

FLAME CURSED FAE
BOOK ONE



OF
BLADES
AND WINGS

ELIZA RAINÉ

A BRIDES OF FAE AND MIST NOVEL

OF BLADES AND WINGS
FLAME CURSED FAE

ELIZA RAINE

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*Do what you can.
Ignore what you can't.*



GLOSSARY AND PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

The World

Yggdrasil (EEG-dras-il) - *the tree of life and common name for the world of the five Courts connected to its trunk by root-rivers*

The Known Races of Yggdrasil:

Ice Court Fae - *pale skin, blue hair, ice and water magic*

Gold Court Fae - *pale skin, gold hair, light magic*

Shadow Court Fae - *varied skin tone, black hair, shadow and fear magic*

Earth Court Fae - *brown skin, green hair, earth and nature magic*

Fire Court Fae - *dark skin, gray hair, fire magic*

High Fae - *also known as Vanir. Ancient psychic race now thought to live in the canopy of Yggdrasil*

Rune-marked - *humans born with rune tattoos that match to one of the five courts, able to create power staffs for the fae*

Valkyrie - *originally 9 shieldmaidens blessed to guard Odin. Subsequently, the name given to all of Odin's magical Guardians trained at Featherblade*

Language Used in Yggdrasil

Valkyrie (val-KI-ree) - Guardians of Odin

Val-tivar (val-TEE-var)

Oskorela (osk-oar-ELLA) - The Wild Hunt

Heimskr (HEEM-skur) - Stupid

Hersir - (HER-sear) - Commander

Names

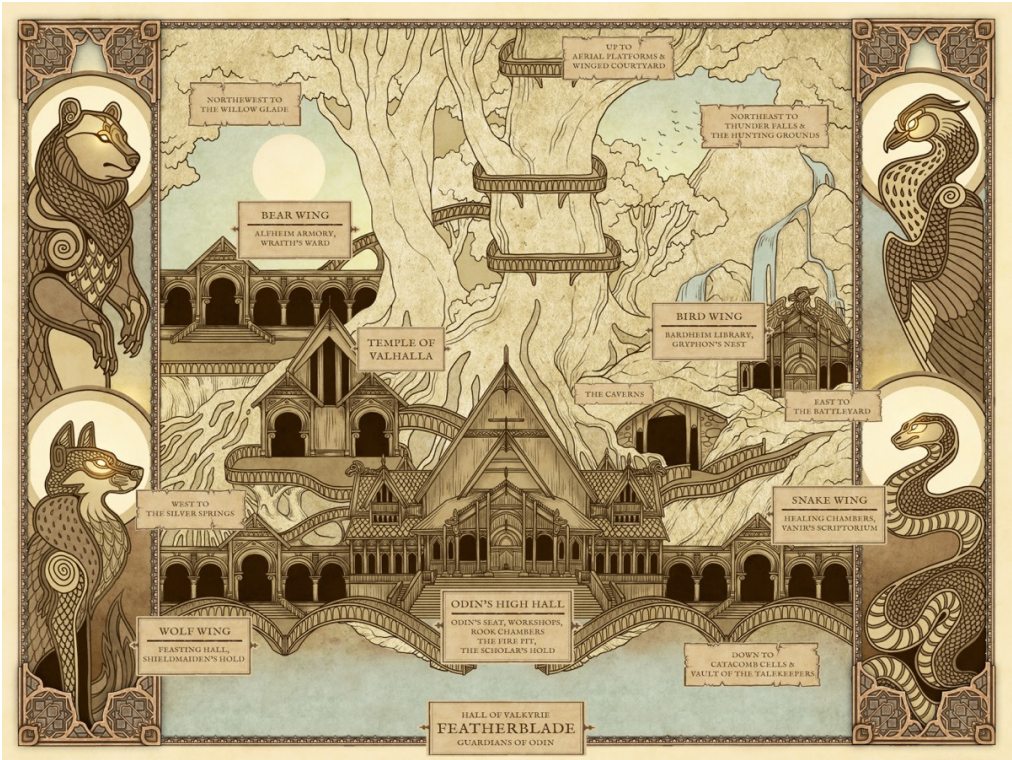
Madivia (ma-DIV-ee-a)

Freydis (FRAY-dis)

Brynhild (BRIN-hild)

Sarra (SARR-a)

Skoll (SKOHL)



CHAPTER I

KAIN



“You-you don’t need to kill me.” The boy backs up, his hands raised in submission. He stops when he hits a pedestal, flinching when the vase on it falls to the floor, splintering apart with a crash. To his credit, he doesn’t take his eyes from mine.

The kid can’t see Skoll. But he sure as fuck can sense him.

I may have had my wings removed, may have had my skin cursed, but the gods could not take my wolf.

Fear oozes from every pore, and fire scorches along my veins as Skoll drinks it in. The wolf gives me power, and as unhinged as he is, fear drives him wild. *Makes me strong.* And fates, it has been a long time since Skoll was able to smell fear like this.

It is intoxicating.

“Tell me, why are you interrupting me?”

The kid shakes his head again, eyes still locked on mine. I know he can see flames dancing across my irises. A taste of what is to come.

“They said you might help me.”

Skoll growls, and the kid’s eyes flicker. Looking for the threat. He will never see him. Only I can see the beast’s muscular haunches, salivating snout, bared fangs, and flaming eyes.

I take a step closer, the wolf’s greed outweighing my curiosity.

“They’re offering good money!” the kid yells, and I halt.

I have been alone with the wolf too long. Alone with the thoughts and the voices too long.

“Who sent you?”

“Th-th-there will be fae arriving soon,” he sputters.

Suppressing a snarl, I glare at the boy. An instruction to continue.

“I have been sent early, with an offer.”

I take another step toward him, crunching the broken ceramic under my boot. Skoll pants beside me.

The kid’s eyes stream at the corners, the scent of his fear rolling through my wolf, and into me.

“Explain yourself, boy. Or you will burn all night. And that is too long to appreciate such a short life.”

CHAPTER 2

MADDY



I get very little warning before the blackouts. Just a swirling in my stomach, a little lurch of dizziness, and then the darkness comes. Annoyingly, though, there is always enough time to wonder if this is the one I don't wake up from.

That's the part that causes me true fear, makes my heart pound in the second before I lose consciousness. I know I won't hurt myself when I fall because my sister is there, and I rarely have any lasting effects.

But I was told when I was young that one day, I won't wake up. Any blackout could be my last. They don't know what is wrong with my brain, or my magic. All they know is that it will kill me, eventually.

My parents stopped consulting healers years ago, when they discovered the unexpectedly useful side effect of my faulty brain. But my sister didn't give up. I knew she never would.

"Oh, Odin help me, not now," I hear her mutter as I come around.

I make a mental note on my tally. *653. I've survived another one.*

My reality twists as I open my eyes, my mind trying to draw me away from my rooms and my sister, and into the sanctuary that exists only inside my head.

I force it away, clinging to the cool existence of the icy blue bedroom I share with Freydis. I plaster a smile on my face even as I swallow down the usual surge of nausea. "At

least I was already lying down,” I slur, waving an unsteady hand at my fur-covered bed.

Freydis puts her hands on her hips and stares down at me. “*Sitting* down, Maddy. You were sitting down. And you took half of the nightstand out with you.” She points at the bottles of perfume, glittering jewelry, and pressed powders now covering the thick fox-fur rug at her feet.

“Oh. Shit.”

My sister rolls her eyes at me for cursing—it’s unbecoming in a princess, apparently—and I sit up. Freydis presses a hand to her head, her stern face screwing up in pain. I stumble to my feet, reaching for her, but she waves me away. “I’m fine. Come on, we need to be at the ball soon, and now I have to redo your eye powder. Sit.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, sitting as she instructed. I feel bad about knocking all her pretty things over, but I do that regularly. That’s not why I’m sorry. Her eye is twitching as the pain leaves her, and I hate myself for it.

“Do not blame yourself.” She gathers the powders and paints and sits down next to me on the bed, turning my face gently to hers. “It’s not your fault.”

“Do you...” I start to ask her a question, but sadness wrenches in my gut, and I’m forced to pause. I do everything I can to stop the wave of emotion showing on my face, resulting in an awkward fake cough and lopsided smile. “Do you think you will still get the headache attacks when I black out when we’re not in the same court anymore?”

Freydis stares into my face, a similarly sad, knowing look in her eyes. “We’re connected, Maddy,” she says softly. “That won’t change when I leave.”

I drop my gaze.

Everything will change when she leaves. *And I don’t know how to deal with it.* I draw on my love for her and project a smile as far across my face as I can, trying to make it reach my eyes when I look at her again.

“I can’t believe you’re going to be a Valkyrie,” I say through my stretched lips.

She gives me a dubious look. “*If* I get through the training and prove myself worthy of Odin,” she corrects me.

I snort. “Freydis, you have our parents’ power and your own. You will ace every test they give you.”

Whilst my sister shares in my affliction—she has never fainted but she suffers blistering headaches whenever I black out—she does *not* share my lack of magic. Her hair has vivid streaks of blue in it, as well as a number of honor-won braids, and her ice powers have been strong since we were children. Her face bears my parents’ high, regal cheekbones, her skin is chalky white, and her ears are perfectly pointed at their peak. Everything just as a true fae royal should be.

My ears are pointed too, but my hair is mostly white and braid-free. My skin is always too flushed for ice-fae royalty, and my lips don’t suit the dark purple colors that the court loves this season—rose-pink colors them instead.

Not that it matters what the Ice Court thinks of my looks. They don’t know who I am—you can’t parade around an ice-fae princess with barely blue hair and no real magic, who faints regularly for no reason.

Plus, it behooves my parents to keep me hidden from their world. There is less chance of anybody finding out what my broken brain can do instead of create snow or shoot shards of ice.

“Just remember, Maddy,” Freydis says, touching my cheek. “I’ll always know if you’re safe. We have a bond.”

“Will I know if *you’re* safe?” I ask, working to keep my emotions in check.

“You know that stuck-up noble we stole the diamond from last month?”

I nod.

“Well, I took something else from him.” She reaches into her deep robe pocket and pulls out two identical compact

mirrors, both decorated with turquoise enamel shells. “These will let us see each other while I’m away.”

Hope surges through me so hard my fingers shake as I take one from her. I tamp down the immediate urge to test it and push the compact into my skirt pocket, but it is hard. *Maybe the loneliness won't be so bad after all. Not if I can see her every now and then.*

I lean forward and hug her, refusing to let tears fall. She has been honored by the emissaries of the gods themselves by being chosen to train at Featherblade, and I am going to show nothing but happiness and pride for her.

But fates above, I will miss her.

“Tonight, at my leaving ball, I need you to be as sharp as you can be,” she says, gently pushing me back, then brushing my hair from my face and picking up a box. “You still have to find a—”

“Moonstone, starstone, firestone, and an emerald,” I finish for her. “I know.”

“Good.” She nods, applying a peach-colored press to my cheeks, then wiping away whatever was already on my eyelids. She has already made herself up, and she looks more beautiful than any ice-fae in the court. “There are just four gems missing from the tiara now,” she mutters, and I know she is trying to soothe herself as well as me. “Once we return them, its power will be restored.” She draws her attention from my lips to give me a smile. “If anything in the world can cure you, Maddy, it’s the tiara of Skadi. You must not give up while I’m gone.”

Her words make my teeth clench, and it’s even harder to keep the sadness from my eyes. I’m not being pessimistic. I just know that the tiara won’t work on me. I always have.

Just because it once belonged to a goddess doesn’t mean it will do anything for a powerless, broken fae like me. Unless we can summon Skadi herself, I can’t see how a lump of metal, even if it is a very beautiful one, can possibly make a difference to my broken brain.

But I will never say this to Freydis, because the last few years sneaking out to gather gems and metals to repair the old tiara with her have been the best years of my life.

We've been so many places beyond the walls of my beautiful tower of rooms, and I've learned so much—not from the books and memories that my family have fed me for decades, but from *real life*. The bite of my fist on flesh or the touch of a man are things I previously only dreamed about.

Admittedly, I have experienced only a fraction of what the rest of the fae of *Yggdrasil* are able to enjoy, but after so many years hidden away by my parents, I am willing to take *whatever* I can get, no matter how desperate, dangerous, or naïve it might make me. Any of my blackouts could be my last, and Odin take me, I wish to wring every drop of excitement I can get out of my gods-given time in this world.

Only, that's all over now.

I will not be able to sneak out of the palace and find the last four gems without her. I will not be able to scale ice mines—or steal jewels from nobles, or win wagers in human-filled taverns for trinkets—without her magic, or her being there to catch me when I faint.

My life will exist only inside these walls, alone until the sickness in my brain finally wins.

This thought is so crushing that whenever I try to accept it, my breathing turns fast and my head spins, and I am forced to pretend that this is not about to become my reality, forced to bury the panic and instead focus on my love for my sister.

She is strong and powerful, and she can become a legend—a winged Guardian of Odin.

I am weak and soon to die.

Neither of us can change that. So, there is no way in this world I am going to prevent her from reaching her glorious destiny or let her feel even a drop of guilt about doing so.

“I'll find the last few gems,” I lie.

“I know you will.”

I'm almost certain she knows that I can't.

I change the subject. "How often can I speak with you through the mirror?" I ask.

She shrugs one shoulder lightly. "I don't know how demanding the schedule will be. If there is a lot of combat training, then it may be tiring." She gives me a small smile. "But your sense of humor is a balm I'll never turn down."

Freydis regularly accuses me of over-optimism, and I deploy that in full now. "If you're ever in need of some creative cursing, I'll be there, ready for you to roll your eyes, but secretly be impressed," I say cheerfully, even though it feels like someone is tying my stomach in knots, and the backs of my eyes are prickling.

We fall into silence, and I watch her bite her lip in concentration while she paints sparkling blue powder under my eyebrows. Probably for the last time.

"You know, I am the best-dressed handmaid in the palace," I say as I look at my reflection when she's finished.

Freydis rolls her eyes, but I know the gesture was meant for our parents, not me. It took her years to convince them to let me attend social functions in the guise of her favorite slave. There was no point in *me* pleading. I serve one purpose for my parents, and it rarely occurs in a ballroom.

"We must go, but Maddy, don't forget to concentrate tonight." She has taken on her sharp tone. The one she uses when she's trying to get me to focus.

"I will." *I will try*. Concentrating is not my forte.

"You must. That tiara has to be fixed."

I bite my tongue and beam at her. "By the time you've earned your wings at Featherblade, Skadi's tiara will be in one piece."

She smiles back, and I can see that it is as forced as my own. We both know that by the time she earns her wings, I'll be dead.

CHAPTER 3

MADDY



When we begin the long descent from the north wing tower to the ballroom, my head is immediately filled with the low buzz that leaving the quiet calm of our rooms causes.

When I am sitting still for Freydis, I find it easier to still my mind, which is one of the reasons her doing my makeup has become a routine before we do anything that requires me to concentrate.

But now I'm moving, my mind is moving too. It has always been like this. Today, I'm grateful. The buzz is better than the feeling of impending doom that keeps flooding my mind whenever the reality of tomorrow tries to take its grip.

I try to focus on the magical ice blocks that make up the circular walls around us, glancing out of the sheer sheets that make up the windows at the rest of the palace and the glittering, manicured courtyards far below.

Despite never being announced to the world as the daughter of King and Queen Verglas of the Ice Court, I *am* a princess. And the Ice Court Palace, although a prison for me, is the most beautiful, most remarkable cage a fae could wish for.

I may be trapped, but not by anybody who means me any harm. I am just an “unfortunate victim of circumstance,” as the healers tell me. The glittering structure I live in is a safe harbor, offering me the best that can be made of a situation

beyond anybody's control. And I guess if one is to stare at the same walls forever, they could do a lot worse than this place.

The palace moves, too, so my view is always changing. In fact, the whole landscape shifts, everything in the Ice Court set on sheets of ice that change position constantly. It is an excellent defense mechanism, as enemy raiders not only don't know where they are going—they also don't know how to escape when they are caught. And we are raided often, usually by the gold-fae. The shadow-fae raids have lessened in the last year, and the earth-fae are rumored to be dealing with a sickness affecting their human slaves. The fire-fae haven't been seen in a long time, and among the many, many pieces of information forced upon me by my parents, I don't recall anything about the landscape of their court. For a beat, the constant pull in my mind wins the battle for control, and I start to slip, curiosity burning as reality fades. *What does the Fire Court look like? Does it move, like ours? Does it have rivers of liquid fire? Does it—*

“Maddy!”

I stumble on the ice step, reality snapping back into place. “Shit. Sorry,” I say as my sister gives me an exasperated look. Her huge, glittering gown is swept up into her arms, white with swan feathers shooting up from the back of it and a deep plunge at the chest. Her beautifully carved, bright blue staff is at her hip, and all her jewelry is set with diamonds.

“Pay attention,” she hisses. “It's hard enough watching you for fainting—you don't make it any easier constantly abandoning reality deliberately.”

Easy for her to say. If she saw inside my head, she'd abandon reality too. I would bet Thor's arse on it.

“I know. I'll try harder,” I say, making a point of watching each step as I descend in my sparkly slippers. My dress is nice too, blue and teal with hundreds of glittering sequins across the bottom half of the skirt, and a long, sweeping sheath for my much less impressive—and mostly pointless—staff. I have no feathers, though. *Would I like feathers on my dress?*

I feel my concentration slipping once again as I recall all the dresses with feathers I have ever seen.

Maddy! I berate myself silently. *It's Freydis' leaving ball. You need to be present for every minute.* I draw a long, grounding breath. *They will be your last with her.*

Two palace guards, wrapped in leather and furs and wearing blue war paint on their cheeks that, along with their brown hair, mark them as human, are waiting for us at the bottom of the staircase. They nod politely when we reach them, before falling into step behind Freydis. I hang back, walking with them, as is my place.

When we reach the ballroom doors, we pause so that my sister can be announced. "*Princess Freydis Verglas of the Ice Court, heir to the ice throne!*"

We walk under high, arched ceilings that glitter azure, lit from the inside by a thousand blue stars. My slippered feet make no sound on the flawless ice as I follow in the wake of my sister's smiles.

I let my eyes linger over the glacial grandeur as we walk. Court nobles are whirling around in complicated dances I could never pull off, their fine silk skirts and damask robes flying behind them like flower petals in the wind. I ground myself with the small details I can see, like the delicate frost patterns etched into the balcony banisters that I used to run my fingers over as a child, and the twisting patterns of pressed white snow that run all the way up carved ice columns too tall to see the tops of.

There is an orchestra tonight, and their finely carved string instruments, horns, and flutes look as though they are made of glass. Perhaps they are. My mind tugs at me, and I move my gaze to something else, quickly.

Trays of chilled cocktails that emit a silvery mist almost cause my feet to take me off course, I'm so desperate to know what they smell like, but I force my feet to stay straight, keeping pace with my sister and her guards. My eyes land on a snow leopard lying collared and leashed at its mistress's feet, and thank the fates, we have reached the dais in the very center

of the room, or I would likely have abandoned Freydis and gone straight to the huge cat.

“Daughter,” my mother says to my sister from one of the two thrones on the grand ice platform. “You look resplendent this evening.”

“As do you, my Queen,” she answers formally. My palms itch and I force my hands and mind still.

I do not dislike my parents. My father I hardly know, but my mother usually has something that can be described as a smile for me. They have never hurt me or treated me badly. They just... gave up trying to save me once they realized that the very thing killing me is possibly the most valuable asset the Ice Court has.

I suppress a sigh and arrange a neutral look on my face as I bow low with the two guards.

“There are many suitors here tonight,” my father says. Freydis’ cheeks turn the slightest shade of peach, like warm sun on snow.

“Tonight is not a night for suitors, Father,” she says, and I see the resignation in his eyes. He does not want Freydis to leave either. Without her, there is no heir to the Ice Court throne. But the gods’ emissaries have spoken. Featherblade is calling for new Valkyrie recruits after centuries lying dormant, and the call can’t be refused.

My mother *tsks* quietly, giving her husband a sideways glance. “Of course it is not a time for suitors. It is an evening for great honor.” She smiles. My eyes move to the new braid in Freydis’ blue hair, the one she earned by being selected for training at Featherblade. She will earn many more in her life, I am sure.

My mother stands, and the ballroom falls silent in an instant.

“Thank you for attending, loyal friends,” she says, her soft voice carrying through the cavernous hall. “Although we will miss our brave daughter, we are most honored by her mission. Strength, valor, honor, truth, and victory. All values upheld by

the legendary Guardians of Odin: the Valkyrie. At the side of the gods themselves is the perfect place for our daughter.” She sweeps her arms toward Freydis, and every head turns to my sister. I keep my eyes on the Queen. Is there regret or sadness in her eyes?

No. All I can see is pride.

Unusually, I feel a stab of bitterness.

Freydis *is* all of those things, a perfect representation of the values the Queen just listed.

But the Ice Court is not. *My parents* are not.

For all the talk of valor and honor in our world, the truth is: *secrets always win*. Those who hold knowledge over others can do as they please.

I am weak compared to most, my magic barely existent, but I am more valuable to my parents than any weapon, and more dangerous to them in the wrong hands than any warrior.

The building wash of resentment rising through me dies in a heartbeat, though, as my sister speaks.

“Thank you all for coming to wish me well. I will represent our people with pride and fight well for *Yggdrasil*.” She raises one hand above her head, palm flat. “For the honor of Odin,” she calls, and the room rings with the echo of her words.

I feel guilty about my bitter thoughts. My mother is right to be proud of Freydis, of course she is. So am I.

I’m just scared. Scared of the endless hours I will spend alone when she is gone. Dizziness pricks at me as the panicked thoughts try to take hold, and I am relieved when Freydis turns back to my parents and the music restarts.

“Do you know when I will be collected?”

“Dawn,” my mother replies, and my panic returns.

“Who are they sending?” Freydis asks.

“I don’t know. There are six known living Valkyrie left, I believe?” My mother looks at my father for confirmation. He

shrugs, but his gaze falls on me.

I raise my eyebrows, praying that he is giving me permission to answer my mother's question.

I hear his voice inside my head. "*Go ahead.*"

With relish, I abandon reality.

CHAPTER 4

MADDY



Within a second, I am in the gallery. The place inside my mind that I didn't know for years didn't exist in anyone else's. I thought everybody's heads were the same inside.

Apparently, they're not.

I call it the gallery because it is one endlessly long corridor, and it is filled to bursting with statues made from ice.

Most are as tall as I am. Some are detailed, and some are rough, but I made them all. Well, all except the three that were here first: a bear, a wolf, and an eagle.

But every other one was made by me. And now I have to find the right one.

I concentrate on my mother's question. *How many living Valkyrie are there left?*

The corridor moves beneath my feet. I stay very still, and eventually, it comes to a stop, an ice carving of a yew tree before me. The form of the statue makes no difference to the memory that's stored inside, but I take a second to notice the details in the leaves and the texture of the bark.

When I reach out a hand and touch the ice, it turns to water, the memory stored within it flooding over my skin, making the tips of my fingers fizz with the cold. It's a delicious, bone-deep cold that I know is as much part of me as the color of my hair or the scars on my knees from falling so often as a child.

Reality slowly floods back into place as the carving reforms, and for a moment, I'm both standing in front of the expectant gazes of my sister and parents *and* watching the ice knit itself back together, the yew tree taking shape again. When I'm finally fully in the ballroom again, I'm holding a piece of paper.

Most of the memories that my family have fed me have been from pieces of paper. Some of them are from interviews, the unwitting participants having no idea that a fae with a magical memory was behind the blue curtains, storing every detail of what they said. But the majority of the sparkling statues that fill the gallery contain memories of stolen parchments, acquired in raids from all over *Yggdrasil*, or bartered for by unscrupulous folk whom my family would deny knowing, but pay handsomely in secret.

A couple of the memories are real, things I viewed, important events and days, but not many of them. There is very little in there that actually belongs to me.

That doesn't stop the need to search it from always pulling at me.

Everything I see, everything I hear, and anything I recognize causes the pull. I immediately want to go and find out what I know about it, what might be stored in the endless, icy corridor.

When my parents first realized that I could store and recall every single thing I saw, read, or heard, they gave me too much. It took me a long time to learn how to store it better, how to choose what stayed in the gallery and what did not. Now, they feed me new information less often, but they use me to recall what's there all the more frequently.

I don't know if they know as certainly as I do that the growing collection of ice carvings and the constant tug of the gallery on my mind is inextricably linked to my blackouts. It's too late to stop using it, the blackouts are a part of my life now, and there appears to be no correlation between how much I use the gallery and how frequently I faint. But I wonder if

my parents would have used my memory powers less if they had known it was linked to what is killing me.

Sometimes, I don't think I want to know.

What I *do* know, though, is they will never let me leave the Ice Court because of it.

“Well?” My mother's voice makes me blink and look down at the piece of paper in my hand. It does not have a fully solid form—it's more of a glittery, floating ghost of a piece of paper than an actual piece of parchment.

My sister demonstrates her bond to me by staring at it too. We realized when we were young that only we could see what I bring back from the gallery. She can't make sense of whatever I melt and bring forth; she is just aware of the glowing magic of the memory, whereas everybody else is completely oblivious.

This memory is pages from a book, I think. Or perhaps a report? The handwriting is a scrawl, and I realize there is more than one color of ink and style of word on the pages. I scan until I see a long list of Valkyrie names. By most of them is a neat word added in red ink: *deceased*.

I move my eyes down the list, skipping those until I find one that isn't marked as dead.

“Harald the Huge. Shadow-fae, brown wings,” I start to read. My family nod, and the two guards look uncomfortably at each other. They know there is something wrong with me, and I suspect they know I am more than a handmaid—they have been Freydis' personal guards for a decade. But they value their lives, and their tongues, so they will say nothing. Just... look awkward as the weird fae reads from an invisible book again.

“Erik the Kind, renowned healer, earth-fae. Only Valkyrie known to have more than one color in his wings,” I continue. I read faster, looking for what the colors are, but there's no indication of it on the paper.

“Brynhild the Knowing,” I read next, but when I glance up and see the looks on everybody's faces, I skip the rest about

her. Brynhild is the most famous ice-fae Valkyrie of our past. She is a legend in our court. I'm pleased that it does not say *deceased* next to her name.

"Valdis the Fast," I read. "Lightning fast, gold-fae. Black Wings, small in stature."

I move through six more deceased Valkyrie.

"Kain the Ruinous," is next, and my brows draw together in interest. "Fire-fae." That's all it says, nothing about his wings or warrior attributes. Disappointed, I move on.

"Sigrun the Great, leader of the Valkyrie, fierce warrior woman, earth-fae, magic spear, white wings."

She is the last one on the list not marked as gracing the halls of Valhalla in the afterlife.

I keep scanning the page, looking for any more information on the Valkyrie, but it's mostly information about Featherblade, the magical, god-created hall where the Valkyrie are trained. *Where my sister will be this time tomorrow.*

I swallow hard and look at her. "Do you really believe a Valkyrie will come to collect you?" I ask Freydis.

"I don't know." Her words are a whisper, and I can see the excitement in her eyes when she looks at me. It is in direct contradiction to the swelling panic I'm feeling at her imminent departure from the palace, and I mask it with a grin.

"Wings, Freydis. You're going to get wings!"

My mother coughs, and my father scowls. I am talking to Freydis too familiarly, I realize.

I drop my eyes to the floor, stopping the small swirl of anger before it reaches my mouth, keeping it contained in my gut instead.

Freydis gives me a sympathetic look and touches my arm. "You may go, Maddy. I will call if I need you," she says quietly. The dismissal is a relief. With a nod for Freydis and a bow to the King and Queen, I turn.

I'm usually better at masking my feelings around my parents, and I am painfully aware that I need to control myself at functions like this. I am not going to ruin Freydis' last night.

Sadly, I am certain that letting a large, carnivorous cat loose in a ballroom of fae nobles doesn't qualify as *controlling myself*, so I deliberately turn away from the snow leopard and move forcefully to the tables of food.

They are covered with hundreds of types of fish, and a selection of delicacies from our greenhouse gardens. Plates of grapes, apricots, and plump strawberries, made even tastier by the intricate ways our people have learned to grow fruit. Crystal fleets of fizzing, fae-wine-filled glasses glitter along the side, but I can't touch those. I'm a servant. Instead, I scoop up a huge helping of smoked salmon served over rice and a tiny bowl of strawberries.

If I were alone, I would have taken more, but I consider what I have on my plate as a polite helping. Nibbling as formally as I can, I try to scout out a moonstone amongst the finery of our guests. It's the most common of the four gems we're missing, and despite not believing it will make a difference, without the mission to repair the tiara, I really don't know what I'm going to do. It's a safe thing for me to focus on, and nobody thinks twice about a slave girl staring in perceived awe at the jewelry decorating their hands or their throats.

A deep rumble startles me—startles everybody in the hall. I look around, instantly seeking my sister. I find her eyes already on mine, and together, we look up to the ceiling. When you live in an ice palace, the first thing you do when you hear any loud sound is check the ceiling. I'm expecting to see a broken chandelier or splitting ice, but my mouth drops open in shock.

