisps of energy dangling on shreds of hope that dwindled away. I simply looked at him and said nothing, waiting for Polonius to unveil the horror he planned to unleash.

“I wanted to let you know, *darling*, Sire has unlocked the magic spell that kept me from you,” Polonius drawled. “Finally, we can move forward with your coronation and our plans to wed.” The sick, twisted smile that adorned his face sent acid through my veins.

“Unlocking the spell was simple as soon as I was able to reframe my thinking about it,” Sire boasted. “*Per corpus meum mortuum meum*. ‘Over my dead body.’” He laughed.

At that moment, a soldier brought Halo out from the crowd, struggling and screaming. She looked like she’d been as roughed up and beaten as I was. While the soldier dragged her to us, she put up a good fight, even digging her boots into the ground.

Polonius spoke again. “With Sire’s help, we were able to decipher the language and realized we needed to shed the blood of a descendant of Harlance Valian.” The sardonic grin that spread over his lips made me shudder for any time I’d spent feeling empathy for him. “After they are slain, we paint their blood over the threshold, and then you and I can be reunited.”

Polonius pulled out a dagger and stepped toward Halo.

“No!” I cried out with all of the strength I had left. “I’ll leave with you right now. I promise. We can marry tonight, just don’t hurt her,” I begged.

“All I have to do is slit Halo’s throat, my dear.”

I rushed toward the gate, about to vomit. My mind was a blur as I tried to think of a spell to protect Halo.

Sire’s magic stopped me, and I froze in place.

“Don’t be over-dramatic, my dear,” Sire said to where I stood just feet from the city gates. He scowled at Polonius, as if telling him to stop his threats and bullying as he pulled out a dagger of his own. He reached through the bars as I continued to scream and cut a long thin line down Halo’s inner arm, letting her blood ooze and drip from the wound. As her blood coursed down her arm to the threshold of the gate, he whispered an incantation.

Magic swirled up from the place where Halo’s blood had pooled. Sire

backed away from it as the gates swung open, and Polonius walked in.

## Chapter 32

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### *Lex*

I could hear Aria screaming, but I was trapped in that damn workshop. Nothing at all was going to plan, and we were failing. The two of us were good together; we fought better when we were with each other. We should have been out there kicking everyone's ass, but I'd let my ego get in the way. Aria had a kingdom to rule and raise from ashes. I should have solely focused on that, but instead, I'd left to see my home, touch base with my legacy, and remind everyone that I was the next king.

And now Aria was screaming, at the mercy of Sire Vanoire and Polonius.

I couldn't take it anymore. I tried beating down the door with my foot, but it didn't budge; all the kicking did was hurt my foot. I then attempted to smash the window and climb down, and as I did, I saw Bindi and her troops fighting with great skill and effort. But it wasn't enough. There were too many Crypt Claw.

As I smashed the window with a huge, leather-bound volume, the glass didn't break. I looked around the room for something else to throw at the window, my wolf howling to be released.

"I know," I said to him under my breath. "I'm trying." The amount of fear trembling around Aria was too much for my wolf.

I looked down at the city square again. Now, Bindi was on her knees at the point of a sword while other Royal Guards were being killed and brought down in submission. When I saw Aria on her knees with her head bowed and Polonius hovering over her, I shifted, practically losing my mind as I lunged and dived at the window, daring it to break.

My wolf began to howl, and I could feel Aria's wolf responding, though she remained kneeling before the man I vowed would die by my hand. My

wolf thrashed about the room, trashing every inch of it before Halo opened the door and entered, looking pale and pained. There was a bandage on her arm that blood had seeped through. She spoke in a whisper as she tried to calm me.

“Lex,” she said patiently.

“How did you escape?” I asked her, looking puzzled. Sire had cut her arm to allow him to break the protection spell so that Polonius could enter Onyx Rah. I’d seen it all from the window.

“You have to leave,” Halo said in a voice more stern and commanding than I’d ever heard her use.

“I’m not leaving Aria. Especially not like that!” I motioned my head toward the window, where I could see her still kneeling in front of Polonius.

“Aria can teleport herself out when it’s safe,” Halo told me. “Right now, she has to put on a show for Polonius so he’ll not destroy everything we’ve started here.” Despite Halo’s strength, she looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“I’m the only one Aria can trust,” I told her as I tried to release myself from her magic.

“And yet, you left her here without you,” Halo said, stinging me with her words. “Now you have to go. They are going to kill you. Aria will be able to save herself. Polonius wants and needs her—he won’t do anything if he thinks she’ll obey him.”

“We don’t trust you.” I glared at her.