CHAPTER 5

MADDY



A swirling, spinning mass of black shadow and gold light is appearing above us.

It's huge and terrifying, but also utterly mesmerizing.

I have no recognition of it whatsoever, but I have no doubt that it comes with danger, and my skin prickles as its magic flows through the room. I hurry toward my sister, hoping that she'll come toward me, but she doesn't. She stays right next to my mother and father. A voice booms through the ballroom, halting me in my tracks.

“Outside, now. Everybody.”

For a second, nobody moves. Including me. I look between my sister and my parents' faces, wondering what they will do next.

It occurs dimly to me that I should consider what *I* would do next, but then my mother stands up. My father stands too, and the whole room stares.

“We shall move outside,” the King says, as though it is his idea. He and my mother step down from their dais, and together with their guards and my sister, they lead the way through the grand archway, out into the frost-covered courtyard beyond. Obediently, all of the fae begin to file out of the ballroom after the royals, curious and fearful mutters making the whole space hum.

The shadow and light follow them, too, flowing like liquid through the high doorway and re-forming as a swirling mass

outside, starkly dark against the always pale blue sky of our court.

I hurry after the fae leaving the ballroom, emerging into the cold courtyard and finding that everybody who has gone before me is blocking the way to my family. *I may only be a handmaid, but I'm the damn princess's handmaid.*

"I must get to my mistress," I say to anyone who glares at me as I push my way through, eventually forcing my way through most of the awed crowd. When I reach the front, I can see why they are so reluctant to move.

The sparking, shadowy mass has settled on the frosted grass lawn, and in the center of it is a portal. Where there used to be a fountain with an enormous swan in it, there is now a huge, swirling window straight into another world.

I stare in absolute amazement as I recognize the five people looking back at us from a forest clearing.

Fates above, I am looking at real-life winged Valkyrie.

Erik the Kind is in the middle, and the colors of his wings that I couldn't find in the document, I can see for myself. Massive, heavily feathered black wings flank his lithe body, and they are decorated with bright yellow rings.

Harald the Huge, at least a foot taller than the largest fae I've ever seen, is at Erik's right. Valdis is next to him, looking tiny next to such a large figure, but her expression is so fierce that not for a second do I believe her small stature causes her any problems on the battlefield. Brynhild, supremely elegant, rippling silver wings flowing behind her, is on Erik's left.

When my eyes land on the last fae, my breath catches.

He has no wings.

He is a Valkyrie, I am sure, but there are no feathers erupting from his shoulders. He has bronze skin, hair the color of ash, and the most intense gray eyes I've ever seen in my life. Somehow, I can see them all the way from where I am. And bafflingly, he's looking straight back at me.

This must be Kain, the fire-fae. But where are his wings? The urge to dive back into the gallery to find out why anybody might become a Valkyrie and not have wings is almost too great. I'm fighting it with everything I've got, so I almost don't hear my father speak.

"Welcome, Guardians of Odin. We were not expecting you."

Understatement of the damn century.

Harald steps forward. I force my eyes to move from the fire-fae and focus on the huge shadow-fae instead. His hair is raven-black against cool-colored skin and filled with braids ending in silver beads. He has thick smears of black war paint across his cheeks, and his wings are deep brown, almost like fur. Huge and fierce as he is, there is an elegance to him.

"There has been a change in our plans," he booms. "We are collecting the remaining Featherblade recruits tonight."

His words make my muscles freeze, and my skin tighten.

Tonight?

They are taking Freydis tonight.

I thought I had at least a few more hours, but she is leaving tonight, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.

I'm still about five people away from her, and I push through their stunned stillness to reach her, but she's already moving forward.

"I am honored," she says as she drops to one knee in a massively overexaggerated curtsy. Harald stares down at her a moment, then holds out a piece of leather threaded with small stones. From where I am standing, I can just make out that they are each marked with runes.

I don't recognize any of them, and again, the tug starts, wanting me, urging me, *needing me* to look up the runes.

And miss what happens next, miss seeing my sister leave? I chide myself, forcing my attention to stay in reality. This most incredible reality.

Freydis takes the leather strap, and something changes in all the Valkyrie's expressions. Well, all of them except the fire-fae, who is still inexplicably staring at me.

Harald snaps his attention over his shoulder at Erik, clearly communicating silently.

"Something is not right," says Brynhild, and every face turns to hers. Her voice is lyrical, relaxing and inspiring at the same time. I remember the paper I was holding in my hand earlier. Brynhild was famous for having the future-knowing powers of the high-fae.

If she says something is not right, then something *is not right*.

Hope surges in me. *Maybe there has been a mistake. Maybe they are not taking Freydis, and she can stay here, with me.*

The truth of how selfish this desperate plea to the gods is hits me. I want my sister to be honored at Featherblade, to go with these incredible warriors, and to become who she is destined to be. Of course I do. *I just don't want to be alone.*

"We are here for Princess Verglas," Valdis says. She is a gold-fae, her gleaming, honey-colored hair tied up in one thick braid lined with hundreds more. Dark black lines rim her eyes, and she is clad in silver leather that stands out against her onyx wings.

Freydis nods at her. "Yes, I received your call, and I am ready."

Erik tilts his head, his pale green braids falling over one shoulder, his skin the color of tree bark. His voice is cheerful as he asks, "You received our call?"

"Yes."

"In what manner did it reach you?"

"Parchment," she says.

"And how was this parchment addressed?"

I see Freydis falter. “It was addressed to Princess Verglas,” she says, and her voice is quiet.

My heart thuds in my chest as some part of me processes what this might mean faster than I am able to understand it.

Freydis’ eyes move slowly to mine.

The King, *my father*, coughs loudly. “This is Princess Freydis Verglas. There is no error here.”

Harald steps through the portal, and everything changes.

He oozes danger. There is something around him, a palpable magic. I can’t see it, but I know that it is there. I also know with every instinct I possess that I do not want to fuck with it.

My father takes a step backward, and I see the furious regret on his face the second after he does so. He has succumbed to his fear, and he has done it in front of his entire court.

My sister speaks, ever the diplomat. “Welcome, Harald the Huge, Guardian of Odin, to the Ice Court. Can we get you anything?” she says, meticulous in her formality.

The huge Valkyrie growls. “You can get me Princess Verglas.”

My father tries to look angry, but the look is hollow. Every member of my family is doing their best not to look at me, and my heart is beating so fast I think I might be sick. My brain is desperately listing what-ifs.

What if they’re here for you?

What if you could become a Valkyrie?

What if you could actually leave the Ice Court?

But I know what the result of all of those what-ifs is.

I will die. Most likely, I will die within a damn day.

I cannot stay conscious for more than seventy-two hours in a row. I am weak. My ability to perform magic is pathetic, and

I can barely concentrate on one thing for more than a few minutes at a time.

I am not a Valkyrie material. So, this is a mistake. Unless my parents have another daughter that they are hiding somewhere, the call was meant for Freydis.

Brynhild steps through the portal, into our courtyard. She holds out her hand and sucks in a long breath. Deafening silence falls over the gathered fae. There is a faint smile on her stern lips when she opens her eyes again.

“How I have missed my home,” she says. Her voice is so beautiful, I feel like I would do anything at all that she asked me to.

“You are always welcome here,” my mother says, bowing low. “Anytime you wish to visit.”

But when Brynhild sets her eyes on my mother, the look is one of politely concealed disdain.

“I reside in the canopy of *Yggdrasil*,” she says, coolly.

My mother’s alabaster cheeks flush. “Of course,” she says.

Brynhild’s face softens. “But you seem to have taken good care of my homeland. I thank you. Now tell me, Queen of the Ice Court, why do you hide a daughter?”

My heart hammers in my chest. I can’t breathe at all.

I stare at my mother, and every single other fae in the courtyard is staring at her, too. The color drains from her face completely. I did not know it was possible for her to be any paler. She says nothing, though.

Brynhild frowns, then closes her eyes.

Should I stand up and tell everybody that I’m the person that they’re looking for?

But what good would that do?

I stay still, completely paralyzed by confusion. I don’t know what to do, and I don’t know what’s happening.

The gods couldn't have chosen me to be a Valkyrie. Just the thought makes my knees weak.

How? How could I possibly be a Valkyrie?

The idea of going to Featherblade, to a world that looks nothing like my own, causes a sudden excitement so deep it makes me giddy, and I crush the feeling down.

Brynhild's voice rings through the silence and snaps me back to reality. She is pointing straight at me. "This is the child you keep a secret from your court."

My parents' faces are ashen. Freydis' eyes are wide. Every head, every pair of eyes, is facing me, and I don't know how to react.

So, I say nothing. I stare. I try to remember how to breathe, as Harald and Brynhild start to move toward me.

"Hold this," the huge man barks. I barely reach his chest. He opens his hand and drops the thong with the stones on it. Instinctively, I catch it.

Light explodes in my eyes, making my head hurt. I suppress a cry but don't manage to contain my flinch. One of the pebbles lights up, a brief blue glow. I hear Freydis gasp. Brynhild's eyes narrow in sudden concern, and Harald smiles.

"We have found our rook," he says.

I blink, repeatedly. "No," I say. "No, you've got it wrong. You want my sister, not me."

"You are challenging the gods?" asks Harald, his eyes darkening, his voice dropping, and that dangerous magic around him thickening.

"Of course not." I shake my head. My stomach lurches.

Fates, no. I know that lurch.

Please, Freya, Odin, Thor, and anybody else who might be hearing me. Please, not now. Please, not fucking now.

The world turns black.

CHAPTER 6

MADDY



The sick feeling is stronger than usual when I come around.

Why now? Of all the times to black out, my broken brain chooses the most public moment of my entire damn life? My mental tally kicks in: 654.

You survived, Maddy. Stop complaining.

For a second, I consider *not* opening my eyes. Maybe if I just stay here, stay quiet, stay on the ground with my eyes closed, the Valkyrie will leave with my sister, and everything will go back to how it was before.

My eyelids flutter open.

Fuck that. I don't want to die alone in a tower. But I won't take this opportunity from my sister. This is a mix-up, a mistake. It has to be.

But as I sit up and blearily take in the fae around me, all staring, doubt surges.

Harald is frowning at me, his smile gone. Brynhild is tilting her head thoughtfully, a knowing look on her face, and her expression is far from warm.

Do the gods make mistakes?

My collapse has sent the whole gathering into awkward silence. My sister isn't moving, and she is normally the first to rush to me when I fall. My hip hurts, and so does my shoulder, but I must not have hit my head hard, because other than the spinning disbelief, it feels okay.

I start to stand up, and then I hear a voice in my mind.

“Stay down.” My eyes snap to my father. It is him speaking to me. *“Stay down. You need them to see that they have got the wrong sister.”*

I falter. Harald is still staring at me, frowning. Brynhild is watching, waiting. My eyes drift toward the portal, to the other three Valkyrie. Valdis is glaring at me. Erik is flexing his beautiful black-and-yellow wings and staring at me with blatant fascination. The fire-fae has finally lost interest in me. He’s inspecting his fingernails, and every now and then casting glances at my parents and Freydis.

I draw on his disinterest and try to pretend that I am not being watched by an entire court, that I haven’t just been outed as the princess hidden away because she’s sick and weak.

Harald speaks. “Perhaps there has indeed been a mistake.” He turns to Freydis. “You are Princess Verglas?”

“A Princess Verglas, yes,” she confirms, her voice strong.

“She is tough,” my father says loudly. *“Powerful. A true royal.”*

A true royal.

My resolve sinks, and my head drops. The King is right. This is my sister’s destiny. Mine, apparently, is to be on the fucking floor.

“Stand up.”

I startle as the voice enters my head. I have never heard it before in my life.

I look at Harald, but he’s focused on my sister now. I look at Erik, who is still intently watching me.

“Stand up. The gods do not make mistakes. You are to attend Featherblade. Stand up and prove it.”

I do. One leg first, then the other.

Slowly, everyone turns to me. My sister stares. My father speaks into my mind. *“What are you doing? I told you to stay down.”*

It takes every ounce of courage I have, but I stay standing, and I don't look at my father.

"I am Madivia Verglas, Princess of the Ice Court," I say. "If I am meant to train at Featherblade, then I wish to do so."

"What just happened to you?" Harald says, gesturing to the ground.

"I faint."

"Often?"

"Yes." There's no point in lying.

"Why?"

"I have an affliction."

"Is it terminal?"

I falter.

"Yes," says my father. "Which is why we saved our court the pain of getting to know, and then having to lose, our beloved princess."

I stare at him, grateful for years of practicing a neutral expression as anger swells in my gut. I barely know the man, and he is spouting horseshit like "beloved princess"?

Brynhild steps forward and lifts her hand, and a tendril of sparkling ice magic flows from her palm. It pauses when it reaches me, swirling around my face.

Is she waiting for permission?

I raise my eyebrows at her and nod, not knowing what I'm agreeing to.

The tendril whooshes around me, into my hair and around my ears. It feels cold, but it also somewhat pleasant. Brynhild's eyes glaze over, and for a second, I swear I can hear the beat of wings, swear I can sense something beyond her.

But then nothing happens for a long time. Just the swooshing cold around me and the deafening silence of the

onlookers. Finally, Brynhild lowers her hand, and the beating stops.

“It is her,” she says, and sparks of energy flood my skin, giving me goosebumps.

“You’re sure?” Harald says.

“I am sure.” Her face has changed, though—her eyes are cold and hard now. “But I think we should take the other sister.”

My stomach tightens, and I desperately try to wrangle my emotions into order.

I want this for Freydis. I want this for Freydis more than anything in the world.

Or, at least, *I did*.

Do I really want this for Freydis more than I want this for *me*?

I have never even considered living her life, living her opportunities. But now... *Now I want wings. Now I want to learn to fly.*

Harald looks between me and Freydis. “I can sense the power in this one,” he says, gesturing at my sister. “This one has little.”

Brynhild nods. “Correct.”

“Then why would the gods have chosen her?”

They are talking about me like I’m not standing right in front of them. I open my mouth to say something, to defend myself, to pitch myself, even, but nothing comes out.

They’re right—I have hardly any magic at all.

“*Tell them why the gods chose you.*” That voice enters my mind again, and I snap my eyes to Erik. He is still staring at me.

I don’t know why the gods chose me. I’m not even sure the gods *did* choose me. What in *Yggdrasil* could I have that the gods would want in a Valkyrie?

My father is glaring at me. My mother looks scared. Freydis' face is a mask—I do not know what she is thinking.

“Take us both,” I say, moving deliberately to my sister's side. Harald scoffs, and Brynhild gives a small, annoyed sigh.

I reach for my sister's hand, wrapping my fingers around hers. She is as still as a statue.

“Do not be ridiculous,” my father says, but stops short when Harald glares at him.

“There is room on the boat for one more,” he says to me. “Not two.” He raises one eyebrow.

With a colossal effort, I marshal my thoughts and my ricocheting emotions.

As incredible as this chance may be, can I really take it from my sister? When she would be so exceptional, and I would likely die?

You will die. It is a certainty. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe next month. But you will die.

My own voice in my head is unwavering. And it speaks the truth.

I look into Freydis' ice-blue eyes, and although she is not asking me to give this up for her, I can see her pain. I can see what it's costing her not to plead with me. I can't take this away from her. She is meant for greatness. This is her destiny. It's not mine.

“Take Freydis,” I say, stepping backward but holding on to her hand. It takes me everything I have to say the words. But Freydis needs this. Freydis is prepared for this. She will be amazing. I will die a lonely death in my beautiful, icy cage.

My sister turns to me with a smile on her face and eyes that are filmy. “Thank you,” she whispers, but my arm is pulled from hers.

My fingers release hers of their own volition, and then I am floating up, off my feet completely. I cry out, but the sound is lost.

A thunderous waterfall crashes down from the sky right in front of the portal. Fae scream and rush back, and I look for Freydis in the crush, but I'm moving through the air, toward the crashing water.

At the very base of the waterfall is a boat, and I rise higher, heading straight for the wooden vessel. It is not a large boat, and there are already four people in it. I scrabble, trying to swallow down my panic.

I can't pivot, though; I can't seek out my sister.

"Freydis!"

I know she can't hear me. I can see Harald and Brynhild moving back to the portal just past the rushing water, and then I feel burning hot eyes on me. The fire-fae is watching me.

I try to force my body to turn in the air, desperate to see Freydis' face. But I am being lowered into the boat, my body held by magic.

Tears are pricking the backs of my eyes, and I don't know what to do.

I asked them to take Freydis! Why am I being put in the boat?

The whole vessel begins to rise, moving up the waterfall. Disorientation takes me as the magic holding me vanishes.

I spin, moving straight to the side and leaning over the edge, looking for my sister. But I can see nothing but the relentless spray of water.

CHAPTER 7

MADDY



Why couldn't Freydis come too?

I force the panic down and try to concentrate as the world beneath me falls away. The crashing water around me is so loud it's interfering with my thoughts.

The Ice Court palace below us is a blur, spraying water filling the air, catching the light, creating a thick mist that is impossible to see through.

Filling my lungs over and over again, I try to keep a grip on myself.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

I can't understand why they didn't take Freydis. Or why they have taken me.

Disproportionate relief floods me as I remember Freydis' compact mirror. I shove my hand in my pocket, closing my fingers around the cool metal.

Thank the gods. I *will* see her again. She might hate me, might never want to look at my face again, but at least I can try.

What the blessed fuck am I doing here? Overwhelm is slamming through my brain, shutting everything else down. Bile rises in my throat. I close my eyes and draw on the part of me that doesn't believe I'm weak and broken. The part of me that has always wanted more than I'll ever be able to have.

The gods chose you. Prove them right. You can do this.

I take a deep breath, trying to let the words seep into my body, trying to make them true by absorbing them completely.

“What’s your name?” I hear a voice behind me.

And if you need to have a small breakdown, you can do it later, when you are alone.

I turn, gripping the side of the boat for balance. An older male, an earth-fae with deep brown skin and green hair filled with braids, is standing directly behind me. How he’s so steady whilst the boat whooshes *up* the waterfall, I have no idea.

“Maddy,” I say, looking around the rest of the boat.

Two fae sitting together at the other end look back at me warily. One is a shadow-fae, and I can sense his wealth and power from where I am. He’s my age, late twenties, and the way he is wearing the sneer on his face suggests it is permanent. His dark hair is already sporting two or three braids.

The female next to him is far more remarkable, though. She has skin the color of charcoal, something I’ve never seen before, and gray hair. She’s a fire-fae, I realize belatedly.

Her expression is anything but friendly. I force my eyes away from her, not wanting to make her uncomfortable by staring. I look at the last person in the boat, a gold-fae. They have a shaved head, and that’s another thing I’ve never seen before, and I would certainly not expect in a gold-fae—they are known for both their vanity and their beautiful golden hair. They’re wearing tight armor, compacting their body, and are armed to the teeth. They don’t look at me, so I look back to the older male who spoke first. He’s eyeing my thin, flowing dress, and I don’t think it is in a sexual way. He looks more confused than aroused or interested.

“I wasn’t expecting to come tonight,” I try to explain. “So, I’m not dressed appropriately.”

He frowns. “You didn’t get the call?”

“We thought the call was for my sister,” I admit.

Guilt flows through me, thundering louder than the water around us. *This was Freydis' opportunity. This was Freydis' destiny. I shouldn't be here.*

But I am.

I'm unarmed, I have no armor, and no belongings. But I'm here.

The man leans forward and passes me something. It's a small wooden dagger, with a horse carved on the handle.

"Take this. You should not be at a disadvantage. There is no honor in slaying an unarmed opponent."

He is right—few in *Yggdrasil* would attack an unarmed person. So his gift is as unsettling as it is an act of kindness, and rather than feeling grateful, I'm on edge. I'm scrappy, I'm quite quick, and my aim is good, but I don't think I would win a fistfight with a single person in this boat.

I peer into his warm eyes and weathered features. The eternal optimist in me wants to trust him.

The boat lurches. I look over the edge, and my breath catches in my throat. The mist has cleared a little beneath us, and I can see the Ice Court. We are miles above it, and it is utterly glorious. I can see the icebergs moving, and the root-river that leads straight to the trunk of *Yggdrasil* and connects us to the rest of the world. I look around, desperate for a glimpse of one of the other four fae courts. I can't see them, though, only the mist that surrounds them, and the waterfall is between us and the trunk of the tree, blocking any view of the precious bark.

When I look back, I notice something beneath our court. Tendrils spreading up and around the base of the giant area that houses the sheets of ice. I feel the tug of the gallery as I frown. *Is that supposed to be there? What is it?*

Not now, Maddy.

I do not have the time, nor the privacy required, to go searching for information inside my head. It will have to wait.

The fire-fae female speaks, and I look around. “Who are you?” she asks.

“I’m Maddy,” I repeat.

She rolls her eyes. “I didn’t ask your name—I asked *who* you were.”

“Just Maddy,” I say, uncomfortable. I’ve never told anybody who I am. This is the most interaction I’ve had with strangers who even know my name, possibly ever.

“You’re an ice-fae,” she says.

No shit. “You’re a fire-fae,” I reply. The water roars louder, and I can’t help keeping one eye on the older man. “What are your names?” I ask, moving my gaze back to his.

“I’m Aldrich,” he says.

“Inga,” says the fire-fae.

“Navi,” says the gold-fae.

“Orgid,” says the shadow-fae, and his voice is deep and haughty. “Your staff is... interesting,” he says, and I know he is mocking it.

I don’t feel any kind of protectiveness about my staff. And most fae do—especially powerful fae. My sister is incredibly precious about hers. But hers is magnificent. Mine is a bit shit, just like my magic.

Aldrich snorts. “You won’t need a staff soon.”

Orgid frowns at him. “All fae need a staff to access magic.”

Aldrich raises his brows. “Did you see a single staff with those Valkyrie?”

The shadow-fae falls quiet, his sneer screwed up in concession. The desire to find out what Aldrich is talking about hits me so hard that I almost slip straight into my mind.

Perhaps they won’t notice? Perhaps if they keep talking amongst themselves, I can go and look up more information, and they will not see me vacantly staring into nothingness?

For fates' sake, Maddy! I berate my brain. I cannot leave myself unprotected.

But the list of things I needed to look for in the gallery is growing, and it's harder to control the relentless pull.

I will find out about the fire-fae, about wingless Valkyrie, about brown tendrils under courts, and about staff-less magic—just as soon as I am alone, I soothe myself firmly.

The boat lurches again. Aldrich loses his footing and stumbles to one knee. Orgid and Inga look around, and Navi crouches low in the boat.

I lean over the edge. There's movement. Wings, I realize. Feathers with a flash of red, a flash of brown, and then they're gone. "There's something out there," I tell the others. I can see doubt on Inga and Orgid's faces. I don't know why they don't believe me—it's not as if they would have flown up waterfalls magically before today—but it's clear that they don't.

Aldrich does, though. He moves toward me, crouches low on the planks beside me, and leans over the edge. His proximity to me makes me nervous. I don't know if it's instinct or if he's truly a danger to me, but I'm not particularly willing to find out. I scoot a foot away, and he gives me a sideways look before peering back over the edge of the boat. "I'm not the one you need to fear here, child." I bristle at being called *child*. I'm younger than him, but I'm not a damn infant.

"Do you know what's out there?"

He shakes his head, and I lean over again, doing my best to stay aware of him. I see it again, a flash of red mingled with brown.

And then I hear a sound.

Everybody on the boat hears the sound, and it's clear they are all as alarmed as I am at the awful, evil noise that makes my head hurt the second it enters my skull. It's a high-pitched screeching, laced with unbearable sounds that I instinctively want to stop, like the cry of a baby or the scream of a person in excruciating pain.

“What *is* that?” Orgid calls, both hands over his ears. Navi says nothing but begins to move across the boat toward the prow, pulling something from their back. A bow.

Inga speaks to the gold-fae. “Do not start a fight if there is none to be had,” she warns. This actually sounds like good advice to me. Until the boat rocks again, and this time, it rocks hard. I stifle a gasp and grip the side as hard as I can. The shrieking sound comes again, and then the beat of wings accompanies it.

As the boat settles, a creature materializes in the mist around us, as big as our boat, its wingspan colossal. It’s somewhere between dragon and bird, and it looks as though it’s made from the tree itself, its huge wings branchlike: gnarled, petrified wood instead of bones, and webbed with gristly sinew and exposed blood vessels that pulse freakishly with each beat of its wings. Its feathers are scarlet red and jammed into torn, leathery flesh that stretches across its visible insides.

Bright red eyes, lined with green feathers that are incongruous with the rest of the brown and red coloring of its body, take us all in, one by one. Huge talons flex on the end of sturdy legs as the creature rises higher above us, and its vast, curved beak snaps at the air. It would devour any single one of us in seconds.

I know with certainty that there’s no point searching the gallery for this creature. It’s not in there. I have never, ever seen, heard, read, or been told about anything like this.

It’s fucking terrifying.

It opens its mouth, and the awful screeching sound starts again. Fear paralyzes me. I’m used to an icy feeling through my veins, but that’s not what this is.

This is terror. Pure, true terror. This creature will kill us.

CHAPTER 8

MADDY



An arrow *thunks* into the bird's chest, and the screech cuts off abruptly. My heart beats even faster as I look at Navi, who clearly just loosed the missile. Orgid, apparently not wanting to be outdone, leaps to his feet in the rocking boat and pulls a sword from a scabbard on his hip. Inga stands too, gripping his shoulder and holding up her staff. Fire burns at the end of it, and I gape. We don't really see fire in the Ice Court. We have oil that burns for guests, but we rarely see actual flames, and they are mesmerizing.

Until the screeching begins again. This time it's coming from behind us.

I turn, dread filling me as I see a second animal. This one is slightly smaller than the first, but it looks no less hungry. The first dives at us. The arrow is still protruding from its chest, and Navi looses three more. All of them hit their mark. Aldrich raises his staff, and vines, green and fast, fly out to tangle themselves in the creature's wings. It's too fast for him, though. It gets away before any of them make contact. The other bird hits the end of the boat with its talons, and all of the fae who are standing stumble.

I'm doing nothing. I'm keenly aware that I'm sitting in the bottom of the boat, contributing absolutely nothing.

Paralyzing fear finally gives way to survival instinct, the temporary fear-induced slowing of my brain now replaced with thoughts so fast that I can't keep up.

What can I do? I have the small wooden dagger that Aldrich has just given me and nothing else. My ice magic wouldn't even make it past the few feet it would take to get to the edge of the boat, let alone hit one of the huge, ravenous birds.

Aldrich fires more vines at the two creatures swooping over the boat. Navi's arrows are keeping them at bay, but I believe that's the only reason they haven't plucked one of us from the vessel already. Orgid is slashing his sword as they come near, but it's ineffective, and I've yet to see Inga actually fling any of her fire toward the beasts. We're in a wooden boat, and I don't believe that throwing fire is a very good idea. Perhaps she thinks the same.

It might be my imagination, but when the birds are diving, it feels like they are diving directly *at me*.

Realization smacks into me. I'm sparkling like a gods-cursed beacon in my glittery dress, compared to the browns and blacks of the other's clothes.

I take the dagger and jam it into the skirt of my dress, tearing a strip off the bottom as fast as I can. Aldrich mutters something in the ancient language that I don't catch and continues to try to use his magic to fend off the birds. One of them swoops so low the talons scrape against the side of his face, and he throws himself to the deck. I see blood blossoming on his cheek as he stands, and now he looks furious.

I cut my piece of fabric into tiny pieces that are sparkling and glittering, then wave one like a flag. Aldrich looks at me as both birds slow and stare.

“What in the name of Thor are you doing?”

As both birds dive, I hurl a piece of fabric as hard and as far as I can from the boat.

It works. Both birds zoom off after it as it flutters through the watery mist and into the fog beyond.

All four fae stare at me.

“Oh,” says Aldrich.

There is a screech and a swoop, and the movement is so fast that none of us expect it. I am barely able to stifle my scream as the smaller bird soars over the boat, clutching Aldrich's shoulders in his talons as it flies over. The fae is lifted bodily from the vessel and thrown into the air, and then the other bird surges back down, catching him. My stomach roils as the two birds continue to throw the screaming, flailing fae between them. He hasn't got his staff. It fell in the boat, and I look between him and the wooden rod. Can I throw it to him?

Just as I'm about to try, there is an earsplitting cry. Both birds hold an arm each now, and they fly in opposite directions. I turn away just in time, hearing Aldrich's death but completely unwilling to see it.

"Hopefully, they're not that hungry, and one fae will sate their appetites," Orgid says quietly. His words are callous, but I hear the slight wobble in his voice.

Navi swallows, looking doubtfully up at the crashing water still flowing past us, then out at the mist. I hope their doubt is misplaced, but I'm scanning the mist just as fearfully.

There's a distant shriek, and my stomach tightens.

"Make more distractions, now," Navi barks to me. I start to divest myself of everything that shines. I cut more of my skirt. I cut the sleeves from my dress. I remove all the small pieces of jewelry I have. The only thing I don't remove is the compact mirror that my sister gave me. I move carefully around the boat, handing glittering scraps to everybody. When I clamber over Aldrich's fallen staff, I pause. What should we do with it?