“Well, that’s too bad. Because I’m about all you have right now.”

“Then you need to leave, too. Don’t think for a second that Polonius is planning on sparing you.” She was a fool if she thought he would.

“I can get out of here when I need to, but you—you have to go Lex.” She released her magic as a show of good faith. “Run, Lex. You’re worth more to Aria alive than dead. Please, don’t be so stubborn. Polonius will hurt her if he thinks she’ll go to you. I’ll take care of Aria. She’s like a sister to me now. She’ll be eternally devastated if you’re killed. Polonius doesn’t care about your family or anyone in Tobran. He’s got too much power. With Sire and Aria, he has what he wants, and if he captures you, he’ll have the means to completely destroy her.”

I heard what she was saying, I did, but I was never going to leave Aria. Not again.

I ran out of the room and down to the courtyard, where Sire was holding

our soldiers to the ground with magic and Polonius was shouting out a list of crimes and punishments.

“Bindi, head of Onyx Rah Royal Guard, for launching an attack against me and training troops to fight my own, you will die by execution for treason against the joint kingdoms of Onyx Rah and Brahman’s Peak.” Polonius looked down at Aria. “Perhaps her execution will be my wedding present to you, my love. How lucky it was I found such traitors among your people. You’ll have to learn to do better by our kingdoms. But that will be resolved when you relinquish your duties to me.”

Aria glared at him with fire in her eyes, yet didn’t say anything. I expected her to lash out at him, but he was sentencing everyone to death. Striking up an argument wasn’t going to save their lives.

So, I spoke up.

“She is the rightful queen of Onyx Rah. There has not been any treason committed here.” I pulled out my sword, ready to fight Polonius to the death.

“Ah, Prince Lex Redveign,” Polonius crooned. “How nice of you to join us. It saves me the trouble of seeking you out. For the crimes against Brahman’s Peak, I sentence you to death...to be carried out immediately.” He raised his hand in the air, and Crypt Claw soldiers came at me from all sides.

I swung my sword, instantly killing a few of them. I was ready to destroy the lot of them, but suddenly a blast of heat and magic snapped across the air above my head.

“Stop! Please stop!” Aria yelled. “I beg you, Polonius, please don’t kill him. I’ll marry you right now, I promise, and I will go willingly. I won’t fight you, I promise. Just don’t kill him. Don’t kill them. I’ll give you what you want.” She was sobbing now, and my heart fell. “Don’t make me hate you.”

That was it. She’d given up. In that moment of time when Aria surrendered to Polonius, a zap of magical lighting hit the top of my head. The world spun, nauseating me until I hit the ground with a heavy thud. My eyes stayed open long enough to see Polonius bring Aria up to her feet.

“On second thought, my love,” Polonius said with a wide smile, “I shall sentence Lex to life in prison so that he may witness our marriage and watch as you bear my many heirs. Not only will I rule Onyx Rah with the love of his life by my side, but you’ll give me children of Midnight Moon Pack and Rembrandt descent. Imagine them, all powerful mages, born and raised to enforce my rule.” He laughed as Aria shook her head. “Oh, yes, my dear. We’ll start on our wedding night. And you will be willing as you promised.”

Polonius glared at me, then turned to face Aria again as his voice softened. “I tried being gentle, but you forced my hand. Now you will learn to be compliant...and you will love me.” He looked at Sire, who zapped me with magic again, making sure that I was powerless.

I tried to shift, even though I was still under the influence of magic. But nothing was going to free me from Sire’s conjuring. Before I knew it, Sire’s flashes of heat and electricity zapped my head one too many times, and I finally blacked out.

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\* \* \*

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[Have you checked out Outside the Pack yet?](#)

***I am a wolf in humans clothing...***

All I’ve ever wanted is to be part of the pack, but it’s difficult when you’re human. It never stopped my adopted wolf mother from loving me, but now that the biggest bully of our pack Troy is about to become alpha, he plans to ruin any chance I’ve got of fitting in.

I’ve already got enough problems without adding ‘kidnapped’ to my list. But that’s exactly what happens when we’re attacked and I’m taken captive by the alpha of the enemy pack.

I should hate Night, but he’s nicer to me than Troy ever was, not to mention a hell of a lot sexier. I know our attraction is dangerous, but our connection sparks something in me I never expected, revealing there’s much more to me than my human side.

When Troy hunts me down, it can only mean one thing—war. Now I must make an impossible decision between following my heart or remaining loyal to the pack that raised me...



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# His Royal Mate

# The Voltaire Pack Rising: Book 2

Lindsey Devin

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