I don't get time to come to an answer.

The sound of beating wings is followed by a much louder screech, and all of us duck low in the boat. Navi begins to fire arrows, and Inga launches sparkling scraps away from our vessel. The bird dives after them as they disappear underneath us.

Another bird flies toward us, and Orgid throws some scraps directly at the waterfall. They catch the light just right, and the creature swoops straight into the flow of water. With a gurgled call of alarm, it is swept down, hard.

I give a small, involuntary cheer, which earns me an eye-roll from Inga and a glare from Navi. Movement on my left catches my eye, and I throw fabric scraps as far from the boat as I can. I hear Navi loose an arrow, and a growl of frustration from Inga before more shrieking drowns them out.

We are going to run out of fabric, I realize, as I throw my last piece and watch the huge beast launch itself after it, catch it, then toss it in the air. It will be back in just a few minutes, and there are at least three more that I can count.

Abruptly, the waterfall changes. The misty sky is replaced by an enormous canopy of thick green foliage, and the boat levels out. Thicker foliage appears on either side of us, and then we are moving along a river that appears to be inside the canopy of the tree of *Yggdrasil* itself.

We have reached the top of the waterfall, and with a surge of relief that almost makes me sink to my knees, I realize that, mercifully, the birds have not entered the canopy with us.

The noise of the crashing water is gone, and sudden calm has descended. Panting, I glance around the boat. Orgid is wide-eyed. Inga is still crouching, ready. Navi is the only one of us who doesn't look perturbed, but they're still holding their bow, ready.

We survived.

Aldrich's staff fills my vision, and I reach out for it. Nobody stops me.

"Look," Inga breathes, standing up straight and looking along the river. I turn and see what has caused the awe in her voice.

Yggdrasil.

The trunk of the great Tree of Life is visible at the end of the winding waterway. We are surrounded on all sides and as far up as I can see by broad boughs and branches, jutting in

every direction and weighed heavy with emerald leaves that filter warm, dappled sunlight that is so utterly unlike the cool blue light I'm used to from home.

A great hall stands nestled against the trunk itself, carved out of the very wood of the ancient tree, sprawling across two levels. There are more buildings on either side, some down by the shore of the river, and some towering high above the hall, perched on seemingly vertical branches or wide, flat boughs, all connected by great wooden bridges and staircases, and all formed from the living tree.

It's the most magnificent, most magical, and most *different* thing I've ever seen, and I know at once that this is Featherblade.

There are caverns under the lowest walkways and bridges with small docks in them, illuminated by fire-lit sconces set deep inside, and a wide flight of wooden steps rises from the water. At the top is a set of enormous, arched double doors into the hall in the center of the trunk.

The boat pulls to a stop against the bottom step, and I climb out hurriedly, my legs shaking as they touch the wood. I share a brief look with Navi, whose legs are not shaking at all, then they stride away, up the steps. Orgid and Inga don't even look at me before they make their way up toward the hall.

I'm left standing alone, as even the boat leaves and drifts off under the wooden platforms. A tall statue of a bear holding a burning torch is to the right of the steps, a matching one on the other side, and I lean against it to take a long, deep breath.

The warm-toned, dusky light is something I'm only used to when I'm inside, the Ice Court always being bright and cool outside. The smells are different too, earth and smoke, and the temperature is several degrees warmer than I am acclimatized to. My head is spinning as I try to calm my overloaded senses.

I'm still clutching Aldrich's staff.

I only knew the earth-fae extremely briefly, and I hadn't even really trusted him, but the shock of his death is lingering, muddying my already whirling thoughts. I've heard people die

before. Not willingly, but I have. A fae ripped in two by monstrous birds, though? That will stay with me without the help of the gallery.

“To Valhalla, Aldrich. Thank you for the dagger,” I mutter skyward. I touch my pocket where the little weapon is, and feel my sister’s compact mirror. I wish I could open it right now and speak with her, but what would I say? How can I ever face her again? I took her place at Featherblade.

I look up at the epic structure.

It wasn’t my choice. I would have given it up for her.

But you stood up.

My head hangs. The internal accusation is true. I could have stayed down, but I stood up. I tried to prove that I could be here. *Oh gods, she may never forgive me.*

Movement at the top of the steps catches my eye. The earth-fae Valkyrie, Erik, and the huge Harald are standing in front of the main doors.

Are they waiting for me? Erik waves, gesturing upward, and I sigh before forcing a weak smile onto my face and pushing myself off the statue. One foot at a time, I climb the steps, trying to look like somebody who was supposed to be selected to train to be a Valkyrie. There is no sign of the others when I reach the top, and Erik is still looking at me with fascination.

Harald glances down at the staff I’m still holding, and I offer it to him. “Aldrich died on the boat,” I say awkwardly.

The big shadow-fae grunts. “I don’t need an earth-fae staff.”

I turn to Erik instead, but he shakes his head. “Keep it. I am glad you made it, Princess Verglas.”

My head tilts. *His voice sounds nothing at all like the one that told me to stand up.*

“Why did we have to come in the boat and face those birds? Why couldn’t we just come through your portal?”

Neither seem even slightly upset about the loss of a fae's life, and I can't help the question leaving my lips.

"Featherblade is a test, from day one," Erik says. "All rooks must face the falls. Not all will survive. But you did." His eyes still spark with interest.

"You are to call us *hersir*," Harald interrupts. The ancient word for commander, I remember without having to look it up.

I nod. "Yes, *hersir*."

"And all of you new recruits are to be known as rooks. Here is the key to your chamber. You're sharing with Navi." He holds out a small iron key with a metal shield etched with a feather and a sword crossing, and the number fourteen. I take it, and his hands feel hot against my own.

"Thank you, *hersir*."

"Rook chambers are through the doors, up the left set of stairs, then on the right. Be in Odin's High Hall at dawn tomorrow." Without another word, he turns and strides through the double doors.

Erik smiles at me. "Many of your questions will be answered tomorrow morning. You four were the last to arrive, so training can finally commence. Now, sleep is a warrior's friend. Rest well." Before I can ask him anything else, he leaves too.

CHAPTER 9

MADDY



Rest well?

I stare after Erik's retreating form. I have been taken by real-life Valkyrie and brought to the canopy of *Yggdrasil*. I'm one of the few fae to have ever left the five courts. *Me*. The same fae who has been kept hidden inside a palace for more than two decades.

And he's telling me to sleep? Not a fucking chance.

The need to store everything that has happened, and to look up the torrent of new information I have, is overwhelming. I can't do that in my room, not if I'm sharing with Navi.

So, instead of following the two Valkyrie through the front doors, I turn left and make my way up a narrow spiral staircase that appears to be attached to the main building by nothing but sturdy vines. When I reach the top, I am on a bridge that is connected to the upper level of the main hall, and leads to numerous other buildings set higher up the trunk. I am drawn to one immediately. It is a temple, and it is even more beautiful than the one we have in the Ice Court.

The carved peaks of its steeply sloped roof pierce the low-hanging foliage. Thick oak timbers banded in black iron form the walls, smoothed and polished and filled with tiny windows containing misty glass that lets through the warm glow of the torches I assume light the inside.

I look around but can see nobody. Fireflies zoom all along the bridge, lighting the way, and thin columns surround the

temple, torches atop each one.

The double doors at the front are framed with geometric patterns the same as the carvings around the outside of the main hall doors I saw a moment ago, and they are painted ocean blue. Where the main doors host a carving of *Yggdrasil*, these doors have an elaborate raven etched into them. The runes on the triangular façade topping the doors read, *The Temple of Valhalla*.

There is a narrow path moving around the temple to the left, and, curious, I follow it. I find a secluded, pretty garden. There are hundreds of flowers blooming in the small space, impossible in their variety. *Are they growing from the branch itself?*

The magic here defies my senses, so I try to ignore the how and just take in the riot of color: pink peonies, red poppies, yellow sunflowers, and blue cornflowers. We do not have flowers like this in the Ice Court. I am used to rigid, cool, glittering grandeur, and this swaying collection of color under dappled light and a warm breeze is completely new. Rather than it overwhelming my senses, though, a quietness settles over me, and it is easier to breathe. I do not want to immediately slip away from this place or impulsively inspect my surroundings. It is enough to just take it all in, to let my eyes and hands roam over the petals and leaves while my brain tries to work through everything that has happened.

There is a small apple tree in the center of the mass of flowers, the only one in the garden, and when the calm has seeped through my whole body, I move to it, running my hands over the bark and enjoying the coarse texture. There's no bench or anywhere to sit, but I'm happy to stand. After my experience on the boat, I'm enjoying the feeling of firm land beneath my feet.

I am completely vulnerable when I perform the task of storing my memories, and I look around one more time. Satisfied that the garden is safe and solitary, I close my eyes, allowing myself to drift toward the gallery. But just as I get there, my stomach lurches.

No! The blackouts hardly ever happen more than once a day. *This can't be a third, can it?*

I get another second of disbelief before all I see is black.



I feel sicker than usual when I come around. My head hurts, and I wonder if it's because I banged it on the way down. I take a deep breath as I open my eyes, dizziness assailing me in a way that does not normally happen. I'm lying in the grass, surrounded by pretty daisies.

655. *You've woken up, you've woken up.* I say the words in my head repeatedly. That is what is important.

Not that it cannot be a good sign that I've blacked out three times in a day.

Not that if this happened whilst I was on that boat with the huge birds, I would certainly have died.

Not that I have no idea if my sister is experiencing a blistering headache far, far away from me right now.

Ignoring those things, I cling to gratitude instead.

I survived. I am still alive. *I woke up.*

Forcing my way through the dizziness, I pull myself into a sitting position, and my heart stops in my chest in shock.

The fire-fae Valkyrie is standing against the apple tree that I was leaning against moments before. My hand flies to my chest, trying to slow my pounding heart.

"Odin's arse, you frightened me," I breathe.

"Nobody comes here," he says. His voice is deep and gravelly, as though he's out of practice using it. Recognition sparks instantly, though.

"You... Did you..." My words stall. *It couldn't have been him who told me to stand up.*

Could it?

I stare at him, taking in his features. My heart's still pounding, but now I'm not sure if it is because he startled me,

or if it's just his presence that is keeping it thudding.

How can one fae be so rough and so beautiful at the same time?

Leather warrior garb is wrapped around a body corded with muscle, lean and hard and tight. His face is unshaven and scarred, and his tousled, ash-colored hair hasn't got a single braid in it. But his cheekbones are sharp, his jaw is square and strong, and his eyes... They are the same shade of gray as his hair, and the color moves and swirls, like falling ash. I am completely certain that I could stare at them for hours.

"I said nobody comes here," he repeats. A flicker of threat sounds in his voice, flows from his body, and I am spurred into response.

"I didn't know anybody was—" I start, embarrassed that my words are slurred.

He cuts me off. "Leave."

But I don't want to leave. I like this garden, a lot. And I'm not even sure if I can stand yet. "Why can't I stay?" I'm relieved my words are clearer.

My relief is fast replaced by fear as the atmosphere changes, the whole feeling of the small garden shifting. There's a presence now that wasn't here before. Something dangerous, something hot and lethal. I feel it acutely, and my temperature rises uncomfortably. I look around, but I can see nothing.

"Let me guess, *princess*," the fire-fae says slowly. "You're used to getting what you want, when you want?"

I shake my head and move, trying to get my feet under me to stand. "No—"

He growls, and the sound is animalistic. It's not like anything I've heard from a fae's lips before.

"Just being a princess," I start hurriedly, pulling myself to my feet and using the tree for support. It brings me dangerously close to him, and I pause, unable to resist staring into his eyes. I swear I can see actual flakes of ash moving in

his irises. There is a lethal grace to him, a fierce kind of beauty, and it's making my head swim. "Doesn't mean I always get what I want," I finish in a whisper.

His mesmerizing eyes narrow and glint as he snarls. "So, you're a poor, deprived princess? Horseshit."

I bristle and force myself to lean back a little. "I grant you, I've never been deprived," I say, trying to inject some pride into my voice to replace the instinctual fear he causes in me. "But I promise you, I am not a spoiled child."

He says nothing for a long moment, and, curse it, I find myself staring into his eyes again.

"Do you really believe you can become a Valkyrie?"

His quiet question makes me blink. It sounds like a trap, and I don't know how to answer it. Did he see me faint just now? It wasn't like I was going to be able to hide that from anyone here, but I would have liked it to not be my first impression.

I lift my chin. "Of course I can become a Valkyrie," I say. *Perhaps if I say it with enough enthusiasm and belief, I will believe it, too.* He snorts, and I glare at him. "You know nothing about me," I say. I'm not used to talking unpleasantly to people, and it doesn't come out in the growl I hoped it would, but I carry on, mimicking his narrowed eyes. "I know all about wanting what I can't have."

"Oh really?" His tone drops dangerously low, and a shiver takes me, even though the temperature has risen again. My heart rate quickens; my instincts all scream at me.

Danger.

Run.

I imagine my feet sinking into the ground, and try to keep them where they are.

Slowly, he reaches past me, bends down, and plucks a daisy from the crushed pile where I fell. He holds it up next to my cheek and fixes his burning gaze on my eyes, his face six inches from mine.

“Do you have any idea what it is like not to be able to touch a living thing for centuries?”

My heart’s beating so fast now that I can’t really speak, so I just shake my head.

There’s a flash of light, and I gasp. The daisy sparks with fire where his fingers are touching it, and flames rush up the stem. In a second, the flower is incinerated. *Gone*. The ash is drifting from his fingers down over my shoulder, covering my ruined dress.

He gives a soft hiss, then strides away, leaving me standing over the crushed daisies.

Heart hammering, I close my eyes, grip the apple tree, and press my forehead to the bark.

How? How have I only been here five minutes and already pissed off the terrifying fire-fae?

CHAPTER 10

MADDY



When I finally push myself off the tree trunk, I am calmer, and absolutely positive that I am alone. I can't see anyone around me, and I can't sense the all-encompassing presence of Kain, or any other Valkyrie. I think briefly about returning to the main hall and finding my chamber, but I doubt I'd get halfway across the bridge before the gallery sucked me in.

I sink down to the grass, re-crushing the same flowers as I set my backside down. I close my eyes, lean back on my elbows, and let myself leave reality.



The gallery knows I am planning to add to it, and instead of standing in the main corridor, statues stretching as far as the eye can see in each direction, I'm in a small studio. The walls are made of blue, glassy ice, just like most of the ice palace I grew up in, and in the center is a small, circular platform, surrounded by jets of water that shoot up three feet from the floor in a neat ring. Creating a memory statue takes longer than it feels like it does. My whole sense of time is inaccurate when I'm in the sanctuary inside my head.

I hold my hands out toward two of the jets, ready to draw the water toward me and start molding and freezing it.

But the water doesn't come to me. It just keeps spurting upward, cheerfully ignorant of my desire to control it.

An uneasy feeling crawls across my skin. "Come here," I command, but the water ignores the pull of my will. I drop my

hands to my side, take a deep breath, and look toward the ice-blue ceiling. I've never, ever not been able to make a statue to contain a memory.

And today is not the day that happens, Maddy. Enough crazy shit has happened already.

I drag my resolve around me, tip my head back down, glare between the two jets of water, and then hold my hands out. "Now," I say, willing the water toward me. But again, nothing happens.

Panic rises, starting in my stomach and working its way through my chest. I swallow hard, clutching my hands into fists. I can't let the panic win. I'm not *allowed* to panic here; this is supposed to be my sanctuary.

Fine. If I can't store the memory now, I will store it later, I tell myself with as much maturity and calm as I can muster. I know that I'm lying to myself—I'm already losing the finer details of what happened, and the longer I leave it, the less I will have to store.

But I won't stand here and try to force myself to do something that I clearly can't.

I touch my foot to the ground deliberately, and my surroundings change into the corridor filled with memories I've already made. I am not concentrating properly, though, still frustrated and angry.

It's that infernal fire-fae's fault for shaking me up.

The second his ash-filled, intense eyes enter my mind, the corridor whooshes under my feet.

When it stops, my mouth falls open.

The statue it has deposited before me is one of the original three that were here the very first time I discovered the gallery inside my head. It's the wolf statue, and usually it's just a solid, lifeless, icy blue, but today it's glowing—*with a color not dissimilar to that of a flame.*

I stare, almost scared to reach out and touch it. I have tried everything I can, my entire life, to get into these three statues

and find out what's stored within them, and I have never been successful. They are a locked mystery I had given up ever solving.

Tentatively, I press my fingers to the icy snout of the wolf.

Nothing happens.

I barely refrain from stamping my foot and behaving like the spoiled princess Kain just accused me of being. My frustration is tipping toward anger. Rage, even. Nothing seems to be in my control right now. My brain barrels through my fears, parading them before me.

I have passed out three times in a day, and for the first time I can't make a memory statue. My sister probably hates me, an unhinged fire-fae threatened to burn me like a flower, and tomorrow I have to stay alive through Valkyrie training. I was nearly killed by monsters I didn't know existed. *And I am completely alone.*

I sit down on the icy floor of the corridor, which is comfortingly cold, and rub my hands hard across my face.

"What would Freydis say if she were here?" I mutter through my fingers. When my frustration used to get the better of me as a child—which was embarrassingly often—my sister would tell me, "*Do what you can, and ignore what you can't.*"

Okay. What *can* I do?

I *can* try again to store everything that has happened, when I'm not so tired.

And I *can* try to look up some of the other things that might help me over the next few days. Anything that has to do with Valkyrie, like how you become one, their history, and, most interestingly to me of all right now—how a Valkyrie might lose their wings.

Feeling a little more in control than before, I stand up, and the corridor beneath me moves. When it stops, there are four statues in front of me. One is a sword, about ten feet tall. One is a rose, and another is an owl. The last is the yew tree that I already checked in the ballroom.

Reaching for the sword first, I touch the hilt. The garden re-forms around me, and when it does, there's a voice in my ear that wasn't there before, and I can vividly see an image before me. A fae is speaking. I can't see him. All that is in the image is me staring at my own hands, sitting on a chair, as I've been bidden to do, behind a heavy navy-blue curtain. The fae believes he is educating my sister in history, at my parents' request. He doesn't know I'm there, recording everything he is saying. Many memories of mine that pertain to history feature this particular fae, a scholar named Alfred.

I concentrate on what he is saying. "There were originally nine Valkyrie, all female, selected by Odin himself to be his personal guard during his war with the Giants. When their battle was won, they convinced Odin to create Featherblade from the bark of *Yggdrasil*, a training hall for new Valkyrie. They also convinced him to let males enter their ranks. Eventually, there were seventeen Guardians of Odin, or Valkyrie, and together they defended all of the gods with new magic bestowed upon them by Featherblade. They no longer needed staves to perform this magic, instead aided by their *val-tivar*. Over time, many Valkyrie fell in battle, and when the gods abandoned our world, the Valkyrie chose to live in the canopy of *Yggdrasil*, as did many of the lost and ancient races. Their home is only accessible by flight and, as such, can only be visited by those with wings. Or with power such that would levitate a person the entire height of *Yggdrasil's* mighty trunk." There is a scoff in his voice, and he clearly does not believe this to be possible.

I strain my concentration, listening for anything that might explain why a Valkyrie would lose his wings. The scholar talks a while longer, nothing he says of particular interest, and my palms begin to itch, boredom setting in. I am about to go back to the gallery to check the next statue when I pause.

"There is only one recorded instance of a Valkyrie failing in his duty and being punished for it. He used his powers to kill a fae and his family, driven by jealousy. He was in love with the fae's wife. While the gods were unable to remove his *val-tivar*—the bond is too strong and completely permanent—they *were* able to remove his wings and confine him to

Featherblade. Without wings, he remained bound to the halls for such a long time that he went mad and eventually threw himself from the highest aerial platform and let the birds that guard Featherblade have his body.”

I only half listen to everything the scholar has to say after that, my mind completely stuck on what Kain must have done to lose his wings. Is he bound to Featherblade too?

Wait, am I bound to Featherblade until I have wings?

Squashing the trapped feeling before it can get a grip, I force my thoughts along.

What is a *val-tivar*? It must be what Aldrich referred to, about how the Valkyrie perform their magic without a staff.

Hoping one of the next statues has something about it, I return to the gallery.

But the rose statue is another history lesson with Alfred, and the only time Featherblade is mentioned is when he is talking about buildings imbued with the gods’ power, and the reference is fleeting. The other statue contains a book of songs written by ancient bards about Sigrun and the original Valkyrie. Whilst it appears exciting to read, it’s a large book, and doesn’t further my quest for currently useful knowledge.

When I try to look for anything on *val-tivar* specifically, no statues are deposited before me. Apparently, nothing has crossed my path about it before. Refusing to be disappointed, I look instead for anything about dark tendrils that might reside underneath fae courts in *Yggdrasil*. A few statues are set in front of me, but it doesn’t take long to scan them and see that the references don’t match what I saw.

I don’t know how much time has passed when I decide I have spent enough of my night in the gallery, but the dusky light and flickering torches all look the same when I get to my feet and stretch. I’m reluctant to leave the peaceful, vibrant garden, and I have to force my feet to take me back to the main hall.

I know what is causing my resistance. I have only ever shared a room with my sister, and if I think too much about

that, the precarious grip I have on my emotions may well shatter.

So, when I reach the end of the bridge, push open the intricately carved doors into what proclaims to be “Odin’s High Hall,” and find myself already at the top of the steps Harald pointed out, I face the corridor that leads to the chambers with a smile on my face and deliberately steady steps.

CHAPTER II

MADDY



Door fourteen is easy to find, as all the doors are numbered. The rune for “courage” is carved into the thick wood. I pause, unsure if I am supposed to knock. I assume Navi is in there, but I don’t know for certain.

With my hand raised awkwardly, I startle as the door snaps open.

Navi is standing before me, and as I start to say a cheery hello, I pause. She is wearing a tightly wound band around her breasts and a similarly tight set of underwear, and nothing else.

“I, er, do you want me to—”

She steps back, jamming a thumb over her shoulder in a clear gesture for me to enter. Her eyes are hard as I oblige, still smiling awkwardly.

“Hi,” I say as she slams the door shut behind me.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

“Oh,” I say, no more prepared for her brusqueness than her lack of clothing.

My sister would have blanched at her cursing—she says things like “by Loki’s underwear” when she is annoyed—but the books I like to read are filled with words much ruder than *fuck*. I quite like cursing.

“Exploring,” I answer.

Navi rolls her eyes. “Touch my stuff, I will kill you.” The threat is delivered calmly, precisely, and completely

believably. I nod, then look around the room, which is lit only by a small candle.

We both have large beds covered in furs, and there's plenty of space between them. There is a window, but Navi has drawn the drapes across it. There is a nightstand each, holding the candles, and a chest at the end of each bed, presumably to put our clothes in. There is also a rail across one end of the room, and I can see that Navi's got things hanging there already. Armor and tunics and robes. Her weapons are spread around her bed, though, everything easy to access at a moment's notice. There's no way this fae hasn't been trained for war. I try to think of something to make conversation about, but come up with nothing, so I keep my mouth closed instead.

"Unpack, then go to sleep," Navi says to me, climbing back into her bed. But I have no belongings to unpack. I'm not willing to get out the mirror and answer any questions about it, so I keep that in my pocket. I do have Aldrich's staff, which I put inside the chest, and then I set the small wooden dagger he gave me down on the nightstand next to the empty bed. Navi scoffs.

"That's the one thing you should be keeping on you at all times," she says.

I raise a brow. "You sleep armed?" I ask.

"Always." She lifts her pillow and displays a dagger and two throwing stars.

"You think we'll be attacked in our sleep here?"

"You can never be too careful."

I don't know if that's true, but I put the dagger back in my pocket. "Where are you from?" I ask her, sitting on the edge of my bed.

Instead of answering me, she silently throws back the furs and stands up. She stalks toward me, glaring.

"Go to sleep. Sleep is one of a warrior's greatest assets, and I need the lights out to get mine," she says, and then blows my candle out, sending us straight into darkness. I restrain a

sigh, give her a sarcastic smile she definitely can't see in the dark, and roll back onto my furs, still wearing my tattered dress.

The thing is, though, I am not tired. My mind is still buzzing, despite my having visited the gallery for so long. At home, when I have trouble sleeping, I read for hours and hours by candlelight, but that's not going to be possible if it will keep Navi awake. *And, Freya's backside, I don't want to keep this warrior woman awake if she doesn't want to be awake.* Maybe I can sneak out and explore Featherblade a bit.

I sit up, and Navi gives a bark of annoyance. "Wow, your hearing is good," I whisper.

"Why are you not sleeping?" she snaps.

"I'm not tired," I say. "I might go and explore some more."

Navi growls in the dark. "I don't think you can survive a month here, but I promise you, you won't make it until tomorrow if you don't go the fuck to sleep."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I murmur.

She snorts. "You don't have a muscle on your body and you didn't touch your staff once on the boat. Valkyrie face tough tests. You don't look tough."

"You know nothing about me."

"And I don't need to. I just need you to shut up and sleep, for both our sakes."

With a deliberately loud sigh, I fall back onto the furs. I'll just wait until the miserable warrior fae is asleep, then I'll sneak out and explore.



Only, the next time I'm aware of anything, it's Navi standing over me.

"Thor's balls!" I clutch my chest, eyes immediately wide.

Navi shakes her head. "Good gods, you're like a helpless kitten. You won't last more than a week."

You fell asleep, my startled-awake brain informs me. There is a very slight, dusky gloom filtering through the now-open drapes, and Navi is fully dressed.

“Dawn,” I mumble. “We are to be in the Odin’s High Hall at dawn.”

“And you are going to be late. Washroom is two doors down on the left,” she says.

Before I can thank her for waking me, which I’m genuinely grateful for and surprised by, she leaves, slamming the door closed behind her.

I hurry to the washroom and wash my face and teeth the best I can with just my hands, and then set off for the high hall. I’m nervous, mainly because everyone else I pass is wearing leather armor and weapons, most have braids, and all look like they are actually supposed to be here. I am wearing a torn-up, sparkly ball gown, and my long white-blue hair looks like birds have nested in it.

I clutch the mirror in my pocket and try to channel Freydis’ confidence.

My heart tugs, and I wish I could speak with her.

And hear her say she hates me?

Pushing the thought down to deal with later, I emerge onto the top of the stairs that overlook the hall. I didn’t taken the time to look properly the evening before, and it is beyond impressive.

There’s no question that it is born of the tree—branches and vines snake their way across the walls, along the floors, around pillars and along tapestries. Golden light streams through the arched windows high above the main doors, filling the vaulted chamber with a warm, regal atmosphere. Carved pillars hold up the balcony floor I am standing on, each one etched with images of *Yggdrasil* and the mighty deeds of the gods.

At the far end of the hall stands what I believe is a replica of *Hlidskjalf*, the High Seat of Odin himself. The towering throne is made from rich, dark wood and inlaid with hundreds

of runes that catch the light in a way that makes me think they are precious gems. I itch to look at it more closely. It sits on a stepped dais raised a few feet above the shining wooden floor, and behind it hangs a large tapestry depicting the five courts of *Yggdrasil*. It is a map I am familiar with. The vibrant threads of the tapestry shimmer, and I make a note to inspect that too.

The space behind Odin's throne also holds two doors set discreetly into the wall. Between what must be twenty other doors around the room, all set with colored glass in the top half and ancient runes arched overhead, are rows of benches. In the middle of the room there is a huge brazier, only burning embers occupying it right now. I can imagine it roaring with life, though, and the room filled with rowdy warriors, Odin on his throne, overseeing. An unexpected reverence makes my spine stiffen, and I take a breath.

You don't belong here.

Fighting the doubt, I clench my jaw and make my way down the stairs. *They chose me. I'm here for a reason.*

There are fae moving around the hall, some talking in small groups, some looking at the tapestries dotting the walls. Harald and Erik are here, but I don't see any of the others, until I get to the bottom of the steps. Then I *feel* one other.

I turn and see ash eyes set in bronze skin watching me. Kain is leaning against a column carved with a great snake winding around it, ignoring everyone but me.

My mouth suddenly dry, I swallow and turn away from him, only to realize everyone else in the room is looking at me too.

I don't need to be mystic like Brynhild to know they are thinking exactly the same thing I just was. *I don't belong here.*

A gong sounds, mercifully drawing everyone's attention, and then there is a grating sound. The huge window above the door is sliding into the wall, creating a large opening, and I am not the only one who gasps as a figure flies through it.

It's Sigrun. Leader of the Valkyrie, one of Odin's nine original Guardians. Her skin is the deepest color of tree bark,

her hair vivid forest green, and every strand is braided back from her stunning face. Her wings are ten feet wide on each side, and as white as pure snow. She holds a spear as tall as she is that emanates power so strong I want to drop to my knees.

She is absolutely breathtaking. Powerful, fierce, and utterly beautiful, she is surely everything everybody aspires to be.

When she lands silently on the dais, the window begins to slide back into place. She speaks, and the command in her voice is undeniable.

“Welcome to Featherblade.”

My skin prickles at her words, a thrill starting in my toes and making its way up through my entire body.

“Thirty of you were selected to be Featherblade’s new rooks. Twenty-six of you have made it to these halls. I doubt more than twenty of you will earn your *val-tivar* and then your wings.”

The pull on my mind is strong. I *need* to know what this *val-tivar* is.

“Whilst you are here, you will learn what you are good at. There will be those of you who can forge. There will be those of you who can fight. There will be those of you that can heal. There will be those of you who know what is coming, and those who will be faster than your foes.” She pauses, looking slowly over the assembled—awed—group. “And there will be those of you who will fail, for whilst we must love the gods, they are not always correct in their judgment.”

Is it my imagination, or are her eyes drifting toward me? For a beat I wish I could shrink and be smaller, but I smile instead. My constant defense.

“Featherblade has been empty for centuries,” she continues, and I swear I hear a low growl behind me, but I concentrate on Sigrun. Usually, I find concentrating on anything difficult, but not her. *She is captivating.*

“At the moment, you will only be able to access the parts of Featherblade that are relevant to you. Treat this hall as a trainer in itself. It is blessed with the gods’ power, and now that you are here, you are connected to it. It is what will give you your *val-tivar*, and what will give you your wings. Treat it well, and it will treat you well—if you are worthy. As you progress through your training, more of the hall will reveal itself, specifically the parts that will be important to you. The sleeping chambers and most of the workshops are here in Odin’s High Hall. The Temple of Valhalla is available to all, always. You may mourn there. You may commune with the gods there. Whatever is happening in the rest of your life, the Temple of Valhalla is a sacred place. Remember that. Break that rule and you are out.”

She casts a slow, power-filled gaze over every individual fae. “Other than that, there are few rules to follow. We expect you to fight. We do not expect you to kill each other if you can avoid it. But you are all adults. This is not a school for small children. This is where you will learn to become a Valkyrie, a Guardian of Odin. If you are worthy, Featherblade will reward you. If you are not, you will stay here until the gods cast you out, or you die. I wish you luck, and I will see you again soon for the first strength display.”

Her huge white wings spread wide, and she steps down from the dais and walks through the hall with them as expanded as they can be, forcing every single person in her path to move. They do, of course, and they gape as she goes. She’s incredible. My heart is fluttering in my chest as I stare after her.

Could I be like her? Could I really, truly be anything like that?

Part of me believes I can. It’s the same part that has kept me from succumbing to the fear of the blackouts, of my impending death, and instead made me try to take every opportunity and chance for excitement I can.

It’s the same part of me that shrivels and dies at the thought of staring at the same four walls for the rest of time, painfully aware of what I am missing in the world.

It's the same part of me that believes that if I had the power, I could do so much.

But my reality doesn't support that part of me. It never has.

Until now?

I square my shoulders, holding Sigrun's image in my mind.

Any blackout could kill me, but at least here, I might die with wings on my back.

CHAPTER 12

MADDY



H arald steps up onto the dais. “Go and get breakfast in the feasting hall. I advise you to fill your bellies, as we do not stop for midday food. You will next eat in the early evening.”

Everybody turns and begins to file out of the main doors at the front. I spot Navi and follow her, hoping she knows where she’s going.

We exit through the huge front doors and turn right, only stopping when I guess we are directly under the Temple of Valhalla. There is a collection of smaller buildings here, but the larger one in the middle has its doors thrown wide open, and I can smell cooking meat and bread.

Inside, the timbered feasting hall is cavernous. Like the high hall, all the pillars are carved with geometric knots and animals, but unlike the high hall, this floor is made up of large flagstones covered with thick pelts of wool and fur that dull the sound of heavy boots. Along each wall, sconces hold lit torches, and between each there are shields hanging, each with a different color and design.

Three long tables covered in metal plates and tankards fill the middle of the hall, mismatched stools around them, and another table at the back of the room is filled with serving bowls, spits, and platters. Two human thralls are keeping food coming from the door on the left that I assume leads to the kitchen.

Valdis and Brynhild are sitting at the end of one table, and they watch us enter. A line forms at the food table, and I join it, swiping up a plate. The gold-fae in front of me keeps their back to me, so I turn to the fae who has joined behind me instead.

“Hi,” I say. A wiry earth-fae female gives me an uncertain look.

“What are you wearing?” she asks me, looking down at my dress.

“I didn’t know I was coming here,” I say. She is wearing a canvas tunic with no leather, suggesting she is not as wealthy as some of the others here. She is older, maybe twice my age, and bears one braid that she is wearing prominently outside of the band holding the rest of her light green hair back.

She frowns. “How can you not know? Did they make a mistake?” The look on her face suggests she thinks they did.

I bite my tongue and widen my smile. “How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Two days, waiting for the rest of you.” She cocks her head, now looking at my hair. “You know you should tie that out of the way.”

“I will. Thanks for the advice.”

“You’re going to need more than advice,” she mutters. Before I can work out how to answer, she points over my shoulder. “Food,” she says.

I turn to see I’m now holding up the line. Heeding Harald’s words, I pile my plate up with bread, nuts, a pink thing I think is cheese, and a bowl of milk-soaked oats, and take my plate to the first table. There are quite a few rooks already sitting down; some are talking, and some are sitting alone. Navi has selected a seat by herself.

I wonder whom I can sit with, who might be willing to talk to me, but every time I try to make eye contact with anyone, they look at my dress and then look away. Figuring I’ll have time to make friends later, I just sit down in the nearest seat and begin to eat my breakfast.

“That’s quite an appetite for a princess.”

I snap my head up and see Inga and Orgid. They are both holding plates as loaded as mine is.

“I’m ravenous,” I say with a smile. “You must be too?”

“I thought princesses were supposed to be graceful and modest,” says Inga, and she makes her voice loud. Muttering begins around me, and I catch the word “princess” repeatedly.

“I’m not really a proper princess,” I say awkwardly.

“No? Then why are you dressed like one?”

I frown. “You were on the boat with me. You know I had no bag or clothes, and why my dress is ripped.” I say it quietly, but his response is loud too, gaining the attention of everyone else in the hall.

“What we know is that you are a member of the royal palace in the Ice Court.” Orgid leans in, peering at me. “Who are you?”

I swallow. Orgid is clearly wealthy, and if he is part of a high-ranking fae family in the Shadow Court, then he would be aware of the other royal families. He would have recognized Freydis.

I oscillate between telling them I’m a handmaid to my sister or telling them the truth.

The only people exposed to my parents’ deception in the courtyard when I left were Ice Court nobles. My parents may have convinced them to continue to keep my existence a secret. Should I keep that up? Or should I own who I am now that I have a chance to actually be me?

“I’m Princess Maddy Verglas,” I say.

“There is no ‘Princess Maddy Verglas,’” Orgid answers, screwing up his fine features in confusion.

“Well, it’s Madivia, technically, but my sister calls me Maddy.”

“You’re really the daughter of the King and Queen of the Ice Court?” Inga’s face is hard, and now everyone around us

has fallen quiet.

“Yes.” My voice is steady, but my cheeks are fiercely hot.

The silence is broken by a peal of laughter from Orgid. “No wonder they kept you quiet! You’re nothing but a chubby, muscle-less mess! You didn’t use your staff on the boat at all. Do you even have any magic? Where are your braids? Have you really never earned a single braid?”

Somehow, my cheeks get hotter.

“She saved your life on the boat. Sit the fuck down and eat your fucking food.”

It’s the last voice I expected to come to my aid.

Kain, standing by the food table with his arms folded, the ash color in his eyes flickering amber. Orgid whirls, opens his mouth, clearly thinks better of it, then glowers instead.

Erik strides up next to the fire-fae, all easy smiles. “Thank you, *hersir* Kain,” he says. I try to focus on the earth-fae with the black and yellow wings, but my eyes are glued to Kain.

How in the name of Freya’s left tit does he know what happened on the boat?

“The next three weeks’ schedule is being handed out,” Erik says to the whole room, and a human thrall taps me on the shoulder and passes me a piece of parchment.

I’m grateful for the forced break in eye contact, and I realize my skin is hot when I take the paper.

I try to make myself focus on it.

Schedule. Erik said something about a schedule.

I’m aware of Orgid and Inga moving away from me, but I don’t turn to look.

I scan the parchment, but Erik begins talking again, so I try to listen to him. “You will all train together in one group for the first few weeks. To be honest, we do not know how long it will take for you to awaken your *val-tivars*, as we have not trained new Valkyrie in a woefully long time, but when you do, we will be able to tailor your training more appropriately.”

A hand shoots up.

“Yes, Henrik, is it?”

An outrageously good-looking earth-fae with broad shoulders and a smile that would make most females lift their skirts in a heartbeat beams at Erik.

“Yes, *hersir*, Henrik of the Earth Court. I am honored to be here.”

Erik nods. “What is your question, please?”

Without any indication that he feels embarrassed for not knowing, Henrik asks, “What is a *val-tivar*?”

Excitement surges through me. Erik raises a finger. “Of course. A *val-tivar*, for those who are unaware, is your power animal. The way, that you will do magic without a staff.”

A power animal? What the fates is a power animal?

“Some call them battle creatures. Some call them soul animals. They have been known as many things over the years within the Valkyrie world. But what they are is a part of you, in the form of one of four of Odin’s great creatures. You will be the only person in the world who will be able to see and communicate with your *val-tivar*. But that doesn’t stop you from sensing others.”

I glance at Kain, thinking about that presence in the garden that I was able to feel but not see. Was that his *val-tivar*? The scholar’s words float back to me from the memory I listened to yesterday. “*There is only one recorded instance of a Valkyrie failing in his duty and being punished for it. While the gods were unable to remove his val-tivar—the bond is too strong and completely permanent—they were able to remove his wings and confine him to Featherblade.*”

I’m assuming that Kain lost his wings as punishment, I realize. *Perhaps he lost them in an accident?*

Erik’s voice snaps me back from my wonderings. “Once your *val-tivar* has awakened, you will learn to allow them to possess you during battle.”

Possess me? I'm not sure I like the sound of that. But given that my magic has never presented itself enough to really use effectively with a staff, I'm willing to try anything.

“The four animals that the *val-tivar* may embody are bears, snakes, birds of prey, and wolves. Each has its exceptional powers and advantages in battle. The bears embody both strength and fearless battle prowess. When a Valkyrie is possessed during battle by a bear *val-tivar*, they become a true berserker. Unstoppable. Ten times stronger. A hundred times fiercer.”

Mutters come from the tables. I hear Harald mentioned and have to agree. His *val-tivar* *must* be a bear.

Erik smiles again at everybody and touches his chest. “My *val-tivar* is a snake. Snakes are famous for their healing abilities, and those possessed by their snake *val-tivar* can heal their wounds on the battlefield almost as soon as they are created. In some exceptional cases, like mine, snake-possessed Valkyrie can heal others. The birds of prey are usually a raven, a falcon, or sometimes an owl. Depending on which, you will be given a different ability. Owls have deep wisdom and mystic powers.” *Like Brynhild*, I think. “And ravens and falcons have both incredible speed and an ability to preempt your foe's next move. Lastly is the wolf.”

A hush falls over the room.

Wolves are killers. Everyone in *Yggdrasil* knows this. A wolf is the only thing to have come close to killing Odin, according to the legends.

“Wolves have a bloodlust that is not always rational, a dangerous and unpredictable need to fight and to devour,” Erik says in a measured voice. “Their tastes are insatiable.”

My eyes are moving to Kain as he's speaking.

“Wolf-possessed warriors on the battlefield possess strength and speed fueled by endless stamina and bloodlust. They will not stop until they are put down, and woe betide anyone caught in their jaws.”

I'm absolutely certain that Kain's *val-tivar* is a wolf. I let out a breath, forcing my attention from him to myself.

Could a snake *val-tivar*'s healing power stop my blackouts? Or at least stave off the imminent end of my life?

If Featherblade finds me worthy, please let mine be a snake, I pray. Running around the battlefield in a raging bloodlust as a bear or a wolf does not sound like something that I would be good at, and my memory magic already provided a wisdom of sorts. Please, please be a snake.

“Featherblade has a wing for each, and when you have awakened yours, you will move chambers. Right now, we are in the Wolf Wing.” He claps his hands together. “Right. I must leave the rest of today's Valkyrie teachings to Brynhild, who will meet you in the Bardheim Library in the Bird Wing in half an hour. When she is finished with you, you will be taken for fighting trials to find out what you're already good at.”

CHAPTER 13

MADDY



I finish my breakfast fast, trying to contain my nerves. The fact that I'm going to have to demonstrate publicly how untrained I am as any kind of warrior is unsettling enough, but at some point, I'm going to faint in front of everyone. There's no escaping it.

Please, please don't let it be when I'm holding a weapon that I can fall on and kill myself with, I pray. That would be beyond shit.

There's a part of me that wants it to happen now, and get it over and done with. But there's a chance I won't black out at all today.

There's a chance today is your very last blackout.

I crush the thought. I'm here, and I'm damn well making the most of it.

As I eat, I take in the piece of paper that tells us what we're going to be doing for the next three weeks.

FEATHERBLADE TRAINING SCHEDULE	
<u>MONDAY</u>	
MORNING	HEALING - HEALING CHAMBERS, SNAKE WING
AFTERNOON	SWORD & AXE - BATTLEYARD
<u>TUESDAY</u>	
MORNING	MAGIC TRAINING
AFTERNOON	ALL DAY PRACTICE IN ELEMENTAL GROUPS
<u>WEDNESDAY</u>	
MORNING	GLIMA - SHIELDMAIDEN'S HOLD, WOLF WING
AFTERNOON	FORGING - THE FIRE PIT, ODIN'S HIGH HALL
<u>THURSDAY</u>	
MORNING	FLIGHT TRAINING
AFTERNOON	ALL DAY PRACTICE AT AERIAL PLATFORMS
<u>FRIDAY</u>	
MORNING	BATTLEYARD COMPETITION
AFTERNOON	STRENGTH DISPLAYS, PRACTICE COMPETITION, HUNTING
<u>SATURDAY</u>	
MORNING	FIGHTING CHOICE - GLIMA, SWORD & AXE, OR ARCHERY
AFTERNOON	FORMATION FIGHTING - THE BATTLEYARD
<u>SUNDAY</u>	
MORNING	RUNES - THE SCHOLAR'S HOLD, ODIN'S HIGH HALL
AFTERNOON	ARCHERY - THE BATTLEYARD

I remember my sister's words. *"I don't know how demanding the schedule will be. If there is a lot of combat training, then it may be tiring."*

Fates, she was right to worry. This is a lot.

I am going to have to be careful that I don't let my mind win all the battles I know are coming and slip off to the gallery whenever I see or hear something new. Abandoning reality here will not only leave me vulnerable, it won't help me make any allies. Nobody will want to be friends with the crazy fae.

When the rooks begin to leave the hall, I follow them, slowing as I walk past Kain. He is leaning against the wall by the door, eating an apple and oozing his "fuck off" presence all over everyone.

He is wearing a black tunic today, with no leather or armor other than short black gloves. He has knives and an axe at his hip, and I'm annoyed that I find him so damn interesting to look at. His hard jaw flexes as I draw level.

I briefly consider thanking him for defending me earlier. Then I consider asking him *why* he defended me earlier.

“Thanks for—” I start, but he takes a step toward me, heat surges, and that presence is here again. His eyes flash with fiery danger. My lips close, and I hurry out of the door, following the rest of the fae who’ve already left the room.



There’s enough of a trickle of fae still heading toward the library that I can follow them, and I assume that the rooks who arrived here two days ago, like the earth-fae female I spoke to, have already had time to explore.

I wish I’d had time to explore. It might lessen the helpless feeling pervading my brain.

I am not helpless, I say to myself fiercely. I’m just... starting a couple of rungs lower than some others.

Do what you can. Ignore what you can’t. Except that might be hard here. I can’t do anything.

Yet, I add with a nod to myself. Can’t do anything *yet.*

We walk through the doors into Odin’s High Hall and make our way up the set of steps on the right this time. They lead to a door that opens onto a bridge the same as the other side. But set into the bark are three archways that look to house dark tunnels into the tree itself. I long to step into any of them, and am delighted when the fae I’m following ducks into the last one.

It is, in fact, a very short tunnel, and when we come out of the other side, I find myself at the bottom of a flight of steps set into the moss-covered bark, leading up to a branch jutting out of the tree. There is a series of small buildings up there, all crafted from wood and in the same style as the others here, nestled along the branch. The Bird Wing, I assume. I start up the steps.

The library turns out to be the first building along the fortunately wide and sturdy branch, and it is as beautiful as any library can be. Smaller than I expected but perfectly proportioned, it’s circular, with shelves crammed with books nestled into every single bit of wall space available, even over the impressive entrance doors. In the middle of the room, a

column is ringed with shelves covered in books. The most interesting thing, though, is the ceiling. It's dome-shaped and features an incredible painting of the nine original Valkyrie soaring over the occupants' heads, fierce and ready for battle.

Brynhild is leaning against the column, running her fingers up and down a wooden carving of a hummingbird between the shelves. I have yet to see a column in Featherblade that is not decorated with carvings.

She is wearing white robes trimmed with silver, and no other weapons that I can see. Her vividly blue hair is piled up high on her head, her braids wrapped up together into a decorative bundle.

She is beautiful. A true ice-fae and warrior.

I remember what she said in the courtyard. "*I think we should take the other one.*" Brynhild wanted Freydis here, not me. But it was she who exposed me. Should I be grateful? Or wary?

Unsure how I feel about the Valkyrie ice-fae, I stay near the back of the library. Other fae are looking at the books, and I scan the group quickly when I think everyone has arrived. I think there are mostly shadow-fae, about eight of them, though perhaps almost as many earth-fae. Fewer gold-fae and only three other ice-fae. And, of course, one fire-fae. Inga throws me a suspicious look when she catches me watching her.

I lean against a shelf, idly touching the spines of the books there and refusing to read any of the titles in case my mind gets interested and tries to tug me away from reality.

"*Hersir*, is your *val-tivar* an owl?" asks a young ice-fae, his voice clear over the chatter humming through the room. He is possibly the youngest fae I've seen here.

"It is bad manners to ask such a thing of an elder Valkyrie," Brynhild says coldly.

"Oh. I'm sorry, *hersir*, I didn't know," he mutters, dropping his gaze.

"You are all here because the gods have decided that Featherblade needs to train new Valkyrie," Brynhild says,

addressing the whole room and ignoring the young fae's apology. "Tell me, why do you think the gods have reopened Featherblade?" she asks, then looks around everybody expectantly.

I consider her question. The thought has skimmed my consciousness, but I have had more immediate things higher up my list of concerns.

Valkyrie were created to guard first Odin, then all the gods. So, do the gods need protection?

Tentatively, I raise a hand.

"Yes?" she says to me.

"Are you able to tell us why the gods left *Yggdrasil*? That would help us in answering the question," I say.

She looks at me disdainfully. "No, I am not able to tell you why the gods left. Nobody can answer that. What I can tell you is that they still speak with the highest-ranking fae left in this world, on occasion."

"Including Sigrun," I guess, then squish my lips together as I realize I said the words aloud.

Brynhild gives me a clipped nod. "Many species shared *Yggdrasil* when the gods first blessed the Tree of Life as their home. Now, it is dominated by the five elemental fae courts that you all hail from. But once, there were many realms connected to the trunk of the tree by the root-rivers that allow you passage. The high fae, or *Vanir*, as the gods called them, still reside in this world, but here, high in the canopy. Creatures like the Starved Ones, a cannibalistic race of undead that the gods cursed, found a way to live within the mists beyond the rivers. Fortunately, they have recently been vanquished from our world. But it is suspected that there are other races still hiding in the tree, such as the dwarves and the Beowulfs."

I am fascinated by what she is saying. Dwarves and Beowulfs are myths, as far as I'm concerned. To think they may be real...

“Most dangerous of all to the gods were Giants. They could climb the trunk of *Yggdrasil* and reach the canopy without wings.”

“Like Harald?” a gold-fae asks, earning a glare.

“No,” Brynhild says tightly. “Not like Harald. *Nothing* like Harald. Harald is a large fae that we describe as giant. These creatures *are* Giants. They have no fae or humanity in them whatsoever. They have been at war with the gods and Odin since *Yggdrasil* blessed them with life. The Valkyrie spent many, many years battling two Giant realms, one of frost and one of fire. Ultimately, we were victorious. We couldn’t destroy the realms, but we could demolish the root-rivers. No longer could they raid the fae courts, climb the great trunk, or endanger *Yggdrasil* and the races who reside in it.”

An uneasy feeling is crawling over my skin, trampling my excitement about the new information. My brain is working fast, connecting Brynhild’s first question with what she is telling us now.

Henrik is standing near the Valkyrie, and when he speaks, it is clear he has made the connection too. “Are you saying the gods need new Valkyrie to fight against a threat like Giants?” he asks, a note of hesitation in his voice.

“Not *like* Giants,” Brynhild answers. “The threat *is* the Giants. There have been multiple reports of Frost Giant attacks, and we believe they are trying to find a way to reconnect their realm to our world.”

“We’re being trained to fight Giants?” someone says. There’s no fear in his voice, just disbelief.

“Yes.”

I draw a long breath.

This is no game. There is a real threat to our world, and fae are needed to protect it.

“Is twenty-six Valkyrie enough?” asks Orgid.

“Well, technically there *were* thirty of you, but yes. It is still enough. One Valkyrie is incredibly powerful on the

battlefield if correctly trained,” Brynhild says. “All have magic beyond that of a normal fae. Each one of you that earns their wings will come into their own, and have something that sets them apart from everybody else. Some of you will be absolutely glorious.” She looks around the room, and I’m almost positive she deliberately avoids looking at me. There’s a murmur of excitement, and I wonder if I’m the only one who’s feeling a frisson of fear.

I don’t think I am a coward, but I’m also not stupid or suicidal. I have no idea what I would be able to do against a Frost Giant. *Recall memories at it to fucking death?*

Once again, the wonderings about whether the gods really did make a mistake assail me.

No, Brynhild just said everybody has their own skill. Everybody brings something, a different kind of strength. And I have a power that nobody else has. No one in the *world* has, as far as I know.

Part of me longs to demonstrate it, to maybe gain some respect from the others that way, but the rest of me knows that it is too dangerous to let them know what I can do. There are wealthy fae here, so there is a good chance that there’s something in the gallery about them and their families. My family have used me to keep court secrets more than they’ve used me to keep anything else—so much so that all the information on other fae has become a blur over the years for my normal memory.

Outing myself as my parents’ daughter is more than enough for one day, I will not risk anybody finding out about the gallery, I decide firmly.

Brynhild speaks again. “Unless, of course, we lose a lot of you. Then we may have to do a second wave of recruiting. It will be up to the gods to decide and communicate to Sigrun.”

“How many is *a lot of you?*” asks Henrik.

“You should address me as *hersir*,” she chides, but her tone is soft and her eyes are fixed on him in a way that makes me wonder if Valkyrie and recruits are allowed to interact in

more than just a knowledge-passing manner. “I may come across as approachable,” she purrs, “but you will respect me properly at all times.”

“Sorry. *Hersir*,” Henrik adds, and it is like he has turned on a magical charm power, his smile broader and his eyes twinkling.

There is an awkwardly long silence, then Brynhild points to a stack of books. “There is one for each of you. Take it and read it in any free time you have. It is about how the Valkyrie won great battles against the Frost Giants many centuries ago. There are many very useful learnings from our predecessors. If you finish it, come back here to the Bardheim Library and get more books. As many as you like—this place is open to you always. Now, head to the Battleyard for evaluation and grouping.”

The fae line up to take a copy of the book, then leave the library. I am last in line, and as I near the pile, I hear Brynhild’s voice in my head.

“If you wish to survive here, you need clothes, armor, weapons, and the courage of Thor himself.”

When I look up at her, she is gazing at a shelf of books, apparently completely uninterested in me.

I pick up a copy of the book, gripping a little too hard, and stride out after the others, my teeth clenched. A list of replies that would certainly not be appropriate for a *hersir* is streaming through my head.

You think I don’t already know that?

You think I’m choosing to learn to fight in a fucking sparkly dress?

Are you expecting me to pull an axe and a chest plate out of my arse?

I walk faster, praying to any god who might be listening for as much help as I can get with whatever is coming next.

CHAPTER 14

MADDY



I hurry after the other fae back through the tunnel, then into the second one, leading into a clearing made of hard-packed earth. A collection of benches rings the clearing, and there are large chests dotted around. A small building with two enormous flags crossing over its entrance stands on the other side of the ring. One flag has a geometric representation of a bear, and the other a falcon.

The emerald and jade canopy of leaves is still overhead, but the foliage is thinner here, and more light and breeze is getting through. The thick forest surrounding us, on the other hand, looks impenetrable. *How is this here? Is it a particularly wide piece of branch that we are standing on that's been covered in earth? Maybe—*

“Rooks, line up!”

I don't have time to work out the practicalities of Featherblade's magic. There are three Valkyrie standing in the center of the dusty circle, and they are waiting for us. Harald is wearing no armor or shirt, just heavy canvas trousers and a shitload of war paint, his huge wings dwarfing Valdis next to him. She still looks unquestionably fierce, her braids tied up in a high ponytail on top of her head and thin, black, decorative zigzags of war paint along her sharp cheekbones. She's wearing tight black leather from head to foot, and her dark wings are tucked tight to her body.

Next to her is Kain.

Standing next to the other two, his lack of wings is so obvious. I'm desperate to find out how he lost them.

Harald speaks, bringing my attention back. "Split into three groups, now," he commands. Fae begin to move around, some with purpose, like Navi and Orgid, and some looking just as unsure as I feel.

I move toward the nearest cluster of people and get raised eyebrows and eye-rolls. I smile at everybody regardless.

"Right. One group with each of us, and then we rotate," Harald says, and immediately steps toward our group.

There are eight of us, including Navi, the earth-fae female from the breakfast line, and the young ice-fae male. "Staffs on the ground," Harald barks. In contrast to all the muttered annoyance I hear from the other fae, a wave of relief washes through me.

Now is not the time that I will have to demonstrate that I can barely make more than a few snowflakes a foot from my face. With no pang of regret or reluctance, I unclip my staff from my hip and lay it in the pile with everybody else's.

Now I just need to pray I don't pass out.

Harald moves to a big chest and starts to pull out swords. "Have any of you had practice with swords before?" Six of the eight raise their hands. The only other fae who hasn't is a slight gold-fae female. She, too, has no braids in her hair, and I wonder if she might deign to talk to me at some point. "Fine. You two together, then," he says, pointing at me and her. I move toward her when she doesn't take a step.

"I'm Maddy," I whisper as I reach her. She doesn't answer me. In fact, she doesn't even look at me. Harald moves around, handing out swords. I hope they're blunted practicing swords, or even wooden swords, but they're not. *Of course they're not.* They are as sharp and gleaming as steel can be.

"Face your partner," Harald says. When I turn to face the nameless fae, I see the other groups spread out across the dusty ring. Valdis' group have moved toward straw-stuffed

mannequins and appear to be holding bows. Kain's group have no weapons at all. They must be fighting hand to hand.

Uh oh. I can't imagine that will go much better than sword fighting is about to.

"Focus," barks Harald, and I'm sure the order is meant for me. "Hold the sword in the hand that feels most natural," he says, and then turns to the rest of the pairs. "Begin, and I'll be over to observe each of you in a minute."

He turns back to us and gives us a short introduction on stances and shifting weight from the back leg to the front arm when holding a sword. I do exactly as he tells me, trying not to feel embarrassed that the sparkles on my dress keep catching the light and that the ragged material is flapping between my knees.

"Right. Practice carefully to begin with," Harald says, then turns away from us and begins to communicate with the rest of the group, ordering the first pair to take a stance.

The fae opposite me is around my age, I would say, but her face is so severe and so lined that I'm guessing she's had a harder life than I have.

"What's your name?" I ask her.

"None of your fucking business," she answers.

Okay.

I keep my well-practiced neutral expression in place, hold my sword up, and ask, "Shall we start?"

In answer, she swings the sword toward my head in an unnecessarily aggressive maneuver. I duck, my instinct to move out of the way rather than lift my sword to block, and the sword sails over my head.

"What the fates are you doing?" I half shout as I straighten. "He said 'practice carefully,' not take each other's damn heads off!" I hear a laugh behind me and realize that everybody's looking at us again. Harald's got a wry smile on his face that I can see he's trying to suppress.

Orgid's words come back to me. *I am the chubby girl in a princess dress here.* Nobody thinks I'm going to survive, so who cares if some asshole fae takes my head off on the first day?

My neutral expression drops, and I set my mouth in a hard line. I turn back to the nameless fae.

"I think it's good manners to engage your partner first," I say coldly.

"Fine," she replies. "Are you ready?" Her tone is mocking, and she doesn't wait for an answer before she swings again. This time, I raise my sword to block. The power of her blow meeting my steel sends shock waves down my arms, but I do manage to keep the sword held up.

Fuck, I'm going to have to start building up my muscles if this is going to happen regularly.

I keep the grimace from my face.

"Back to work!" I hear Harald say, but I daren't drop my gaze from the gold-fae to check that the group has stopped paying us any attention. It is interesting, though, that now that I've shown some ability to defend myself, they've lost interest. No beheadings to watch today. *I hope.*

The fae swings again, to my left this time, and I drop my arms to block her blow.

"You seem very angry," I say, trying to think of anything to distract her from hitting me. I'm reasonably fit from all my time escaping, climbing, and running from the palace with my sister, but I haven't got the upper body strength required to keep this up for long. I know that for sure.

"I have good reason to be angry," she says.

"And is any of it my fault?" I ask her. She raises the sword high above her head and then slashes it down toward me. There's no way I can block it, so I step to the side, and she grunts as the sword hits the dust. It's a good job she is a novice, I think, because now I'm standing to the side, I can see the others.

Specifically, I can see Navi. I already saw that she was a skilled archer on the boat with the birds, but watching her against another skilled partner with a sword is almost magical. She's so fast, and she moves before even the blade seems to know where it's going. *Will she get a bird val-tivar and be given the gift of foresight to be able to preempt what's coming next? Or will she get a bear, a berserker blessed with strength ten times her own on the battlefield? She would probably suit a wolf, with endless stamina, explosive bloodlust—*

“Ouch!” Pain sears up my arm, and I look to the side to see blood trickling down my bare shoulder. There's a twisted grin on my opponent's face, the severe lines replaced for the first time with a smile. She's not hit me hard with the sword, I realize, just reached out and nicked me while I was distracted.

“You must be on your guard at all times,” Harald barks, and I hate that he saw this. “Lose focus and die. First blood to Branka.” Anger rolls through me, and most of it, to be fair, is for myself. I think it is bad manners to attack an unaware opponent, but we are in a practice ring, and I completely forgot that I was facing off against a fae with a sword when I was watching Navi.

I am going to have to work on my concentration.

For the next hour, I spend my time moving to the side and blocking the blows that I can, and by the end of it, I am a sweaty, exhausted mess. It's bad enough that I'm wearing a sparkling dress and look like I slept in a ditch, but now I look like an absolute wreck. The older female's advice that I should tie my hair back is ringing in my head as the long strands stick to my back, and I'm constantly pushing it out of my face.

“Rotate!” Harald shouts, and I am utterly relieved to be moving on from swords.

Everybody takes their time walking over to where Valdis is standing with the bows, and I hope I am not the only one who is tired now.

Archery is something I've done before, thankfully. It's an easy thing to practice within the palace grounds. Our courtyard

is set up with intricately decorated target boards, though, so I've never aimed at a mannequin.

"These are fae-sized," Valdis says to us without any preamble or introduction. "Once we decide who will continue with archery, you will be given Giant-sized practice targets." That makes sense, if that's who we will be fighting, I think, crushing down the fear and incredulity that thought brings with it.

Valdis hands me a bow and a quiver of arrows, which I sling over my back. "Has anybody here not done archery before?" This time, half of our group put their hands up, and I'm not one of them. "Novices, with me." She gestures at the four people—mercifully, the horrible gold-fae included—to move to the end target with her. The other three and I take a mannequin each.

Navi, I know, can use a bow, and I am not surprised in the slightest when she *thunks* arrows into the correct body parts every single time she looses. Most of mine do hit the mannequin, although very few go where I actually hope they will. The strain on my arms feels more than it has done in the past, but I think that's because I've just been holding the sword up for so long.

With Valdis paying attention to the four who need help, I'm mostly left on my own, and I take relief in the brief respite. The earth-fae female is casting me the odd glance, but she's not actually being unkind to me, and Navi's completely ignoring me. There is a shadow-fae male around ten years older than I am directing arrows at the last target, and I would say that he's almost as good as Navi. I glance over at the group doing hand-to-hand, and wish I hadn't as a large shadow-fae is slammed to the ground, sending dust flying. A trickle of dread churns in my stomach.

Valdis walks along behind us, and I get a barked "Need to improve."

Feeling bold, I step out toward her. "*Hersir*, I don't mean to bother you, but do you have anything I can tie my hair back with, please?"

She stares at me, and all I can think about is how beautifully fierce she is. What is her *val-tivar*? She is Valdis the Fast, so a bird of prey, perhaps?

She pushes her hand into a pouch on her belt, yanks out a leather thong a few inches long, and hands it to me without a word. I take it, and she strides off.

“Thank you,” I call after her, and quickly wrap the thong around my hair in a low tail at the nape of my neck. I then bundle the long strands into a ball and tuck the ends into the thong as much as I can, keeping it all out of the way and off my back. I feel better immediately, and I can feel the breeze across my aching, hot shoulders.

I can do this. Do what you can; ignore what you can't.

Right now, I can't fight with a sword, but I will if I keep learning. I have to get stronger, though. There must be places within Featherblade where I can train my muscles?

Doubt snakes through my attempted pep talk. *All well and good until you faint and hurt yourself. Or don't wake up.*

But that isn't right now. *Focus, Maddy.*

I lift the bow, struggling to get it to the height I know is optimal because of the fatigue in my arms, and loose an arrow. It skims the shoulder of the mannequin, but it does just about catch instead of clattering to the ground. “I'm usually better than this,” I say out loud, not expecting either of the fae on either side of me to respond.

“Let's hope so,” mutters Navi.

I smile at her, and she sighs, like she's annoyed with herself as much as me.

“Rotate!” yells Harald.

We drop our bows to the ground and begin to move, but when I see the look the waiting fire-fae with no wings is giving me, I have to work twice as hard to make my feet move.

CHAPTER 15

MADDY



We all stop when we reach the fire-fae, and it's clear that it is not just me who is intimidated by his lethal aura. Nobody has moved within six feet of his rigid, ready body, instead spreading out in a ring around him.

“If you find yourself unarmed,” Kain says, “then your best weapon is you. Every physical part of you that you can use. *Glima* is not optional at Featherblade. When you're stripped of everything but your *val-tivar*, you must be able to defend yourself.” His eyes find mine, and I realize that I've zoned out trying to remember what *glima* means. I'm pretty sure it means wrestling. With his eyes still fixed on me, he continues to speak. “It doesn't matter how big, small, strong, or weak you are; you *are* able to defend yourself.”

Defend myself, maybe, I think, but do any actual damage? Or win?

Not a chance.

I swallow hard. This is absolutely not something I'm going to be good at. And I don't get the impression that he's going to take things lightly with me.

“You,” Kain says, and points at Navi. She steps forward. “Disarm,” he commands, and she does straight away. He drops into a low crouch, shifting his weight, his knees bent and his arms raised, his hands in front of his face defensively. Navi mimics him. The temperature soars, the atmosphere shifts, and, so fast I almost miss it, Kain puts Navi on her arse. I'm

vaguely aware that both his arms moved at the same time as his legs. And then I don't know what happened. There was just the "oof" of Navi hitting the dust.

"Speed is an advantage," Kain says, straightening. "So is stealth and intimidation. You don't have to be strong to win. Pair up."

As fast as I can, I step toward the older earth-fae female. I know she'll have far more experience than me, but I also don't think she actually wants to hurt me, like the asshole gold-fae, Branka. And I've no intention of irritating Navi more than I have to, given that I need to share a bedchamber with her.

The earth-fae raises her eyebrows at me. "I'm Eldith," she says, and a wave of relief rolls through me. She's communicating with me. She's not mocking my outfit, and she's not refusing to spar with me.

"Maddy," I say.

"Yeah, you told me. Have you done this before?"

I can hear some more "oofs" and cries around us, demonstrating that other people have already begun to fight.

"No," I admit. "I didn't have much company growing up, and my sister wasn't the wrestling type."

"Huh," she says. Her arm snaps out, and her fist catches me in the face.

"Shit!" I swear, stepping backward and raising my hands.

"You need to defend yourself," she says. The temperature soars again, and I can feel my irritation rising with it. I'm not used to heat, and I'm not reacting particularly well to it. I'm used to the cold, and I crave it now.

Eldith is dancing around me, her feet fast, keeping me on my toes, needing to watch her every move. I can't tell if this is better or worse than the sword fighting for the amount of concentration it requires. I suppose a dip in focus is less likely to result in my losing a limb, though.

I'm forced to question that as she steps into me, her hip banging into mine and then both arms snaking around my

middle. Instinct kicks in, and I drop to a crouch, trying to evade her grasp. I know I'm not strong enough to force my way out of it, but perhaps I'm wriggly enough. I'm not, though, and she rolls to the ground, heaving her weight over mine and taking me with her. My shoulders hit the dust, and I'm slightly winded, but I don't stop moving. I keep rolling, and I get a moment's elation when I realize I'm on top. No part of me wants to continue the fight, though, so I begin to stand up.

"Hit her," I hear Kain say behind me.

"What? No." But as I've turned to look at him, she has done exactly that to me.

Knuckles collide with the other side of my face, and I swear again.

"For fuck's sake!" But still, my instinct isn't to lash out at her, to try to connect my fist with her face. I have hit a man before, but his intentions were much worse than beating me in a practice fight.

"Hit her," Kain growls again, and I refuse to look at him, refuse to let him distract me. She stands up, but I'm still straddling her waist, so I fall, slamming again to the ground. We're probably similar in size, but her weight is all muscle, and mine is definitely not.

I roll and force myself to my feet, still refusing to turn and look at Kain. "If you do not hit her, I will make you fight me," he growls. Fear flows through me at the thought of that. Fear and something else, and it's not something I'm willing to examine right now.

Eldith kicks out at my leg, but I skip and avoid it. Again, I let my elation distract me, and she kicks out my other foot. This time, it's a stamp, and I hiss as she makes contact. I'm wearing slippers, not boots, and I hear a crunch. The wave of pain takes longer than I expect to get to me, but then it assails me hard, and my hiss continues as I work to not let out any other sound of pain.

I'm positive I see a flicker of regret on the female's face. "You should be wearing boots," she says to me. I keep my mouth shut, refusing to bark at her that she could see perfectly well I wasn't when she decided to stamp on my foot.

I shift my weight, lose my balance, and, as I land on my injured foot, suck in a breath, only just winning the battle not to cry out.

Shit, shit, shit, and more shit. I know the damage is serious; I can feel that my foot is all wrong.

"Go to the healing chambers, now," Kain barks. I force myself to look into his face, unsure how to tell him that, first, I don't know where the healing chambers are, and second, I'm not actually sure I can walk there.

I wonder if I am hallucinating from the pain in my foot, because I think I can see the warm glow of flames rising in his irises. There is no question he is angry with me.

"I'll take her," Eldith says, before I work out what to say.

Kain just nods, then strides back to another pair. "Piss poor," he shouts at them. "Again!"

I look sideways at Eldith. She doesn't make eye contact with me; instead, she moves and throws a rough arm under my shoulders.

I'm embarrassed at how quickly I let her take my weight, but the pain is becoming unbearable.

We make our way back through the tunnel, Eldith taking most of my weight and me hopping awkwardly, making my working leg ache with the exertion. We don't share a word as she directs us clumsily down two sets of spiral steps, then along a sandy shore until we reach a collection of squat buildings. More intricately carved doors fail to pique my interest—the pain is now a throb moving up my entire calf, distracting me from everything else. Eldith knocks, and in seconds the door creaks open.

Erik's smile falters as he sees us. "That didn't take long," he says.

CHAPTER 16

MADDY



The pain is making me uncharacteristically angry, and it must show, because Erik reaches for me with an apologetic look on his face. “I meant it didn’t take long for any of you to end up here. Not you specifically,” he says.

Sure you did.

“Thank you,” he says to Eldith, dismissing her. She hesitates, then turns and leaves. My instinct is to thank her too, but I force myself not to.

She broke my damn foot. I’m not thanking her for shit.

When Erik takes my weight, it is easier to move; he is that much stronger. He guides me through a small hallway that is so overgrown with branches and vines it feels like we are still outside, and then we turn into a large room with a low, beamed ceiling. In the center sits a thick wooden table engraved with runes and covered with instruments and potions, including a large ceramic bowl filled with something pungent. Mint and something spicy. There are also measuring scales, needles, and surgical blades I don’t want to look at. I take in the neatly organized jars of leaves, mushrooms, pickled roots, poultices, and brightly colored powders that line rough-hewn shelves, along with piles of bandages, dressings, and folded furs. Bunches of drying plants hang from the beams above four pallets, each with its own folding screen covered in geometric knot designs.

Erik lifts me by the waist easily before setting me down on one of the pallets and then picking up my foot. As he peels off

my slipper and examines the damage, he speaks.

“So, you were unable to find some more suitable attire last night?”

I don't answer him, because if I do, it will be inappropriate.

“Well, this can be healed easily enough,” he says after a minute of silence. I'm a bit dizzy now, and I think exhaustion is contributing.

“How long will it take?”

He straightens, folding his wings tight behind him. The yellow is so vibrant against the black feathers they're hard not to look at.

“Not long.”

“Days? A week?”

Part of me wonders if not being able to walk will give me time to strengthen other parts of my body before I have to enter the ring again, but most of me can't stand the thought of being immobile.

Erik gives a small chuckle. He holds up his right hand, and the atmosphere in the warm chamber changes. I'm aware of a presence that isn't him—it's cooler and bigger somehow.

I startle as I feel something around my calf. Scales. Cool scales, slithering over my skin, toward my foot.

I force myself not to react, not to swipe at the invisible thing touching me. Erik's snake *val-tivar*. The Valkyrie's eyes have changed, his pupils turning into vertical slits, and his irises have morphed from brown to yellow. He gives me what I'm sure he thinks is a reassuring nod but is actually just as unsettling as the reptilian expression he was wearing before.

Blistering pain erupts in my foot, and I gasp. But when it fades, everything fades. All the pain is gone.

The scales slip away, and Erik's eyes return to normal.

I gape at him and then at my foot. The bruising that was beginning to blossom is still there, but the pain is gone. I

tentatively wiggle my toes. Nothing.

I reach down and press on the bruise. Still, nothing. I press harder, feeling under the skin. Everything is perfect.

“That’s...” I can’t finish my breathed sentence. It’s what? Impossible? Incredible?

Could he cure my blackouts?

“You will be very tired shortly, and need to sleep. Would you like to hear how the healing works while we wait?” Erik asks me. There’s a twinkling in his eye, a sense that he knows so much more than I do and ever will.

I nod because, of course, I want to know how the healing works.

“My *val-tivar* is right here beside me now. In fact, she lives on my shoulder.”

I move my eyes to Erik’s right shoulder, seeing absolutely nothing but the wings jutting out behind him.

“Well, half of her is on this shoulder, and the other half is on the other.” Erik smiles.

“Does she have a name?” I ask.

“Absolutely. But no Valkyrie will ever share the name of their power animal.”

I nod. “Of course, *hersir*,” I say respectfully, not wanting to offend.

“I will tell you, though, that she’s black with yellow rings.” Erik grins at me, and the thought of having my own snake wrapped around my shoulders, ready to heal me whenever needed, gives me a thrill that is beyond any fear I’ve felt since arriving here.

“How does the healing work, *hersir*?”

“She can tell what needs to be fixed, and by the magic of the gods, she can fix it. Not all snake *val-tivars* can heal other people, but almost all can heal their own bonded when they take possession. But mine... She is gifted.”

Which may explain why Erik is one of the last six surviving Valkyrie.

“What kind of wounds can she heal?”

“In others? Broken bones, cuts and abrasions, and most poisonings are easy for her, if she gets to them in time. More grievous wounds that involve vital organs are harder. Mental wounds are not able to be healed by another’s *val-tivar*.”

He is giving me a pointed look, his eyes boring into mine.

Mental wounds. He is telling me that he can’t help me, I am sure.

“But she could cure ‘mental wounds’ for you?”

He gives a small shrug. “Illness of the mind is incredibly complex, and incredibly personal.”

I swallow. “How soon does your snake need to be there to heal others’ wounds?”

“Again, it depends on the severity. Fatal wounds, she must be there in minutes. Broken bones like your foot, days. As long as your own body hasn’t started to knit them back together.”

“And... you?”

His eyes flash yellow. “Short of losing my head or a spear through the heart, she will fix most anything.”

I let out a long breath. Erik is practically invincible.

“So, when some of the rooks here bond with their snake *val-tivars*, they will come and stay here with you in the Snake Wing?” I ask.

“Yes. And I look forward to the company.” His eyes sparkle again. “For now, I have one or two thralls who have taken an interest in healing, but I am mostly alone here. But all the rooks here, regardless of their *val-tivar*, will learn an element of healing during battle, so I hope to see more fae in these halls soon.”

“That’s a lesson I am looking forward to learning,” I say around a yawn. *Unlike sword fighting.*

“You are hoping your *val-tivar* is a snake,” Erik says, one hand thoughtfully on his chin. It’s a statement, not a question.

“Yes,” I say, and roll onto my side, balling up the soft fabric beneath my head. “Any of my blackouts might kill me.” It’s not something I have admitted aloud before, and the Valkyrie is practically a stranger. But if he can help me, I have to try.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he says. Which translates as: *I can’t help you.*

I suppress a sigh. My eyes are heavy now, and I let them close.

“The gods selected you for a reason. I am looking forward to discovering your strengths.” His voice sounds distant.

“You and me both,” I mumble, and sleep takes me.



When I wake, it takes me a long time to remember where I am. The room is empty, lit by warm firelight, and again, I am reminded how far from the cool blue light of my own home I am.

I check my foot, and even the bruising is gone now. I slip down from the padded pallet and experimentally press my toes to the ground, then my heel. It’s perfect.

“Ah, you’re awake.” Erik strides into the room, and Harald enters behind him.

“Yes, and I feel much better. Thank you, *hersir*.”

“Find clothes and armor, or you’ll get pummeled worse than you already have been,” grunts Harald.

“Do you know where I should look?” The rest has restored some of my patience, and I only slightly grind my teeth around the words.

“Use your imagination. Featherblade tests, and Featherblade rewards,” says the big fae. He seems more lighthearted now than he did in the Battleyard.

“Is there anywhere here I can train my muscles?” I feel stupid asking, but the shadow-fae’s eyes flash, and it is not with annoyance. I think it is with interest.

“Yes. There is a training room in the Wolf Wing, and one in my wing.”

“The Bear Wing?”

He nods, confirming his *val-tivar* is indeed a bear. “Beyond the temple. But Featherblade may not show you it yet. Do you know how to train muscles?” I shake my head. “You can’t do it alone. You will get hurt, as it involves heavy weights. And you’ll need to improve your stamina. Valdis might have some advice for that.”

“Valdis?”

“They don’t call her the Fast for nothing.” Harald chuckles.

“You’ve missed dinner, but I saved you this,” Erik says, changing the subject. He hands me a wrapped packet, and I take it gratefully.

“Food is important for a warrior. As is sleep,” Harald says, then squints at me. “You’re pale.”

“I’m an ice-fae. I’m supposed to be pale.”

Erik laughs. “Eat. Rest. Do better tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 17

MADDY



O din's High Hall is dark when I enter it, and empty. I am relieved. The others would have noticed my absence at dinner if they hadn't seen me being carried out of the practice ring earlier, and I'm over being the center of attention for one day.

I don't want to go back to my room, though. I know that there's no way that I'll be able to sleep, not after the hours of rest I just had.

I need to find clothes. I refuse to go to breakfast tomorrow wearing this tattered, glittery dress. None of the other fae are going to give me anything to wear, that much is clear, but there must be a place here for washing clothes. Maybe there will be something I can borrow.

I make my way to one of the unassuming doors behind the magnificent wooden throne, taking a minute to examine all the gems inlaid into the runes. There is a magic about it, and I long to touch it. Controlling the urge with an effort, I move to the door on the left and open it. A bark-lined corridor with no windows and a lot of overgrown vines, lit by sconces, greets me. It is plain enough that I guess it does not lead anywhere grand, so I follow it.

There are steps leading down at the end, and usually, thrall quarters are the highest point or the lowest point in a building, so I go down, finding a new corridor. There are still no windows, but there are a few doors. Each one is dark, though, with no indication of life or activity.

Just as I'm beginning to give up, I see a light. I can hear sounds, too. I move down the hall toward the slightly stronger beam of light than the gentle sconces glow with, and there is a door open. It's a workshop, and inside is a human girl with brown hair, hammering something as hard as her small frame will allow her.

Not wanting to startle her, I knock gently on the door. I fail, and she gives a small shriek as she flings whatever she's holding in the air and spins around to face me. Her eyes are glazed, and it takes a moment for her to focus on me.

She clutches her chest. "Fates above, I wasn't expecting anybody," she gasps, and then remembers that she's talking to a fae, giving me an awkward bow. "I'm sorry, my lady," she says.

I shake my head. "No, no, *I'm* sorry—I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Maddy. I was wondering if you could tell me where I could find clean clothes?"

She stares at me a moment, taking in my dress and slippers. I see her check my ears for points, and my hip for a staff, confirming I *am* fae. "Clean clothes?" she asks hesitantly. "Are you not one of the new rooks?"

I nod. "Yes, but I wasn't given any warning that I was coming here, so I have no belongings."

She looks down at my dress again. "Huh. That looks like it was a nice dress, once," she says.

"Yes. It was." I look down at the blue, sparkly remnants of the gown, now covered in dust, then look at the girl's clothes. She's wearing a beige tunic underneath a protective leather apron. Her sleeves are rolled up, and I see the mark on her wrist. My interest surges.

"You're a rune-marked," I breathe. She nods. I squint at the rune and then recognize it. "For the earth-fae?"

"Yes," she says, still looking a little wary of me. She's pretty, and young, with full lips and big brown eyes. I can see that she's curious about me, too.

I move closer.

“I’ve always been fascinated by the rune-marked,” I say.

She starts to speak and then seems to change her mind, instead turning back to what she was holding. It’s a chisel, I realize, and the piece of wood that she was working on has now been flung across the room. She spots it and moves to retrieve it.

“The fae would have no power at all without the rune-marked.” And it’s true. The fae can wield no magic whatsoever without their staffs, and staffs can only be infused with magic by rune-marked humans. It is a defense mechanism the gods put in a long time ago to try to balance power between fae and humans—without one, the other has no power. I guess in theory it worked, but the reality is that the fae just enslaved the human rune-marked.

She says nothing, just scoops up the wood from the floor and takes it back to the workbench.

“So, how do you put the magic into the staff?” I ask.

She turns to look at me. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, my lady, but I have to finish this tonight. I’m quite busy.”

“Please don’t call me *my lady*,” I say. “Can I just sit here and watch?”

Her brows rise. “Why?”

I shrug. “My roommate is a very quiet and angry person, and I’m genuinely curious to see what you do. I won’t make any noise. I’ll just sit here”—I point to a chair on the other side of the room—“and eat this.” I hold up the packet of food. “I don’t know what Erik put in it, but you’re welcome to share.”

“Thank you, I already ate,” she says slowly. “But sure. If you want to watch, you can.” She still looks confused, but she turns back to her work, and I move to the chair.

Bread and cheese are in the packet, and I chew happily while the girl chisels and molds the wood. Part of me wants to record the process, to store it, but I feel like that would be a breach of confidence.

I realize with a jolt that this is the first time I've been able to make a decision like that in my whole life. Normally, I'm force-fed information, often without the knowledge of the person feeding me the information.

After about an hour, she turns to me, and I watch the glaze leave her eyes again, as it did when I entered.

I hold out the last of my cheese. "Would you like some?"

She starts to say no, then stops. I stand and hand it to her, and her eyes soften as she takes it from me.

"I love cheese. It's so rare in the Earth Court," she says wistfully.

"Really? What do you eat there?"

"Fruit," she says, wrinkling her nose. "Shitloads of fruit."

I laugh. "Fruit is hard to grow in the Ice Court, so that is rare for us. They should trade more."

"If the fae weren't constantly trying to kill each other, maybe..." She trails off, looking anxious.

"It's okay," I say. "I'm not offended. I know fae can be greedy and kind of power-mad."

She looks relieved. "The royal families especially," she says.

She's not wrong. "What are the royals in the Earth Court like?"

"I don't know. I never worked at the palace, so I never met them, but they are trying to help the humans, so they can't be all bad." A sad look fills her face, and she drops the hand holding the cheese to her side.

"Help the humans..." I recall that there is a sickness affecting humans in the Earth Court.

"Fae seem invulnerable, but many humans are suffering," she says. "My family say it's a blessing that I was removed before I fell victim too, but..." She sighs. "It's only been five days, and I miss them already."

“I’m sorry. I hope your family did not fall sick.”

A warmer look fills her eyes, and she shakes her head. “No. So far, they are healthy.”

“I’m glad. Do you have a way to speak with them?”

She shakes her head again. “No. Featherblade is an incredible place, but it’s completely inaccessible,” she says.

I give her the warmest smile I can. “Once everyone here has their *val-tivar*, I guess you can go home, since nobody will need their staffs anymore?”

“No. The Valkyrie want the rune-marked to study new texts and see if we can help their *val-tivars*.”

“What would they need help with?”

“I hope to find out while I’m here.” Fierce intelligence sparks in the girl’s eyes.

“It must be amazing to be able to do what you do. Is it like a trance?”

“Kind of, yes. My hands are guided by some sort of magic. But I’m human. I can’t do any magic myself, and I’m too valuable to the fae to ever live my own life. I never thought I’d leave the Earth Court.”

“I know how you feel,” I mutter.

“Really? You know, you’re not like any other fae I’ve met.” She eats the rest of her cheese as I give her a look.

“Yeah. This dress isn’t exactly helping me fit in.”

I get one more long, assessing look, then she speaks. “I have to finish this staff by tomorrow. But as soon as I’m done, I’ll help you find some clothes.”

I beam at her. “Thank you. So much. What’s your name?”

“Sarrah.”

“I’m—”

“Maddy,” she finishes for me. “Yes, I remember.”

She goes back to her work, and I watch for as long as I can, but it is a slow process, and the workshop is warm. Eventually, I find my eyelids drifting shut, and I let them.

CHAPTER 18

MADDY



“Maddy?”

The voice wakes me, and I startle as I sit upright.

“Hi.” I look up and see Sarra’s face.

“Oh, hi,” I say thickly. “I fell asleep.” The statement is as much for my own muddy thoughts as for her benefit.

She smiles at me. “Yes, you did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You kept your word, and you were quiet. That’s the main thing.”

I smile at her. “Did you finish the staff?”

“Yes.” She holds it up.

“Fates, it’s beautiful,” I say. The sleek redwood handle is telescopic so that it can be compacted at a fae’s hip, like all staffs. But it’s the end that is stunning. A tiny, carved wooden halo surrounds a carving of a pear, set with hundreds of tiny emeralds. The detail in such small pieces of wood is incredible.

“Thanks.” She holds out a cup to me. “Coffee?”

My face lights up and I trade the mug for the staff. “Thank you. What time is it?” I ask her, thinking she’ll say sometime in the middle of the night.

“An hour before dawn,” she answers.

I groan. My schedule is in my pocket, and I pull it out. Runes, then archery.

Sarra leans over to look at the paper. “That’s a full schedule.”

I shove the paper back in my pocket. “It’s missing ‘black out in front of everyone,’” I mutter, then wish I hadn’t.

“Blackout?”

I sigh. “I faint regularly for no reason.”

She pulls a face. “That can’t be good.”

“No,” I agree.

“Especially not here. I wonder why the gods selected you?” she says thoughtfully, and then immediately looks like she regrets saying it. “Shit, sorry. I’m sure you’re going to make a great Valkyrie.”

I can’t help a rueful laugh. “Am I fuck! I’ve no idea why the gods selected me. The call was for Princess Verglas of the Ice Court, and my sister is strong and powerful, so we assumed the call was for her. But when they arrived...” I shrug. “They took me.”

Sarra gives me a long look. “You’re a princess?”

“Yeah, but my parents kept me out of public view. Because of the fainting.”

“They were embarrassed?”

“No,” I say quickly. I don’t want to tell her about the gallery. “It was just for my own safety. Royals are targets for other courts, and I’m, well, weak.”

She looks a little doubtful. “So, that’s why you’ve not got any clothes? You all thought your sister was coming here?”

“Yup. I never thought I’d leave the Ice Court, let alone train to be a Valkyrie.”

“Come with me,” she says, setting down the coffee, but not before draining it. I follow her. We walk for a while until we

reach what I assume is the servants' quarters, and then she takes me into a large laundry room.

"Take whatever you need. There's plenty in here," she says.

"Thank you, Sarra," I say, gratitude filling me. I move around the room, gathering up trousers and shirts in any color, as long as they look like they'll fit me. I find a long leather strap that will work as a belt and a scratched black leather corset that should protect most of my upper body from training blows. Sarra comes over with a pair of boots.

"Here."

I pull them on, delighted when they fit. "They're perfect," I say. They are in surprisingly good condition compared to everything else in the room, with sturdy steel toe caps and solid heels.

"I thought we were the same size," she says, nodding in satisfaction.

I look up at her. "They're yours?"

"Yes. So don't damage them."

Her tone is teasing, but I shake my head. "I can't take your boots."

"Why not? I don't need them. The hallways in Odin's High Hall are fine for slippers. You're going to be outside a lot."

I beam at her. She doesn't even know that my foot was broken due to my lack of boots just hours earlier. "Thank you so much for helping me."

She looks down awkwardly. "Thanks for the company," she says. "In a weird way, it was kind of nice to have you there last night."

"I miss my family too," I tell her softly. I do miss my sister. And I definitely prefer Sarra's company to Navi's, or lying awake in the silent, pitch-black chamber we're supposed to share.

"Maybe..." Sarra says, and then trails off.

“Maybe I could come back tonight?” I ask.

She smiles at me. “I’d be really interested to hear about the kinds of things you’re learning about, and especially interested to hear more about *val-tivars*,” she says.

“You and me both. I’ll come down after dinner,” I say.

I leave feeling lighter, despite the armfuls of clothes I’m now holding. I have a new sense of hope, and I feel better about myself. I don’t know if it is a side effect from Erik’s healing, or just from spending some time with someone who isn’t being an arsehole. Either way, I’m determined to ignore the growing dread that a blackout must be imminent and prove myself a decent rook today.

The hallway is dim as I move fast along it, wanting to get back to my room to store my pilfered clothes and change into something that doesn’t sparkle as soon as I can. But I pause as I reach the top of the stone spiral staircase, convinced I can feel eyes on me. I look around, but I can’t see anyone, so I carry on.

When I reach Odin’s High Hall, I open the door quietly, step through, and I’m careful to close it behind me—which is why I am positive someone *is* following me, because I hear it open a beat later.

I whirl around. Kain is leaning against a column nowhere near the door, but I’m sure he wasn’t in here when I came in. I open my mouth to ask him why he’s following me, but he just turns and walks away without a word. I glare after him. There’s something seriously wrong with that fire-fae, and his interest in me is more than a little disconcerting.

I’m unsurprised that Navi is awake when I enter our chamber. The curtains are pulled back, letting in some of the weak morning light trying to break through the thick canopy surrounding Featherblade. Navi looks down at my armfuls of clothes.

“Where have you been?” she asks. She’s fully dressed and fully armed.

I hold up the clothes. “Where do you think?” I open the chest and start to load everything except a pair of trousers and a shirt I can wear today, along with the belt, leather armor, and some stockings under Sarra’s already comfortable boots. Navi watches me a moment, then gives a final eye-roll and leaves the room.

“Thank Freya’s mighty cats,” I mutter, taking the mirror out of my pocket and then stripping out of my dress.

Holding the cold enamel mirror in my hand makes me pause, though. Carrying it on me is obviously not an option—I’m lucky it hasn’t been damaged already. But putting it away... It feels like I’m moving even farther from Freydis.

Should I try it?

I start to open it, but nerves take over. Convincing myself that I don’t have time, I think about hiding the compact under my pillow or mattress, but that feels kind of obvious. Instead, I fold it up carefully inside the middle of the ruined gown, which I then place at the very bottom of the chest.

I catch sight of Aldrich’s staff, also at the bottom of the chest. I feel a beat of sadness for the man I didn’t know, but then a new thought occurs to me. Perhaps Sarra will be able to do something with the staff? She is, after all, an earth rune-marked, and it’s an earth-fae staff.

I get washed and dressed in record time, making it down to the feasting hall for breakfast before the last few others. I walk around the tables with my steaming bowl of porridge and pile of fruit hopefully, but nobody indicates that I should sit with them. There are more groups today, more people talking together. I sit at the end of a table that has few people around it and offer a smile to an earth-fae on the other side. He gives me a weak one in return, and continues to eat his breakfast in silence. I see Eldith looking for somewhere to sit down, but when she sees me, she turns on her heel and moves to the other side of the room.

We are being taught about ancient runes this morning, and I’m excited when we enter a new room directly off Odin’s High Hall with an etching over the door reading, *The Scholar’s*

Hold. It's a round chamber, and the walls are completely covered in paint. There is not one inch of wooden paneling that doesn't have runes drawn on it. I already recognize around ninety percent of the marks before me, but the ten percent that I don't send my mind into overdrive, and I immediately forget about everybody around me, running my fingers over the marks delightedly.

Brynhild strides in a few moments after we have filled the room, and the lesson commences. Normally, I would struggle to sit still for two hours, but the time moves quickly because I'm interested in just about everything she has to say. I lose my battle repeatedly with the gallery; the need to look up something she's mentioned or a rune I do not recognize is too strong to beat. But everybody else is making notes or watching Brynhild, not me. Every time I bring back a memory from my gallery, particularly if it's a paper one and I'm holding the shimmering form of it in my hand, I am careful not to let anybody see.

After over an hour of talking, Brynhild tells us we need to complete a written test. "This will allow us to group you accordingly for further teachings in language and *Yggdrasil* history," she says around groans.

I'm not groaning. This is something I can excel at. I don't need to be strong, I don't need to be fast, and I don't need to try to hit an arsehole to do well at this.

I just need to stay conscious.

She hands out parchment to everybody, filled with questions, mostly asking for definitions of runes and some asking for runes for other things. I answer every single question, heading off to the gallery to answer the four most difficult. I'm positive I've got them all right. When I look around the room, I see that the nearest fae to me are barely halfway down their parchments. Not wanting to stand out or draw any more attention to myself, I pretend to still be filling things in.

Brynhild is watching me, though. She knows I've finished. Has she watched me abandon reality to get the answers? I'm

sure whatever she did to me in the courtyard at the Ice Court involved her *val-tivar*, which I'm sure must be an owl, and I suspect that she knows more about me than I might have let her discover if I'd known what she was doing. But would I be here if I hadn't let her perform whatever magic she had? I don't know. What I do know is she hasn't looked at me warmly since.

Most of the fae look relieved when Brynhild dismisses us, and we all make our way to the Battleyard for archery. Valdis is leading the group again, except this time, it is all twenty-six of us. I make sure I choose a target away from all the fae who have so far been hostile to me, and after the rest I had both on Erik's pallet and in the reasonably comfortable chair in Sarra's workshop, I find my arms are in better condition than they were the day before. My muscles do ache a bit, but I hit almost all of my targets, and I don't end up a sweating mess like I did the day before. And, even better, I don't black out.

My confidence rising, I hang back when everybody else leaves for dinner. Valdis is loading a chest with the bows we were using, and she stops and stares at me when I approach.

"*Hersir*," I say with a respectful nod. She doesn't reply, but puts a hand on her hip as her wings flex wide, then tuck back in.

Fuck, I want wings.

The thought is so strong it makes me blink.

"Harald told me that you might be able to help me increase my stamina," I say, focusing on her face instead of her wings. This close I can see that the war paint on her cheeks has tiny runes within the zigzags.

"A desire to improve will never be denied," she says. Does that mean she's going to help me? She assesses me a moment longer, looking me up and down and making me shift uncomfortably. "You need to run."

"What? Now?"

"Every day. In order to improve your stamina and your body fitness, you need to run."

“Okay,” I say.

“Start with ten minutes, and increase every day, until you reach sixty minutes.”

I gape at her. *Run for sixty minutes?* Is that even possible? Unless I am running for my life, my pace tends to be set by my interest in whatever it is I am heading toward. “Where is good to run in Featherblade?”

“Around this ring is perfectly adequate,” she says.

“Okay.” I let out a long, resolute breath. “Thank you, *hersir*.” I turn to go, but her voice stops me.

“Why aren’t you running?”

“It’s dinnertime,” I say.

“You have time to run now.”

“But I’ve just—”

“If you’re serious about becoming fitter, then you start now,” she says.

I want to argue. I want to go and eat a load of pastry and cheese. But she’s right. I asked her for help, and she’s told me what I need to do.

Odin’s arse. I’m going to have to run.

After one lap, my lungs are burning. It’s not even a large ring, but it feels like I’ve just run the length of the Ice Court.

“Again,” Valdis says when I get back.

She has to be joking. Another lap might actually kill me. But her eyes are hard as stone.

Shit. I’m going around again.

When I return, barely able to breathe and my face so hot I think it might melt off, she claps me on the back so hard I stumble forward. “Good,” she says.

I pant a thank you, and limp away from the practice ring before she can tell me to do anything else.

CHAPTER 19

MADDY



Dinner in the feasting hall is a repeat of breakfast. Nobody looks like they want me to sit with them, but this time I'm bold and sit close to an existing group. They don't get up and move, but none of them look warmly at me. Harald takes a stool into the center of the room and gives a big bellow. Everybody looks at him.

"Whilst you eat, I shall regale you with the tale of the most mighty of Valkyrie," he says, then launches into an entertainingly dramatic story about how Sigrun vanquished a mighty Frost Giant and saved a village of fae. His booming voice and inventive sound effects draw everyone in, including me, and I listen raptly as I eat my meat pie and mashed potatoes. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the story takes a lewd turn once the fighting is done, as is common in bard's stories and songs in *Yggdrasil*. Fight, fuck, repeat. The warrior's way.

When he gets to the part about an entire tavern full of men disrobing at Sigrun's feet, I feel my cheeks pink, and I'm not the only one. Some fae are laughing, but a few others are redder than I am. I can see the glint in Harald's eyes, and know the big warrior is enjoying himself. When the story gets lascivious enough that I am quite sure I would only be able to enjoy it if I was in my own company, not surrounded by strangers, I join the numerous fae who are leaving the feasting hall.

I need some time alone to try to store all the things I have learned the last few days. My stomach squishes nervously, and my skin crawls a little.

What if I can't do it again? What if that part of the gallery is broken forever?

I have to try, even if I'm scared to find out. My memory magic is a part of me. I can't avoid it. *Unlike the compact mirror*, I think as I reach my chamber. That, I *am* avoiding. I have no idea how to talk to my sister. I'm terrified that she won't even want to hear from me, and it's easier to ignore it at the moment than face it.

Navi isn't in our chamber, and I take a risk and lock the door. She might come back at any point—she doesn't strike me as the type to enjoy lewd stories—and she'll probably be pissed that I've locked her out of her own room, but she'll get over it. I have to be alone.

I change out of the clothes I was forced to run in, settle on the bed, and close my eyes. When the gallery forms around me, I am in the room where I make statues. The jets are flowing, squirting water into the air three feet high.

I take a deep breath and think about the runes I learned about this morning that I want to memorize, and I hold my hands out to the water, willing it to do my bidding. Relief so strong I almost stumble rushes through me as the water obeys.

I move my hands in a rhythm that happens completely of its own accord, and the water swirls and molds and meets, more jets spurting up, a giant dance of painting with water.

I try to draw a strong image of the birds that attacked us on the way here, as strong as I can still remember two days later, and then I move on to everything else I want to store—all the stories I've heard so far, everybody's name, and everything I know so far about Featherblade. When I'm done, there are two statues in front of me. The one of a sparrow, I believe, contains everything that's happened the last two days, and the one of an oak leaf is specifically the runes lesson that Brynhild gave us this morning. I let out a long breath and admire the two statues. I don't know how the magic does it, but they're always beautiful. If I actually sat down and tried to create an ice sculpture in real life, there is absolutely no way it would be this incredible to look at.

Satisfied I've done what I can, I return to reality.



Sarra isn't in her workshop when I get there.

The fire is burning low, though, casting a warm light over the room. I scan the bookshelf on the far side and recognize the book that Brynhild gave us to read. I'm pretty sure mine got left in the Battleyard, so Freya only knows where it is now. Taking this copy, I settle into the chair I slept in last night. Somewhat aptly, with Harald's bawdy performance this evening, it is a bard's book of battle tales.

If I hadn't met the Valkyrie in real life, I would struggle to believe the first story. A hundred giants taken down by three Valkyrie and an elaborate set of ropes. But I know about *val-tivars* possessing their Valkyrie in battle now, and I see how their powers come into play. There are clear demonstrations of Valkyrie knowing what's coming next when they shouldn't be able to, or being able to heal grievous wounds fast enough to be immediately recovered. That burning longing to have a snake *val-tivar* surges through me. Surely that's my destiny? That must be why I'm here, to heal myself, and others who might be broken. Perhaps this really wasn't a waste of time, and I will be able to become as good as my sister would have been if she had made it here. With new hope, I keep reading until my eyes grow heavy.



When I awake, it's to Sarra's face, and, happily, she's once again handing me coffee.

"Maddy, did you sleep in here again?" It's a redundant question, and we both know it. "Why? You have a bedroom."

"There's an angry fae in my bedroom. I don't want to be in my bedroom," I say. I take the coffee from her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. You know, that terrifying-as-shit fire-fae was out in the hall when I came in here."

I frown, my pulse quickening. "I think he's following me."

Sarra looks at me with genuine concern on her face. “Of every individual in Featherblade, he is the one I would *not* want following me,” she says. “There is something seriously fucked up about him. Have you heard the stories?”

I shake my head, my stomach tightening. “No. Tell me.”

“Most of the humans here won’t go anywhere near him because he almost killed a thrall a few nights before the fae started arriving. One of the kitchen girls overheard the Valkyrie talking about how they don’t understand why the gods are letting a criminal hold a place as a *hersir* in Featherblade, and she’s sure that Brynhild called him a murderer.”

He’s a criminal? That lines up with his losing his wings as a punishment. Not an accident, then. “Did they say who he killed?”

Sarra shakes his head. “No, but these Valkyrie are used to death. It must be bad if *they’re* calling him a murderer.”

I think about the stories I fell asleep reading. She’s right. “Maybe that’s why they all seem to ignore him.”

“He’s bad, Maddy. Stay away from him.”

I hold my hands up, spilling my coffee. “I swear on Loki’s left ball, I won’t go anywhere near him.”

Sarra snorts a laugh. “Good. So, what did you learn yesterday?” she says.

“What time is it?” I ask, aware that I don’t want to miss or be late for breakfast and give anyone any reason to stare at me again.

“Same as yesterday, an hour before dawn. That’s when I usually start,” she says.

Good. I have some time to talk to her. “Brynhild talked about ancient runes, and then we did archery for hours, and then Valdis made me run two laps around the Battleyard, and I thought I was going to die.”

Sarra pulls a face. “How did the boots cope with the running?”

“They were invaluable,” I say. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Sorry I missed you last night. I was exhausted after the previous all-nighter.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“What’s on your schedule today?”

“Healing in the morning, and sword and axe in the afternoon.” Sword and axe is giving me some cause for dread, but I am excited about the healing. Sarra seems to be, too.

“Tell me everything you learn, especially if it’s something you don’t need magic to perform, like poultices and medicines,” she says enthusiastically, and I remember the sickness affecting humans in her court.

I nod. “Of course.”

When I leave her workshop, I look everywhere for Kain, but I don’t see or feel him around. I’m standing at the top of the stairs, exactly where I sensed him yesterday, and my stomach swoops.

“Oh, shit,” I curse aloud. I’m on my own, and I’m over a hard floor. I just have time to drop to my knees and elbows and tuck my head into my shoulder before I lose consciousness.

CHAPTER 20

MADDY



6 56, I think, as bleary, vine-covered walls come into view. The sick feeling isn't too bad, and I roll onto my back, waiting for my eyes to become less swampy.

"You made it," I congratulate myself in a slur. Not only did I make it, I didn't hurt myself when I fell. I may only get a second's notice, but perhaps it is enough.

I pull myself to my feet slowly. I don't know how much time has passed, but it's not usually very long, so I hope I still have time to get washed up and dressed. When I get back to my room, once again, Navi is already dressed and armed. She's sitting on her bed with her legs crossed underneath her, her hands folded in her lap, and her eyes closed. I creep into the room, not wanting to disturb her, and she opens one eye.

"I'm communing with the gods," she says.

Go to the damn temple, then. "Huh," I answer.

"Where have you been?" she asks me.

I shrug. "Around."

"Fine," she says, and kicks her legs over the bed and pulls on her boots. I gather up some clean clothes and head off to the washrooms.

Nearly everybody has eaten when I get to the feasting hall, so I swipe up some fruit and a large bread roll and eat it on my way to the Snake Wing. I wouldn't say I'm getting used to the warmth—I certainly miss the cool, crisp air of the Ice Court—but there is something nice about being outside in the warm,

dappled orange glow that makes it through the trees. Moving around Featherblade is peaceful, and the constant buzz in my mind is distracted by insects, whorls in the wood, and rustles in the leaves. Like that first night in the garden, the riot of sensations is fulfilling, rather than overwhelming.

On reaching the Snake Wing, Erik waves everyone into a room adjacent to the one where he treated me in the day before. There are large tool benches everywhere, covered in hundreds of jars of powders and bottles, all neatly arranged.

He spends most of three hours telling us all about healing without magic, and it's fascinating. We are all given parchment and quill to write down everything that we're being told, and I'm scribbling furtively, although I know there's really no point. As long as I store this soon enough, I'll be able to recall all of it in full detail, both for myself and for Sarra.

I make a note about something to do with the healing and pain-nulling properties of a specific tree bark, and it triggers a memory in my mind of something to do with anesthetics in a story I was once told. Before I can stop myself, I slip into the gallery, looking up exactly what kind of tree was mentioned in the story I've stored. Aptly, the ice sculpture that the memory is contained within is an olive tree. I've never eaten an olive, but I have always wanted to. I pull the memory out, discovering that it was once again told by Alfred the scholar, which means I will have to listen to it rather than read it—which is harder in public. But as reality comes into focus, I jerk upright. I can smell something acrid, and there's a light near my face.

It's my hair, and it's on fire.

"Shit!" I shriek, batting at the flames, but the movement causes them to burn faster. Any normal ice-fae would grab their staff and have the fire put out in a heartbeat with their ice magic, but my instinct is to clap wildly at it, trying to catch the strands between my palms to starve the flames.

It's only when rationality sets in that I reach for the staff at my hip, grip it hard as I yank it off, and will my pathetic ice magic to intervene. Fortunately, I am able to conjure snow and

ice within a few feet of me, and as I wrap my hand tightly around the top of the fistful of hair, cool snow tumbles from my palm down the locks, extinguishing what my wild clapping didn't.

I can hear sniggering, but it's only a few people.

Erik has his arms folded, and most of the rooks are looking at me with either pity-filled or mocking expressions. There's a wild-eyed look on Branka's face, but my gaze settles on Inga. She's the only fire-fae here—who else could set my hair on fire from across the room?

Why, though? Why would she try to hurt me?

A voice enters my head. "*Maybe you should pay better attention to your surroundings.*" It's Orgid's voice, and it makes me flinch. I had no idea he was powerful enough to project his thoughts into other heads. But shadow-fae magic particularly is known for its psychological aspect. Very powerful shadow-fae can make people see their worst nightmares, even live them as though they're real.

They're just arseholes, I tell myself, trying to calm my racing heart. Showing up the weak to make themselves look stronger. I've always known that people do that—I've just never been on the receiving end of it. *Is this why my parents hid me? To save me from being exposed to fae like them?*

When Erik moves toward me, I shake my head. I don't want him to draw any more attention to me. I don't need anyone to ask if I'm okay, and I don't need anyone's pity.

The smell of my burned hair bothers me for the next half an hour, though, and I struggle to concentrate on what Erik is saying. I write none of it down, and I doubt I'll remember it well enough to store it.

We get half an hour before sword and axe training, and I slip into the room that Erik treated me in. I saw a lock on the door the last time I was there. I turn it, ensuring that the room is empty first, and go straight to the gallery. I'm taken into the sculpture room, and it's almost like the jets are working harder than usual, spurting even higher. I work quickly and with

focus, pushing out the awkward smell of my hair and the adrenaline shot that came with the unexpected attack, and I store everything that Erik told us about non-magical healing that I can remember clearly.

I'm pleased when I'm finished that the statue has taken the form of a squirrel. He's about three feet taller than me, a huge statue even for the gallery, and I feel some sense of control returning. I will be able to tell Sarra all of this at some point, and there's a slim chance it might help somebody she knows one day.

When I return to reality, I grab one of Erik's sharp blades and a mirror from the instrument table, and cut the lock of hair just above where the singed ends are. I have enough hair that the short part is not obvious, and the smell is immediately better. Then I dig the leather strap that Valdis gave me out of my pocket and tightly tie it all back.

I don't think I'm in the room more than ten minutes, and when I leave there is nobody there except Erik, leaning against the wall by the door I locked.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," he says.

Does it fuck. How does getting damaged make you stronger? Getting stronger makes you stronger.

"Right," I say, and leave the Snake Wing before my practiced neutral face betrays me.

I make my way up the stairs and through the tunnel toward the Battleyard. Everybody is already there, and Harald has split them into two groups, one for swords and one for axes. I'm relieved when he puts me in the group that doesn't contain Branka, Inga, and Orgid.

I'm no faster and no stronger at avoiding blows than I was the day before. Thankfully, though, this time Harald is spending more time teaching us technique and less time letting people just beat the shit out of each other. We spend almost all the time just working on our foot positions, and by the end of it I actually feel like I might be better at dodging blows.

There's still absolutely no way I could win a fight, but at least I'm learning something.

By the time we go to dinner, I am ravenously hungry. I sit as far from Orgid and Inga as I can, and I'm surprised when Eldith sits down next to me. "I didn't know your foot would break," she says.

I raise a brow. It's not exactly an apology, but it's something. She starts to eat her food, and I follow suit. It's another meat pie, but this time, it's been served with great big suet dumplings. It's delicious. The food here is easily as good as it is in the palace. A happy noise escapes me when I start on the dessert, an enormous, sticky sugarplum concoction. Eldith gives me a sideways look.

"You need to strengthen your muscles," she says.

"You're not guilting me out of eating this dessert," I tell her.

She holds a hand up. "I'm just saying, you're not strong enough for Featherblade."

"You think I don't know that?" I reply. "There's a training room in the Bear Wing Harald told me about."

She shakes her head. "Nobody has been able to get into the Bear Wing yet—it's not been revealed to any rooks so far. But the training room in the Wolf Wing is open to most."

I nod at her. "Okay. I'll check it out. Thanks."

She gets up and leaves without saying anything else. I finish my dessert thoughtfully. I'm already in the Wolf Wing, so I should see if I can find the training room. At least check it out, like I said.

I leave through the main entrance and move to inspect the three other buildings connected to the feasting hall.

The first one I come to is an earthy, plain room filled with racks of horseshoes, enormous, round metal spheres, and heavy rocks in lots of different sizes. Is this a training room?

Moving cautiously, I push at one of the rocks with my boot. It barely moves. I bite my lip, remembering what Harald

said about hurting myself. I need help, and I know who I'm going to ask.



I head straight down to Sarra's workshop, and I'm pleased to see that she's there. "You're not working on a staff?" I ask.

"No, not today. I have to study." She holds up a book. She's sitting cross-legged in front of the fireplace, so I join her.

"Rune-marked fae," I read.

"Yeah, history," she says. She doesn't look thrilled, but the fact that she was sitting here reading it when I entered means she's not averse to studying.

"Do you know how to train muscles?" I ask her. She looks at me like I've gone mad.

"You're in a Valkyrie training hall," she says. "Anybody here would be able to tell you how to train muscles."

"I know, but I asked Harald and he told me to work it out myself. And everybody else is, well, an asshole," I say. My hands move automatically to the shortened lock of hair, and Sarra's eyes follow it.

"What happened?" she asks me.

"The fire-fae set my hair on fire."

"Kain?" she asks in shock.

"No, Inga, the rook."

"What an immature *heimskr*." I haven't heard the ancient word for idiot in a long time, and I smile. "I know very little about the fire-fae," she says. "Everybody in our world thought they were extinct."

"Same," I say. I barely even have anything in the gallery about the fire-fae, as I've discovered. I recite what I do know to Sarra, though. "The court fell silent two hundred years ago. Nobody's had any access to it since. We know that there was some sort of civil uprising within the fire-fae royal family, and that's all."

“Well, that’s more than I knew. I wonder what happened?”

I shrug, and we fall silent a moment.

“I think in order for muscles to grow, they have to be torn and then repair themselves,” she says thoughtfully. I feel like I’ve heard a similar thing, and the itch to go into the gallery and check is abruptly intense. I force myself to keep conversing with her, in order to fight it.

“I had a look at the training room, and it was just filled with heavy stuff,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “Yeah, lift the heavy stuff. I reckon that’s your best bet.”

“As simple as that, huh?”

She smiles. “As simple as that, yeah.”

“Valdis didn’t make me run today,” I say.

She looks at me like my sister does when I’m doing something I shouldn’t be. “Should you run anyway?”

“Yes,” I admit. “Probably.”

“You could go now?”

It’s comfortable and quiet here, and I like talking to Sarra. I don’t want to haul my tired backside all the way to the Battleyard and force my lungs to the brink of explosion.

Do what you can; ignore what you can’t.

I *can* run. It *will* make me fitter. I haven’t been given this opportunity to sit on furs by the fire. With a sigh, I reluctantly drag myself to my feet. “I’ll see you tomorrow?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says with an encouraging smile.

I run two laps of the Battleyard, which is mercifully empty when I get there. The running is no easier than it was the day before, and I’m almost certain one more lap would finish me off.

I think I can feel Kain’s presence when I stop, leaning over my knees and gasping down air, but I can see no sign of him. I stay alert through my panting all the way back to my chamber,

but don't catch any glowing ash eyes anywhere. My chamber is dark when I enter, and I just get a barked acknowledgement of my presence from Navi. I fall asleep quickly, my limbs aching with fatigue, and my body pleased to be getting some time in an actual bed. I'm grateful that I fall asleep fast, because I'm dreading tomorrow.

We have one thing on the agenda the entire day: magic.

CHAPTER 21

MADDY



I eat breakfast alone the next morning, but before I'm even close to finished, Brynhild, Erik, Harald, and Valdis all stride into the feasting hall. There's no sign of Kain, and part of me wonders why I looked for him first. *Because you're sure he's following you, and you want to know what he did to lose his wings.*

Harald barks, "Shadow-fae, with me, hurry up!" Fae wolf down the rest of their food and hurry to follow him from the hall. The gold-fae move off with Valdis, and the earth-fae follow Erik. The three other ice-fae and I are left in the feasting hall with Brynhild. She says nothing, but all four of us follow her as she marches from the hall.

She stops when we reach the cavern entrance. It's a particularly warm day, light beaming through the thick leaves and little breeze to rustle them.

"Now," she says, looking over us all slowly. My stomach is turning somersaults, and my palms are itching. "Let's see if we can't all cool down a bit. Snow."

The young ice-fae boy, I think his name is Martom, immediately has a flurry of snowflakes storming around him. I can't help but be impressed with his power. Age has no bearing on magic, but typically the more experience you have, the more you find out what you can do and the better you become at controlling it. This kid is brimming with raw power and potential. Brynhild beams at him.

The older male next to him has a decent swirl of snow moving around him, as does the female. She's my age and has a timid but determined set to her face.

Brynhild nods at them both, then turns her attention to me. Six or seven paltry snowflakes drift down in front of my face.

"Really?" she says, her brows raised. I swallow, and I can feel my cheeks heating. "Madivia, would you please give me the best and strongest blast of ice magic that you can conjure?" she says, folding her arms over her beautiful teal gown, her wings flexing behind her.

I try to calm my nerves, gripping my staff with both hands and wishing they weren't sweating. "At what target?" I ask.

Her eyes bore into mine. "Me."

Oh gods, help me. I raise my staff, hold up one palm, and drag as much magic as I can from within myself and try to pour it into my staff. It's a pretty thing, created for me by my family, and I try to embrace it as hard as I can. I imagine my sister's power, try to believe that I could be her.

I blast ice at Brynhild.

A half-frozen jet of water erupts from my palm, shoots about a foot away from me, and splatters to the wood three feet short of the Valkyrie.

Shit.

I'm not surprised, but I am disappointed. Maybe some part of me thought Featherblade might bring my magic out?

Brynhild looks far worse than disappointed. She looks appalled. "What was that?"

"My ice magic," I say quietly. I can't help glancing sideways, and the awkward looks on the rooks' faces aren't much better than the withering glare of Brynhild.

"You are a member of a fae royal family," she says. Shame burns through me as I nod.

"My magic never really fully formed," I mutter. I'm convinced that the development of my memory power and the

blackouts stunted my magical powers, but I'm not going to say that aloud.

"I will not teach you," Brynhild says.

My skin turns cold, and not in the way that I miss. In the way that means that my blood has stopped running properly.

"If the innate magic is not there, then you cannot be taught. I felt your weakness in your home, but I thought that perhaps here in the gods' own blessed halls that your magic may present itself more strongly." Her icy eyes are hard. "I was incorrect." The three words stab into me, shards of ice to the gut.

She won't teach me. I can see the resolve in her eyes. She's not going to change her mind.

My mind tumbles, shame and anger mingling. I grasp for control.

Do what you can. Ignore what you can't.

"How do I train my muscles?" I say, refusing to let the hot pricks at the back of my eyes take any kind of form.

The question seems to take her by surprise. "Train your muscles?"

"Yes. If you can't make my magic stronger, I'll make my body stronger."

She stares at me for so long that I think she's not going to answer me. But eventually, she says, "Find a bear or a wolf to help you." She turns away from me, and thank the gods, I have been dismissed.

My hands are shaking as I move to the staircase. I want to be anywhere that isn't near her and the fae who have just seen me humiliated.

I'm so weak, she won't even try to teach me. *Just like my parents. They gave up, too.*

Is this what they have been trying to save me from my whole life? This embarrassment and shame?

What if they *had* kept trying, though? Kept trying to teach me, kept trying to help me... Perhaps my magic might have gotten stronger?

I move down the staircase fast, jamming my staff back into its sheath on my hip.

I knew this was coming. I didn't know the Valkyrie would refuse to help me try, but I knew everyone would see that my magic is broken. The ice-fae will tell the others, and I will have to deal with Inga and Orgid's horseshit, no doubt.

And they've yet to see me faint.

A snarling sound works its way from my lips. There's nobody at the bottom of the steps, and I kick out hard at the earth.

The gods made a mistake. They must have. So far, there is not one shred of evidence that I am here to make a worthy Valkyrie. The heat behind my eyes returns.

No, no, no. Fuck that.

I will not cry. I will not stand here alone and feel sorry for myself, or let my brain explore every infernal avenue it finds and present me with a hundred reasons I shouldn't be here.

Every day I wake up could be my last. I am here, and I will damn well make the most of it before the lights go out forever.

Sarra's words come back to me. "*Yeah, lift the heavy stuff. I reckon that's your best bet.*" With fierce purpose, I stride toward the Wolf Wing.



The training room is unsurprisingly empty when I reach it, and I move straight to the horseshoes. They look heavy, but they're nowhere near as big as the rocks. I pick up the smallest one experimentally. Not too bad. I move to the next. It's heavier. I test them all, finding the last one is significantly heavier, and I'm barely able to lift it.

A male voice startles me, and I drop the horseshoe, skipping out of the way as it thuds to the floor.

“What are you doing in here?” Kain is standing in the doorway, his eyes intense as they take me in.

“Training,” I say, lifting my chin.

“Why aren’t you training in magic, like you’re supposed to be?” His voice is slow and dangerous, and the alarm bells are already going off in my head.

Danger.

Run.

Hide.

“Why aren’t you teaching magic?” I shoot back. *Why are you goading the criminal, Maddy? Keep your mouth shut, and leave!*

I’m almost sure I see him flinch, then he strides into the room. He picks up the horseshoe I dropped like it’s a damn feather. He’s wearing a loose-fitting black shirt, which falls open as he bends, giving me a clear view of rippling chest muscles. *Fuck, my cheeks may as well just stay burning hot all day today.*

His gaze pins me as he straightens. “I can’t do magic,” he says.

His words confuse me so much my retort dies on my lips.

“You can’t do magic? But you burned that flower.”

His reply is a deadly whisper. “Oh, there’s magic in me, princess. I burn everything I touch.”

Danger, danger, danger!

The alarms are louder now, but my feet are rooted to the spot.

His words in the garden come back to me. *“Do you have any idea what it is like not to be able to touch a living thing for centuries?”*

“You can’t control it?”

His aura seems to grow, his presence filling the small room. It’s hot, and I shift uncomfortably.

“I’m a master of control,” he hisses. “But you can’t control what you don’t have.”

He lost his wings, and his magic? And he can’t touch a living thing without burning it? So does that mean he can’t ever...

As soon as I think about Kain naked with a female, my cheeks flame.

“I can’t do magic either,” I splutter. “Not really.”

“A powerless princess?” His head tilts, and the air around us heats even more.

“I’m not powerless,” I snap.

“Then why do you let people hit you? Set your hair alight?” The last question is a growl.

I glare at him, unable to offer him an answer. I don’t *let* them.

“I’m here to get stronger,” I say eventually. “Brynhild said to find a bear or a wolf.” I look pointedly at him. “Will you help me?” Why the fates am I asking *him* for help? To have been given such a severe punishment, he probably *is* a murderer.

He stares at me. “What do I get in return?”

I scowl. “It’s your duty to teach us. The gods bid you—”

“The gods can get fucked,” he snarls. “I’m a warrior, not a fucking teacher.”

I’m shocked enough that I don’t reply. Who openly speaks ill of the gods?

He puts the horseshoe back on its peg, and the break in eye contact is a relief. My thoughts are slow when he’s staring at me with those striking ash eyes, and he flusters me. But he is answering my questions, so far. Now is the time to confront him. I draw a breath and plaster my boldest look on my face when he turns back.

“How do you know about my hair being burned? Have you been following me? And why did you tell me to stand up, back

in the Ice Court? I know it was you.” I channel as much of my sister’s authority into my voice as I can.

It does nothing.

“Repetitions are crucial to building muscle. No more than thirty a day, per limb, for the first two weeks. If it hurts to lift it the first time, it’s too heavy. Anything more than a horseshoe, and you need a partner or you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Wait, no, tell me—”

He leaves the room before I’ve even started protesting.

I think about running after him. But what the fates can I do if I catch him? Maybe Sigrun could force him to talk, but I sure as shit can’t.

Turning back to the horseshoes, I sigh. I still don’t know why he’s following me, and now I’m even more curious about him.

I raise the lightest horseshoe, then lower it. “One, two, three.” I reach thirty quite quickly, then switch to the other arm.

“Why do you let people hit you?” Kain’s question is ringing through my head as I lift.

Did I *let* Eldith hit me? No, I just didn’t hit her back. That’s not the same thing.

Is it?

Hitting people does not come naturally to me. But then, nothing about this situation comes naturally to me.

A wave of homesickness pulses through me. It’s not for the Ice Court or my tower. It’s for my sister. Squashing it down, I sit on a stool, balance the horseshoe over my ankle, and start lifting my leg. My legs have always been stronger than my arms, and these repetitions take even less time. Encouraged, I eyeball the next weight up.

“Tomorrow,” I say to the horseshoes, then head off to the Battleyard.

I'm able to do three laps, and I think it's both because I haven't already been beaten up for hours, and the frustration still simmering through me acts like a fuel. I'm still sweating and panting when I'm done, but I feel better.

Navi is not in our chamber when I return to wash and change. I take some time to organize my borrowed clothes, deciding the dark brown shirt can be my training shirt, the paler ones can go under my leather wrap for combat, and the only one with a hint of color, a pale green, can be my dinner shirt.

I eye my balled-up dress in the bottom of the chest, knowing my sister's mirror is hidden inside it. But instead of unwrapping it, I pick up Aldrich's staff and head out to see Sarra.

CHAPTER 22

MADDY



Sarra is surprised—but, I think, pleased—to see me so early. I tell her what happened with the ice-fae Valkyrie.

“Shit. Brynhild’s kind of mean,” she says, pulling a face.

I shrug. “I guess she’s got a point. I wouldn’t waste time teaching me either. Not when the others can benefit more.” This is what I have told myself about the amount of time my sister has been given during our lives. Usually, it makes me feel better. Today, though, it feels hollow.

“Well, if you use the time in the training room, I think it’s still time well spent,” Sarra says with a firm nod.

“There’s equipment in there that I can’t use on my own. Would it be possible for you to help me in the evening sometimes?” I ask her.

“Yes, of course. We can work it around my studying,” she says.

I beam at her. “Thank you. And speaking of studying, I have something I can’t use, but maybe you can?” I give her Aldrich’s staff, and something in her face changes as she takes it. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she says hesitantly. “Where did you get this?”

Panicking that I’ve given her a staff that used to belong to someone she knows, I question the sense of my decision. “It belonged to a fae called Aldrich. He, erm, died. On the way here.”

“It’s... strange, somehow,” she says. Relief that it’s not familiar to her washes through me.

“Strange how?”

“I don’t know, but it has to do with”—she pauses, closing her eyes for a moment—“Featherblade, I think,” she says eventually.

“Featherblade? So, it wasn’t strange before it was here?”

She nods, and when she opens her eyes, they are alive with excitement. “I’m sorry, I need to check this out. I can’t wait.”

“I understand that,” I say ruefully. “I’ll just sit here quietly with my book, and you do what you need to do.”

She nods and heads over to her workstation. I take out my book of bard tales and read. A few hours later, I am struggling to ignore the rumbling in my stomach. Sarra is still absorbed in her work, so I whisper that I’ll bring her back some cheese, and leave her workshop quietly.



The feasting hall is filled with rooks when I get there, and everyone falls silent when I walk in.

Shit. Maybe I should have waited until they were all finished. Holding my chin up, I pick up an empty plate from the table and take it to the serving bowls. Murmurs and mutters follow me.

“So, it’s true. You can’t do any magic.” I’m not surprised it’s Orgid’s voice that cuts across the hum.

“Of course I can do magic,” I answer, without turning.

“That’s not what I heard. Martom, tell everyone what Brynhild said.”

I see Martom sitting at the end of the nearest table. He looks between me and Orgid and says nothing, for which I’m quite grateful. But this is not his fight, so I turn to face the shadow-fae.

“My magic may not be very powerful, but it is present. It also has absolutely nothing to do with you.”

His mocking expression turns dark. He is standing six feet from me, and I see a flash of black behind him.

Kain.

There are no other Valkyrie in here, as far as I can see.

“Have you been reading the book?” Orgid says. “The Valkyrie work best as a team, and in a few weeks, we’ll start formation fighting.”

“You’re a weak link,” says Inga. Her voice is rich and clear, but it doesn’t have the nobility-laced arrogance of Orgid’s. I wonder how they know each other, what their story is. Are they together as mates? “Weak links get fae killed.”

“I’m not getting anyone killed.” I sigh, then regret my phrasing. “Except the Giants. Obviously.”

Orgid laughs loudly. Frustratingly, so do a few other fae in the room. “You think you can kill a Giant? With what? You can’t even do any magic.”

To be fair, even my magic that he doesn’t know about won’t help me kill a Giant. I have no idea how I can help in the Valkyrie’s upcoming battles. Healing others is my best hope so far, but Orgid has backed me into this corner, and I will fight my way out.

“You have no idea what I’m capable of, Orgid. Now, I don’t know why you’re so obsessed with me, but I’m not interested. Leave me alone.”

I get a moment’s satisfaction when his smile slips, but then shadows flow from his staff, and images begin to creep into my head. Images of fire, bodies thrashing amongst the flames.

“Obsessed with *you*?” he hisses. “A powerless, pathetic—”

A fist collides with his face, out of nowhere. The shadows, and the images, dissipate as blood spurts from his nose, and he cries out in shock.

Kain stands before him, his stance open and his shoulders relaxed. “She said leave her the fuck alone. You want to fight a fae with no magic? Fight me.”

I hold my breath, gripping my plate so hard my fingers are white.

What the fates is Kain doing? Why is he defending me? Part of me wants to tell him that I can fight my own battles. But it was hardly shaping up as a fair fight.

Inga snarls, stepping up beside the bleeding Orgid. Fire flares to life in her palm, and Kain smiles. The temperature soars, and the terrifying presence is suddenly *everywhere*. Fae push their chairs back, some moving toward the hall doors. I take an involuntary step back.

“Everybody, settle the fuck down!” booms Harald. “I like a brawl as much as the next fae, but I’m hungry.” He strides straight toward the standoff. Inga’s fire dies, and the lethal presence ebbs away. Harald swipes up a plate and walks between Kain and Orgid. It’s only when I see him glance at Kain that I suspect his casual air might be a pretense. He begins to load ham onto his plate, whistling. Kain throws a glare at the huge shadow-fae’s back, then marches from the room.

I want to go after him, but I need to show the two arseholes still before me that I’m not scared of them. I am, especially knowing that Orgid’s psychic shadow-fae magic is so strong, but there’s no fucking way I’ll let them know that.

Orgid glares at me, one hand pressed to his still-bleeding nose. *“I don’t know how you got that unhinged fucking guard dog on your side, but you’ll be alone soon,”* his voice sounds in my head.

I stay rooted to the spot, gluing my eyes to his and keeping my hands steady. With a last hiss, he turns and leaves. Inga glares, then follows him. The rest of the fae turn back to their food, their chatter humming with renewed vigor.

My hands fall to my sides, nausea swooping through my stomach as adrenaline flows through me.

How the fates did I draw the attention of the most dangerous individuals here?

I grab handfuls of bread and cheese from the serving table, then leave the feasting hall quickly. Harald watches me go, but I don't stop to talk to him. I don't want to be a spectacle to the other rooks. I've had my fill today.

Hoping to see Kain, I make my way slowly to Odin's High Hall once I'm outside. There's no sign of him, but when I reach the top of the spiral staircase up to the main doors, I hear Erik's voice above me and pause.

"We must make him aware that this is not acceptable."

"You'll only piss him off more," says Valdis.

"He will spend one night in the catacomb cells." Brynhild's voice is firm.

"He was defending a rook," Erik says gently.

"He started a *fight* with a rook."

Valdis snorts a laugh. "He *is* serving a sentence to pass on his fighting skill. Punching the rooks is one way to do that." There's a long silence, and then I hear Valdis mutter, "Sorry. You're right. He has to be punished."

"It's not about punishment," Brynhild says. "It's about control. He needs to remember that he is not one of us."

The voices fade as the Valkyrie move on, and I wait a few moments longer, until I'm sure they're gone. My mind is whirring through the conversation. I knew Harald's cheery indifference to the fight was forced. They don't want the rooks knowing that Kain is a liability; it makes them look like they're not in control. He's an outcast here, not one of the *hersir*.

Curiosity about the fire-fae is burning so strongly through me now that I'm not able to think of anything else as I make my way to Sarra's workshop. I *need* to know why he's so interested in me.

CHAPTER 23

MADDY



Though I feel bad about pulling her from her work, I have to tell someone what happened, and I tell Sarra everything, including the overheard conversation between the Valkyrie.

“He’s dangerous, Maddy,” she says around a large piece of cheese.

“I know he is. Fates, the other Valkyrie know he is. But he has no magic.”

“No magic, but he can burn people?”

“Yeah,” I say, chewing on my bread thoughtfully. “Do you think that’s why he punched Orgid? Because he was mocking me about having no magic?”

“Or because Orgid is a total prick.”

I nod vehemently. “That he is. Where are the catacomb cells?” I ask.

“Please tell me you’re not going to go and see him.”

“I need answers,” I say.

“Answers to what? Why he defended you?”

“I think he’s part of the reason I’m at Featherblade,” I admit.

Sarra stares at me. “What are you talking about?”

“He told me to stand up.” Clearly, this means nothing to her, so I tell her pretty much exactly what happened at the Ice

Court the night I left.

“You think he spoke to you?” she says. I can see she doesn’t believe it, but I’m so sure it was his voice.

“Yes, and he’s been watching me since I got here.”

“Maddy, don’t take this the wrong way, but you are kind of different from most fae. Maybe that’s why he’s interested in you? And how did he speak to you in your head if he has no magic? Only powerful fae can do that, right?”

“Good points,” I say thoughtfully. Her words should put my mind at rest, but they don’t.

Because when I tried to look up information on Kain in the gallery, I was taken to the wolf statue. The one that has been inside my brain since I was a small child.

I stand up. “I’m going to go and see him.”

“You’re mad,” she says.

“Maybe.”

She stands up too. “Want me to be mad with you?” she offers. I can hear in her voice that she’s hoping I say no. I give her a huge smile.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am for you to offer,” I tell her, “but no, I think he’ll only talk to me if I’m alone.”

Relief swamps her pretty face, and she sits back down. “Good, because I’m human, and I will burn like a matchstick.”

“He won’t burn anyone,” I say. I’m fairly sure that’s true. Although the thing with the flower *was* pretty alarming. “Besides, if he’s locked up, he won’t be able to touch me,” I say firmly.

“Okay. I don’t know exactly where they are, but I know you get to the catacombs from under the docks. Be careful, Maddy,” she says.

“Of course I will,” I lie.

I’m about as good at being careful as I am at concentrating.



I reach the bottom of the wide steps the boat first deposited me on when I arrived at Featherblade, and the magic of the place is instantly evident when a little boat drifts toward me. I'm nervous to climb into it—what if it takes me back to the waterfall and the awful birds?

But I swoosh my hands through the deliciously cold water to aim it under the hollowed-out branch, and it floats gently in the right direction.

I glide through one of the arches, and the water is shallow, sloping up to a sandy shore butted against the main trunk. There are no sconces here, but hundreds of fireflies nestle in the moss and ivy covering the bark at the back. It smells damp, and I realize how used to the smell of wood I have become.

It isn't hard to find the catacombs, once I've found a semi-concealed door in the bark. They are as far down the trunk of the tree as the winding wood staircases allow me to go, and there are even more snaking branches and twisting vines pushing into the hallways here than there are in the halls to the thrall workshops. At least sconces are lighting the way instead of fireflies now, the glow of the flames dim but enough to see by.

I reach the end of a snaking corridor and find a door made entirely of wooden branches woven together. I can just see through them enough to see there is a large chamber beyond.

The handle is smooth and round, and to my surprise, it clicks when I turn it. The door opens, and I step through. Moss covers the earthy walls, but there are more torches, and they are lit more brightly. There is a staircase in the middle of the room leading up to a balcony that rings the lower floor. All along the walls are cells. The doors are made of the same interwoven twigs, but there are bigger gaps, allowing me to see that there are no polished wood or complicated carvings, but there are fur-covered straw mattresses, washbasins, and small cabinets loaded with books. The cells are significantly nicer than the freezing blocks of featureless ice that reside on the lower floors of the Ice Court palace dungeons.

I step cautiously toward the back of the room, wondering for the first time if there is any chance somebody other than Kain is in here.

“So, the powerless princess can pick locks.”

I move toward his voice. He is leaning against the door to his cell, his position casual, but his eyes ablaze.

“I didn’t pick the lock—it was open.” Although I *am* pretty good at lock picking.

“Then Featherblade wants you in here. With me.” A dangerous flash gleams in his ash eyes. He is wearing different gloves now, made from dark, scuffed leather and reaching all the way to his elbows. They’re lashed tightly over his forearms with thin chains. Did the other Valkyrie do that, or did he?

“What are you doing here, princess?”

“I want to ask you some questions. And this way, you can’t walk off.”

“I can ignore you just as well from in here as I can out there.”

“But you can’t follow me from down here. And I know you have been.” I glare the challenge at him, but his expression doesn’t change. I wait for the heat, for the atmosphere to shift, but it doesn’t come.

“Why did you tell me to stand up in the Ice Court?”

He raises a brow. “You’re not here to thank me for punching that arrogant-as-shit little shadow-fae?” He tuts. “I thought princesses had better manners.”

I swallow. He makes my head spin. “Fine. Why did you punch him?”

“Because I dislike him.”

“You punch everyone you dislike?”

His eyes glint. “That would be a lot of people, princess.” He lifts his arms and gestures at me, chains clinking. “And the others disagree with my methods of discipline.”

“Why aren’t you one of them? What happened to you?” It’s a risk, going in with the big question, and my gaze involuntarily moves to where his wings should be.

His eyes darken, and his stance changes. He’s not going to reply. I know it straight away. But still, I don’t feel the heat or dangerous aura that usually accompanies pissing him off.

“Your *val-tivar*,” I say, certain that’s what the palpable absence is.

He cocks his head, some of his gray hair falling over his eyes. I see the scars there, running through his eyebrow, and follow them down to his jaw. How old is he? He has likely lived more life in one week than I have in a decade.

“What about him?” Kain growls.

“I can’t feel him. Did the others do something to him?”

He barks a bitter laugh. “None of them would stand a chance against my wolf.”

I knew he had a wolf. The ice statue flares in my mind.

“Erik said it’s hard to control a wolf *val-tivar*. That they make you permanently hungry for battle.”

He stares at me, then runs his tongue over his lips. “Ravenous.”

I almost step back. *Fuck, I am playing with fire, literally.*

“Why did you tell me to stand up?”

“Because you looked pathetic, and I think your father is a prick.”

My lips part, but nothing comes out. I didn’t really think he’d answer me, and certainly not with that.

I suppose I did look pathetic. And honestly, I don’t know my father well enough to know if he’s a prick or not.

“Why have you been following me?” I ask, choosing not to reply.

Slowly, he folds his arms. “Get me out of this cell, and I’ll tell you.”

I tilt my head. He shouldn't be in the cell. Orgid deserves a hundred punches in the face. And I need to know why he's interested in me.

Abandoning trepidation, I reach for the handle of his cell, another smooth wooden knob, but this one laced with vines that knot tightly.

"I don't know how to pick a lock like this," I say.

One brow lifts. "And if you did, would you?"

"Yes."

"Do you make a habit of breaking rules?"

I give him a look. "Says the fae locked up for breaking someone's nose."

"Haven't you heard, princess?" A wicked gleam lights his eyes, and a smile that is pure sin curves his lips. "I'm the villain of Featherblade."

I grip the cell handle tightly. *What is it about this infernal fae?* A foot taller than me, his bronze skin rich against my pale tones and light sparking in his irises, he makes everything else inside my scattered brain vanish—he *dominates* my attention.

I reach into my pocket with my other hand and retrieve Aldrich's dagger. "If I do this, I want you to stop calling me princess," I say, relieved my voice is steadier than my racing heart.

He doesn't answer.

With a glare, I press the blade to the vines. They fall away far too easily, as though just the threat of the blade is enough. "This is a shit cell," I mutter, before pulling the door open for him.

Kain steps through slowly. His presence swells, and I immediately question my decision to let him out. His piercing gaze is fixed on me, and the attention makes me heat. *And not just in my cheeks.* Swirling heat flows through my entire body.

"Your wolf is here," I whisper.

I can feel it, raw survival instinct accompanying its arrival every time.

Run.

Now.

“He is.”

I suck in warm air. “Tell me why you’ve been following me.”

“Your parents asked me to.”

My mouth drops open. “My parents?” I shake my head. “That’s not possible.”

“They sent a thrall with a small fortune to find someone to look out for the Princess Verglas when she arrived.”

A few pieces tumble into place. *My parents tried to pay someone to watch over my sister.*

I remember Sarra saying the thralls were here before the rooks started arriving—and with their connections, it didn’t surprise me that my parents got to the humans being sent to Featherblade ahead of the fae.

“My sister could have taken care of herself,” I find myself saying. His gaze burns through me. “How much did they pay you?”

He gives a bitter laugh. “What the fuck am I going to do with money?” My suspicion that he’s trapped here is confirmed. “No. They offered me something better.”

“What?”

“Secrets,” he whispers.

My stomach tightens. *Secrets they would have gotten from me.* “What secrets?”

“Now, now, princess. That’s not how secrets work.”

“So, you’re carrying out your task, but with me instead of Freydis?” I swallow. “I hate to tell you this, but I doubt my parents will pay a high price for my safety.”

“Your ‘terminal affliction’?” he says quietly. He was there in the Ice Court courtyard, and those were the exact words that were used.

I nod. “Decreases a princess’s value, I’m afraid.” The casual indifference isn’t as convincing when I say it out loud as it is in my head.

I get no pitying look from him, though. His gaze is unwavering. “There’s something about you. Something... different. You’re here instead of your sister for a reason, princess, and I intend to find out why.”

CHAPTER 24

MADDY



Kain knows I'm different. Fates, everybody here knows I'm different, but the way he stares at me... It's with the same fascination I feel about him.

I wanted to know why he was watching me, and now that I do, I suddenly don't want to be alone with this fae. *Careful what you wish for, Maddy.*

This was a mistake. I should never have come to see him, and certainly never have let him out of his cell.

He can't know about my memory magic, or the gallery, I tell myself.

He can't know that I probably have the secret he wants somewhere inside my head. What would he do to me if he did?

"I'm not that different," I say. "Just not well suited to Valkyrie training." I shrug awkwardly. "At home, I fit right in."

His eyes narrow. "Lies. You're special."

His words freeze me in place.

Special? That is not something I've been called before. He's not saying it endearingly, or warmly. He's growling it like I'm the meal his wolf is hunting.

I drag my eyes from his and turn to the door. "I need to leave."

I am losing control of the situation, of my thoughts, and the power has shifted. This is no longer me interrogating him

through a locked door. He is holding all the cards.

“Let me get that for you, princess,” Kain rasps, moving lightning fast to open the heavy door and hold it open for me.

I sweep through, noting that regal sweeping is less effective without skirts. Electing to march instead, I move quickly back up the hall, trying to put some distance between us, but he strides beside me, his long legs keeping up easily. “You said you’d stop calling me that.”

“I said no such thing.”

My mind is spinning. I don’t believe he plans to hurt me. But he knows I have a secret of my own, and he strikes me as someone who would go to any length to get what he wants.

I move down the corridor, caught up in my panicked thoughts. The branches and vines snaking into the earth are disappearing, replaced by compacted, hard ground. The wooden boards under my feet are becoming flagstones. I slow down, looking around myself.

“Shit,” I curse. I’ve gone the wrong way. When I turn, there’s an expression on Kain’s face that I’m not expecting, and he’s not looking at me. He’s looking past me down the corridor, to where it bends out of sight.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever been here,” he says slowly.

“Do you think you’ve been everywhere in Featherblade?”

His eyes move to me. “I *know* I’ve been everywhere in this fucking hall.”

“Then why would Featherblade choose to show you this corridor now?”

“The same reason Featherblade allowed my cell door to be unlocked,” he says, moving his eyes to mine. “You.”

Curiosity flattens my panic, like a boulder crushing a daisy.

I turn back to the corridor and restart my march, this time with a little more caution and a lot more interest. We round a few more bends, and then the corridor widens out into a room

filled with bookcases and shelving. On all of them are crates and boxes overflowing with items. I can see plates and vases, coils of rope, clocks, bowls full of trinkets—an endless collection of objects.

“Is it some sort of storeroom?” There’s a sealed door at the end of the room, and Kain has moved straight to it. It’s emanating some kind of magic, and I don’t recognize the feel of it at all. When I get close to it, runes dance across its surface and then settle in order before my eyes. Absolutely fascinated, I step close, and Kain throws his arm out in front of me.

“Do not touch it,” he barks. Heat rolls from his body, forcing me to take a step backward.

I scowl at him. “I wasn’t going to touch it,” I lie. “What does it say?” There are a number of runes I don’t recognize.

Kain reads aloud.

Beyond these walls lies the sacred Vault of the Valkyrie,

Filled with treasures, it will reward your entrance lavishly,

But to pass this first door you must prove that your knowledge is sound,

List every Guardian and the beast to which they were bound.

Make one mistake and it will be your last,

The door will ensure you exist only in the past.

“The Vault of the Valkyrie?” I ask. Kain turns from the door to me, and my mouth falls open. “There are flames in your eyes,” I say breathlessly. *Actual flames.*

They are dancing across his irises, scattering the ash, and I’m fucking hypnotized. The promise of a strength unrivaled is blazing within his eyes. I feel like I can see all the way to the power contained inside him, and it is *explosive*.

A colossal, burning ball of fiery retribution.

Oh, Freya and the fates, what have I gotten myself into? I know in this moment that whatever it is, it is bigger than me,

and I have no chance of controlling it. Of controlling *him*.

“I have searched a long time for this.” I try to focus on his words.

“What is in there?” I ask.

“Magic.” The single word ripples with promise. “There’s magic in there.”

“What kind of magic?” *The magic to restore his wings?*

“The kind of magic that the gods and the Valkyrie locked in a vault and hid from the unworthy,” he growls, glaring back at the sealed door.

Hid from the unworthy? If Featherblade chose to show us the vault, then surely that means it’s okay to try to get into it? That we are worthy?

Then why did it not show Kain until now?

“The door says you have to list all the Valkyrie and their *val-tivars*. Do you know them?” I ask him, my voice calmer than I feel. I already know that I don’t have that much information about Valkyrie in the gallery.

“No. But I know where we can find it.”

“*We?*” I repeat, staring at him.

“Oh yes, princess. *We.*” His flaming eyes burn into me. “Two centuries of nothing, then three days of your presence, and this? You will help me get into this vault.”

I gulp. *Be strong, Maddy.*

“What do I get in return?” He said the exact same words to me.

“There are powerful healing artifacts in there,” the fire-fae says.

My thoughts slow. Is he manipulating me? Baiting me with the kind of magic he knows I desire? But he doesn’t seem the type to lie. He’s outwardly blunt in his distaste for things that most people would hide, and I can’t recall an untruth he’s told me so far.

I sort through my options. Surely Featherblade would not have let Kain find the door if he was unworthy? And powerful healing artifacts could be important for all of the Valkyrie and the rooks, couldn't they?

Is this why the gods brought me here? There is something in this vault that this magical place wants me to find?

“Why did Featherblade never let you in here before now?” I ask aloud.

Kain slowly folds his gloved arms, eyes ablaze. “If you are not sure, then walk away, princess.”

I know immediately it is not an instruction.

It is a challenge.

The infernal fucking fae knows I *can't* walk away. The thought of saying no and just forgetting about the vault is not just unlikely—it is unbearable. Impossible, even. I will wonder what is down here until the day I die. *Which may be further away than I expected, if there is truly something behind the door that can cure the blackouts.*

“Where is the list of Valkyrie?” I ask.

“The records room. Such things are not shared outside of the canopy of *Yggdrasil*, and are kept under lock and key.”

“Can we go there now?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No. The records room is the Gryphon's Nest.” I raise my eyebrows in question. “Sigrun's chambers.”

“Sigrun?” I gape at him. “How the name of Thor's balls are you going to get into Sigrun's chambers?”

“She'll be here in three weeks for the strength display.”

“You're going to ask her for it?”

“No. We are going to steal it.”

CHAPTER 25

MADDY



I ‘m actually pretty good at stealing things. But I don’t admit this to him.

Instead, I turn to the shelving towers and close my eyes. If I am caught trying to steal from Sigrun, I will be cast out of Featherblade. Could whatever is in there be worth that risk?

I can’t make the decision now—my brain is too full, too scattered. And three weeks is a long time. Hell, I might be dead by then.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, opening my eyes. They land on a box filled with pieces of armor. Draped over an iron helm is something glittering.

“Think quickly, princess.”

I move to the box, eyes widening when I see what is sparkling in the firelight. It’s a bracelet set with moonstone. *One of the missing gems from Skadi’s tiara.*

My heart burns with the emotion that accompanies the barrage of memories of Freydis, and I reach for it. I miss her, so much.

My fingers brush the metal helm as I scoop up the bracelet, and without any notice or instruction, I am in the gallery.

I am standing before the wolf statue, and now, more than just its eyes are glowing.

It’s melting.

Its rich, gray-colored fur is visible through the once-opaque blue ice.

I lunge for it, desperately. The statue is still hard under my fingers; it doesn't turn to water and flow over me like the other statues do. But it isn't cold anymore. It is warm to the touch.

With a gasp, I find myself back in reality, in the vault, clutching the bracelet.

What just happened? And what has that old lump of iron got to do with the wolf in the gallery?

Kain is connected to that statue too, somehow, and an instinctual certainty that he will be interested in the helm makes me want to hide it from him. I don't know why; I just know that I want to study it and find out what it has to do with the wolf, and I can't do that if he decides he wants it.

I turn back to the fire-fae, trying to hide the box from view with my body, and hold up the bracelet. "Look. Moonstone," I say.

He says nothing. If he is suspicious that something just happened, he's not showing it.

"My sister and I collect gems. Moonstone has been on the list for years. It's so pretty." I don't know if my babbling is enough to explain the gasp I'm sure escaped my lips, but I carry on. "She'll be thrilled with this."

"If we get through that vault door, you can give your sister all the infernal jewels she wants," he growls.

"I told you, I'll think about it," I say, trying not to sound relieved that he seems to be buying my enthusiasm for the bracelet. The helm is too big for me to remove from the box and carry out of here without his noticing, so I'll have to come back for it when I'm alone. "We should go," I say. "Before they notice you're gone, and we get caught down here."

He gestures at the corridor. "After you, princess."



I pay close attention to the route back as we make our way out of the catacombs in silence. I hope that Kain will go his own

way when we reach the docks, but he doesn't. He follows me toward Odin's High Hall.

"Won't you get caught if you go in there?" I ask quietly.

"I will see you safely to your chamber," he replies. There's an edge to his voice, and I wonder if he knows I want to sneak straight back to the vault.

"You think I am unsafe between here and my bed?"

He doesn't reply.

We are halfway across the main hall when, abruptly and without warning, he spins and grips both of my shoulders. I suppress a squeak as he bodily lifts me from the ground and moves us faster than I would think possible into a dark alcove between two pillars, then drops to a crouch, dragging me with him. His hands are burning hot on my skin even through his thick gloves, and I'm about to ask him what the blessed fuck he thinks he's doing when I hear a voice in the hall beyond.

"I'm telling you, *hersir*, he's always watching her."

It's Navi.

"Kain is a Valkyrie and unrivaled in *glima*. He is a valued fighter," Erik replies, and his words sound rehearsed and not particularly sincere.

"He's unhinged. He punched a rook without warning and with no provocation."

No provocation? Orgid was inside my head and there were shadows pouring from his staff!

"And he is being punished for that. Are you worried about your roommate's safety?"

There's a long pause, and I realize I'm holding my breath, my face inches from the blazing gaze of the very threat they are discussing. Kain's warm breath whispers over my cheek as he exhales slowly. His whole body radiates dangerously unpredictable ferocity, and it's not my safety I'm worried about right now.

It's my *sanity*.

I want to believe I'm just experiencing a fascination with something new, but Kain is beyond "something new." He's... intoxicating.

My mind is assailed with vivid images I can't control. Don't *want* to control. I imagine hearing that rough voice commanding me to undress, his blazing eyes roving over my body, his huge form closing in on me, his—

"My roommate won't survive a month," Navi scoffs, dragging me back to reality. "And then the fire-fae will set his sights on somebody else. He is a danger to everyone here."

My cheeks are flaming in the dark. *Thank Freya's mighty cats that the fire-fae can't read minds.*

"Your concern is noted," Erik says. He sounds tired.

Footsteps sound, and I'm sure they're moving in opposite directions. After another beat, Kain straightens. My skin is searing when he lets go of my shoulders.

"Your friend is an asshole," he says quietly, glaring out at the now-empty hall as I stand up.

"Not my friend," I mumble, rubbing my arms.

Kain gives me a long look. "You need to start hitting people," he says, then turns and strides away through the hall.



When I reach my chamber, Navi is sitting cross-legged on her bed, the candle by her nightstand still lit. "I thought you'd be asleep," I lie when I walk in. I'm not going to give away that I know she was just downstairs talking to Erik. I fail to keep the cool tone from my voice, though.

"Why did the fire-fae defend you like that?" she says to me, opening her eyes but keeping her legs crossed and her arms resting in their meditative position. I fix my eyes on hers, and she stares back without blinking.

"Why should I tell you anything?" I ask her. "I've tried to be nice to you since we met, and you've been nothing but blunt and unkind to me."

“I do not wish to become fond of someone who’s going to die,” she says.

I grind my teeth. “You don’t think it’s offensive to assume that I will die? To assume I have no strength?”

Her eyes flick to the staff on my hip.

I sigh. I’m not having this argument with her. She’s not worth my time. “I don’t know why Kain’s interested in me,” I lie. “But I don’t regret that he punched Orgid. He’s a slimy shit, and it wasn’t a fair fight.”

She holds my gaze a few moments longer, then unfolds her legs. “No fight with you would be fair.”

“Fuck this,” I mutter, and yank the door open again. I don’t want to be in the bedchamber anyway. *I want to go back to the vault and get that helm.*

“Where are you going?”

“None of your damn business.” I wish I could slam the door on the way out, but I don’t want to alert anyone else to my presence, and Kain might still be around, spying. So I pull it shut gently and hurry down the hall. I don’t go out the main way, instead leaving on the higher floor and making my way back down to the catacombs the long way.

I worry that I might not be able to find the corridor that leads to the vault again, but I don’t run into any problems. I’m alert and wary the whole way, but I see nobody, and don’t once sense the fire-fae.

I hurry to the box as the storeroom comes into view, excitement lurching. Maybe, if I hold the metal long enough, the whole wolf will melt. *And I will finally find out what memory is stored inside.*

But the helm is gone.

I kick out at the shelf tower, grinding my teeth in fury.

I didn’t fool him. He knew I found something, and he came back for it.

“Infernal fucking fire-fae,” I hiss.

I'm as angry with myself as I am with him. I have no more right to take anything from this room than he does, and I didn't have the courage to claim it for myself before.

Slumping against the shelves, I try to console myself. It might not have been the helm that caused me to go to the wolf statue. It might have just been a coincidence, and it was my prolonged time with Kain that did it. I am sure he is connected to the statue somehow.

My eyes rove over the other boxes, and I push myself up and start to rummage through them as my brain barrels through thoughts.

Kain is dangerous. I know that with every single instinct in my body. And he knows there's more to me than everybody else thinks, which makes him especially dangerous to me. Even more so if he ever realizes that access to the secret he wants from my family is standing right in front of him.

There's also the fact that I can't think straight when he's around me. My inability to concentrate, and the direction my thoughts go when I'm close to him, makes me a sitting duck.

I move on to another shelving unit, pocketing a tiny model of a horse and a coin I don't recognize with a feather on it.

If he keeps watching me, he will realize that I regularly abandon reality, and that I can recall things with incredible precision. I need to be careful around him. Even avoid him completely, if I can. The fact that he is "looking out for me" on my parents' behalf makes that difficult, though.

I remember the blood trickling from Orgid's nose with a smug sense of satisfaction, but it is accompanied by a deep longing to punch him myself. I couldn't have come out of nowhere with lightning-fast, magically enhanced wolf *val-tivar* speed like Kain did, but I was standing close enough to him that if my aim was true and my fist was solid, I could have broken the fae's nose myself.

I sort through a large box of rusted and blunt blades. None of them look useful.

If Featherblade is to deem me worthy of having a *val-tivar* or wings, I certainly can't rely on an amoral, angry fire-fae prisoner to make my life easier. I need to get stronger. I need to get tougher. I need to learn to look after myself. Ideally, I will learn to excel in something.

Dread fills me at the thought that, sometime soon, the rooks here will see me black out. Almost as if on cue, as though thinking about it has triggered it, I feel a swoop in my stomach.

I drop to the dusty stone floor as fast as I can, banging my elbow and not having time to curse before consciousness leaves me completely.

When I come around, I hardly feel sick at all, although the unfamiliar location is disorientating.

657. I've woken up. One more blackout survived.

And one more hidden from the occupants of Featherblade. I might have just a little bit longer before everybody here finds out just how broken I am.

CHAPTER 26

MADDY



I can't face Navi and the small, dark bedchamber, so when I'm sure I've hunted through everything in the entrance to the vault and found nothing else that triggers the gallery, I go to Sarra's workshop instead. She's not there, but I am happy for the time alone.

I store the memory of the vault, including the message on the door that Kain read out. It takes the form of a pear, and I wonder for the millionth time how the form is chosen.

When I return to reality, I crave the peace sleep brings, and thankfully my body is tired enough to oblige.



I wake early to Sarra shaking my shoulders. "So, all the thralls are talking about Kain being let out of the catacombs last night," she says as I groggily roll onto my backside. I slept on the furs in front of the fire, and she is loading it with small logs.

"Do they know it was me?" I mumble.

"No, but apparently, he is back in there now." She lights the fire, then sits down next to me. "What happened?" She scans my face and bare arms, checking me over.

"I'm fine. We talked."

She gives me a look. "You mean, he talked you into letting him out?"

"I traded for information," I admit.

She shakes her head. “And?”

“And he’s watching me because my parents paid him to watch my sister.”

Sarra’s mouth makes a small O shape. “That must have been why he was talking to a human before you all arrived.”

I nod. “I guess so.” I wish I could tell her more, about the vault and the fact that his payment is a secret he wishes to uncover, but I can’t. I’m not willing to tell her about the gallery yet. And I’m not sure the vault is my secret to share.

“Is he going to leave you alone?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

I need to work out how to challenge him about the helm without admitting to the fact that I tried to hide it. Or should I just march up to him and demand he give it to me? That idea is laughable.

Doubt creeps through me, as it did last night. Kain might not have gone back for it. Featherblade might have hidden the helm from me. Plus, I don’t even know if the metal helmet is what triggered the wolf statue to appear.

I stand up, pushing the indecision away.

I need to avoid Kain the Ruinous, not challenge him.

“You’re right about his being dangerous,” I say to Sarra, in the hope that vocalizing it will make it stick. “I can’t stop him watching me, but I will stay away from him.”

“Good.”



Thankfully, I miss Navi when I go to my chamber to wash and change. I’m not as lucky with Orgid and Inga in the feasting hall when I go for breakfast, though. Orgid glares at me with one black eye, and I fail to stop my smile. If Erik healed him, he must have left the bruises deliberately, because mine vanished after the Valkyrie’s treatment.

The shadow-fae and his grumpy fire-fae sidekick say nothing to me, and I suspect that’s because Harald, Erik, and

Valdis are in the hall too.

“*Glima*,” calls Valdis, and stools scrape as rooks finish their food and move to join her at the main doors. Kain is supposed to be the *glima* trainer, but if he is back in the catacombs, I suppose he can’t teach. I try to convince myself that I’m not in the slightest bit disappointed by his absence, and that I meant what I said to Sarra.

Kain is especially dangerous to me. The less I see of him, the better.

We follow Valdis a short way, to another building in the Wolf Wing, the engraving on the door informing me its official name is “The Shieldmaiden’s Hold.”

It’s a long training hall, the farther half of the floor covered in what looks to be padded furs, thicker than normal. There are mannequins lining one end of the room, and large crates full of weapons and shields at the other. Four tall, arched windows let in a huge amount of light, and each window has a stained-glass image of a fight occurring, one for each *val-tivar*. I’m completely distracted by them until Valdis speaks loudly.

“Pair up. We are going to do groundwork today. First, you learn to fall, then you learn how to get back up.”

I’m surprised when Eldith walks toward me straight away. She holds her hands up in submission. “I want to help you,” she says.

I look at her warily. “How? And why?”

“By helping you become a better fighter. If you really do have as little magic as Orgid says, then you’re going to need to make up for it in other ways.” My suspicion must show on my face, because she sighs. “You don’t trust me.”

I scowl at her. “Would you?”

She drops her eyes to my boots, then fixes them on my face. “I really didn’t think I’d break your foot,” she says. “I’m not here to hurt anybody.”

“So, you want to help me because you feel bad?”

“Partly.” She shrugs. “But also, because I don’t like Orgid,” she says. “He reminds me of some of the aristocracy I’ve come across. I don’t like how he has singled you out, is using you to make himself feel stronger.” There’s anger in her tone that definitely runs deeper than me and Orgid. *So, Eldith has been on the receiving end of a power-hungry arsehole too?*

“You want to see him put in his place?”

“Yes. And that will be all the more satisfying if it’s you who does it, rather than a Valkyrie like Kain.” She gives me a wicked grin, and it’s like I’m being given permission to behave badly. “Next time he tries to belittle you in front of everyone, it should be you who makes him bleed.”

I can’t help my grin back at her. “I had the same thought,” I say.

“Good.”

Valdis goes through a series of motions around rolling, breaking falls, and then attempting to pin an opponent to the ground, and we follow them before swapping and trying to break being pinned. Eldith is firm with me, though she doesn’t squeeze or push or pinch or do anything unpleasant to me whenever I am under her grip. But she also doesn’t make it easy for me when I’m trying to pin her or get myself out from under her. She’s a good match for me. Taller, by a little, but similar in weight. I just wish mine was muscle.

After an hour or two, we’re given a ten-minute break to drink some water and get our breath back, and I’m actually feeling good.

“You’re stronger than you think you are,” Eldith says to me, downing her water. “You just need more discipline.”

“No shit,” I mutter, and she barks a laugh.

“Are you ready to go again?”

CHAPTER 27

MADDY



For the next few hours, I train with renewed enthusiasm. I hardly manage to land any blows, but I don't feel disheartened by my inability, just more determined to improve my technique. And Eldith is giving me the chance to improve.

I am proud of how well I'm controlling my concentration, too. I'm ignoring all the other pairs in the room—the grunts, the shouts, the cries, and Valdis' occasional barked orders—and focusing entirely on Eldith. It means I miss fewer movements and, therefore, defend more blows, and I find that I'm actually good at anticipating feints. When Harald ambles into the room and announces that it's time for forging, I'm surprised to find myself looking forward to the next *glima* session.

As a group, we follow the huge shadow-fae all the way back to Odin's High Hall, to a door I have noticed before because it is ringed in iron. The sign over the door reads, *The Fire Pit*.

Unexpected excitement surges through me as we step into the forge. The room is large and circular, with brick walls blackened by years of smoke and fire. Tall, open windows encircle the high-peaked ceiling, flooding the space with light and fresh air. Massive wooden beams cross overhead, the oak darkened like the walls. The brick floor beneath my feet is worn smooth, with channels carved to allow liquid metal to flow.

In the center is a giant stone furnace, cold now, but I imagine capable of becoming fiercely hot when lit. Next to it sits a giant set of bellows with leather straps. All around the circular room are workstations with anvils in various sizes made from iron, steel, and even Mythril. Hammers, pliers, chisels, and tongs hang from hooks on the walls and beams. Sturdy wooden workbenches hold half-finished shields and other metal items in various stages of completion. By the back wall are towering shelves filled with materials—ingots of copper, tin, iron, and steel, along with piles of coal and charcoal for fuel. Next to them are stacks of oak boards and tree branches.

I listen raptly as Harald talks about the different metals that are best for use with different types of weapons and shields, and he expands further on the types of weapons that suit different styles of fighting. Everything he is saying could be useful to me, and could improve my abilities, so I scribble down notes, not finding my focus drifting once.

After what seems like only a short time to me, but I think is actually several hours, he assigns us each to a workstation and asks us to choose something to start forging. I think back to the boxes outside the vault that I went through last night. I told myself then that if I needed my own sword or axe, or a shield, I could go back for one. It didn't occur to me that I might be able to create my own.

It doesn't take me long to decide that I want to make myself a shield, rather than a sword or a mace or an axe. Defending myself is more important right now than attacking others. Kain's words come back to me, and again, I'm forced to question if not hitting back is a good form of self-defense. I shove the thoughts down and try to focus.

Ideas are flooding my mind, and it's almost impossible not to go to the gallery and start researching all the different kinds of shields I've ever seen. I know I'll have time to do that later, though, so I force myself to stay in the reality of the forge, and start frantically sketching every idea that comes to me.

Harald is moving around the room, talking to all the rooks in turn, and when he reaches me, he stares down at my piece

of paper.

“Everybody else is making a weapon,” he says. I can’t tell if there’s judgment in his voice. “Why have you chosen a shield?”

“Because she already has a weapon in that guard dog of hers,” snaps Orgid from a few workstations along.

I grind my teeth and give my answer directly to Harald, but loud enough that the shadow-fae will be able to hear me. “Because unprovoked attacks appear to be in the nature of some of the rooks here, and I would rather defend myself than hurt my allies.” I say the words clearly and with as much venom as I can load into them. I also leave out the vivid image of me smashing a large metal shield into his face.

Harald raises one eyebrow. “There is a book over there full of optimal shield shapes for different-sized frames,” he says, before bellowing that we are all dismissed.

I make my way over to pick up the book, deciding to take it with me, since nobody else will need it if they are all making weapons.

Harald stops me on my way out. “The forge is always open to the rooks,” he says.

I smile. “Thanks, *hersir*.”

As I’m already in Odin’s High Hall I head straight down to Sarra’s workshop, and I’m excited when she’s there. I launch into telling her all about forging and the shield that I’m going to make.

“I can help you if you like,” she offers.

“Really?”

“Sure. The base will obviously have to be metal, but we can put woodwork on the front of it, a carving of something, and I’ll teach you how to shape the wood.”

I beam at her. There would be no magic in it—she works with earth-fae magic, not ice-fae magic—but to have something intricate and beautiful of my own and carved with

the help of my new friend would be amazing. “I would love that,” I tell her.

The evening feels different from any other night I have been here so far. Eldith offering help, not having to worry about Kain all day, and the prospect of having an item to actually defend myself with—it all gives me a buzz of excitement.

The shield dominates my thoughts, and I am grateful to give my brain something to focus on that isn’t hiding my weaknesses or wondering why the gods brought me here. Whilst Sarra gets on with her studies and works on Aldrich’s staff, I sit in the large chair with a wad of parchment and draw up hundreds of ideas. I head off to the gallery repeatedly when Sarra’s not looking at me, to draw inspiration from all of the different shields I’ve seen and heard about.

I do go upstairs for dinner, and all of the Valkyrie except Kain are there, so unsurprisingly, nobody causes any trouble. I eat fast, sitting alone, then sneak a large handful of cheese back downstairs for Sarra.

We talk amiably as we work, mostly about our courts and how different they are, and a little about our families. When Sarra says that she’s going to bed, I have no desire to go up to the chamber I share with Navi, so I sit down on the furs in front of the fireplace. I take my staff from my hip and sprinkle a tiny bit of snow over the embers, cooling them enough that their heat is more comfortable, then lie down, dragging the furs into a bunched-up pillow under my head.

My mind drifts to my sister, and for the first time, I’m not filled with dread.

She loves me, I tell myself. She’s always loved me. She’s always looked out for me too, and always taken care of me. Surely she’s worried about my being here?

I picture the mirror, wrapped up in my ruined dress at the bottom of the chest in my chamber, and gather my resolve. Tomorrow, I will try to talk to her.

CHAPTER 28

MADDY



The next morning, I leave Sarra's workshop late, hoping Navi will already be in the feasting hall for breakfast when I get to our shared bedchamber.

The room is empty when I arrive, so I lock myself in and dig through the clothes in my chest until I find the ripped dress. I carefully unroll it and stare down at the pretty, blue-enameled compact mirror.

Taking deep breaths and steeling myself, I picture my sister's face.

Please, please, please let Freydis want to see me, I pray. Or, at least, please don't let her hate me.

I sit down on the bed, open the mirror, and stare at my reflection in the shell-shaped glass. Freydis never told me how these mirrors work, but I feel magic roll from it, and it turns as cold as ice in my hand. Hopefully, somewhere in the Ice Court, my sister's matching mirror is as cold as this one and on her person. So she knows I'm trying to reach her.

But the reflection continues to be that of my own face, my hopeful but slightly fearful eyes staring intensely into the glass.

I try for almost ten minutes until I give up.

She just didn't know I was trying to get in touch with her, I tell myself as I hide the mirror away again. She won't have the mirror on her all the time. Maybe she has tried to contact me when the mirror was in the bottom of the chest and I missed it, just like she just did?

She's not deliberately avoiding me. She loves me.

I repeat the words while I wash and dress, but the discomfort stays with me.



I race down to the feasting hall, hoping to be there in time to grab some bread to eat on the way to whatever activity the Valkyrie have planned for us today. The schedule says flight training, but given that none of us have wings yet, I have no idea what that might involve.

Erik is already speaking as I enter the feasting hall, and I stop still as he glances over at me but doesn't pause. "The aerial platforms are an incredibly dangerous place, and you will not be granted access to them by Featherblade until you not only have your wings, but you are vaguely proficient in using them," he is saying.

Aerial platforms? Excited anticipation zips along my veins.

"So until you earn your wings, you will be able to choose from three valuable skills to spend your Thursdays practicing. You may perform kitchen work, including foraging, hunting, poison making, and learning to cook in inhospitable environments. You may also choose to hone swimming skills, or you can spend the day at the docks and improve your sailing capabilities."

Chatter starts all over the room, rooks deciding which of the three skills are the most valuable.

"One more thing before I leave!" Erik calls, and the chatters dies. "In three weeks' time, when Sigrun returns for the strength display, we will also commence the *Oskorela*." A buzz of excitement ripples through the room, presumably from the fae who know that translates as "Wild Hunt." "For those who are worthy, Featherblade carries great reward. There is a plethora of prey beyond the safety of these halls, and if you bring back something that proves your honor and valor in battle, the reward will be rich."

My mind goes straight to the birds that killed Aldrich, and nearly killed the rest of us. We can't be expected to kill one of them, surely?

“Hunts must never be carried out alone, and the danger should not be underestimated. Many of you have already experienced the canopy's guardians, the shrieks, and you will not be so well shielded from them outside of Featherblade. But there is plenty out there to find. We will accept volunteer hunting parties now, but prepare yourself for mandatory *Oskorela* parties after our mighty leader's next visit.”

So, the birds are called shrieks. That makes sense, with the horrific noise they made.

And I only have three weeks until I may have to face them again?

Freya help me.

Erik claps his hands together. “Kitchen workers, with me, please,” he calls, then heads off toward the doors behind the serving table. Lots of fae stand and follow him, including Branka.

I swear quietly. That would have been my choice, but my instinct to avoid her is as strong as it is with Orgid and Inga.

Brynhild stands from her table, her lyrical voice commanding instant quiet. “Wait outside the Wolf Wing for me if you wish to swim.”

That is not an option for me. I am a good swimmer, better than most, in fact, but without Freydis there to drag me back up if I faint, the risk of drowning is too great. So, sailing it is.

“Those of you who want to be out on the ship, go down the main steps and wait there.”

I hurry to the serving table and swipe an apple and a small bread roll, then head out of the feasting hall. Orgid, Inga, and Navi stop outside the Wolf Wing with the group waiting for Brynhild, and I let out a sigh of relief as I turn left and make my way toward the main steps.



Valdis is waiting for us, standing before a large boat, and I'm relieved. My admiration for Valdis makes me awkward around her, but she doesn't give me the withering stares that Brynhild does, or the disappointed sighs that Harald does.

I have spent a lot of time on boats moving between ice glaciers, but not large ones, only small *karves* big enough for three or four. This vessel is big enough for twenty, and a slight panic stirs in my gut that we might be heading out toward the waterfall. I eat my apple, trying to calm my stomach.

There are eight of us in the group, including Henrik, the good-looking earth-fae, and Martom, the young ice-fae boy with the impressive amount of magic.

"First things first," Valdis says, then thumps the side of the boat. "Check the vessel. A well-cared-for ship is a necessity."

She goes through how to check the wood for splits and gaps, then how to fill them with thick tar that smells of pine. We board the ship, some more gracefully than others, and then perform the same checks on the planks of the deck and the masts.

Valdis throws a short length of rope at all eight of us in turn. I'm pleased I manage to catch mine. "A ship is only as strong as its ropes and knots," she says, then takes us through a series of knots. I'm familiar with all of them, and even manage to keep the itch to go to the gallery and look up more exciting knots at bay.

She walks us around the boat, showing us which knots work for tying down cargo, which are needed for the sails, and which to use when anchoring or beaching.

"The best boats have a shallow hull, which allows us to beach on sandy shores," she explains, then starts to talk about the sails and demonstrates how to rotate the yard—the beam that holds the sail—to control the speed and direction of the vessel.

It's all information I know, but I pay attention because the boat is so different from anything I've been aboard before. She has a complicated sail in sharp triangles that I'm unfamiliar

with, and can take ten oarsmen on each side, as well as crates of cargo in the low center.

Even though we are still right beside the steps, Valdis has us all take a seat with an oar. The heavy wooden blades rest in rings near the top of the railings, with seats set high to accommodate the oarsmen operating them.

“You can use your innate magic to improve your oar speed, and row for longer,” she says, and I scowl. “Try it now.”

As this is something I doubt I’ll be able to do, I don’t hold out much hope, but I jam my staff alongside the oar, grip it with both hands, and try to channel some of my ice magic into the wood. A nice, icy wind flows down the oar, and it does speed the movement up, more than I thought it would.

Has my magic increased? It doesn’t feel like it has, and I wonder if I just bother so little with it that maybe I miss some of the small ways it can help me.

We finally set sail, and gliding over the water is freeing.

Henrik is vocal the entire time, flirting not only with Valdis, but with every fae in the group. His enthusiastic encouragement means we quickly find a rhythm with the oars, and we power down the winding river. Thankfully, we go nowhere near any waterfalls, and a thick canopy of foliage covers us at all times, so there is no chance of the shrieks getting to us.

On the way back, Valdis tests us individually on the knots we went through.

“Madivia, here,” she calls, just as Featherblade comes into view. I move the heavy oar from over my legs and stand up. My stomach swoops.

Oh shit. I have a second to try to move my weight, but it’s not long enough. Black descends over my vision and consciousness abandons me.



When I come around, the first thing I notice is that I can't breathe properly. My mouth and throat are full of water.

The second is that I am in the air.

It takes another few choking, gasping seconds to work out what has happened.

I fell over the edge of the boat into the river, and Valdis lifted me out.

Her wings are beating gently as she sets us both back down in the boat. My hair is stuck to my face, my clothes are stuck to my skin, and I'm coughing up water. I manage to keep my feet, though, as the other seven fae stare at me.

658. *I've survived another one.* My stomach is roiling, probably filled with river water.

I knew this was going to happen. I didn't know that I would nearly drown, but I knew I would faint during training at some point.

I survived. That's the important thing.

"Thank you," I wheeze to Valdis. My throat burns when I say the words. She mutters something about "confused-arse gods" whilst squeezing water from her braided ponytail. Her wings expand and shiver behind her, shaking off any water that got on them when she pulled me from the river.

"Do you need to go to the healing chambers?" she asks me.

"No." I shake my head. "I'm fine."

She eyes my soaked clothes distastefully.

"It's just water," I croak. I hold my chin up high, and hope my embarrassment is not all the others can see.

With a shrug of one shoulder, Valdis turns away from me.

She starts to bark instructions on how to take down and stow the sail, and we all move to obey.

I'm struggling to concentrate now, though. I'm avoiding eye contact with any of the others, and all I can think about is

what will happen when I faint in front of Orgid or Inga. Even Navi.

My clothes are drying unevenly, the leather wrap around my middle keeping most of my torso wet, but I don't care. The cold that takes me whenever the breeze blows across us is comforting. Featherblade is too warm for me.

Yet another reason you're not supposed to be here, my overactive brain taunts me.

The boat bumps against the steps, and the other fae climb out. Valdis waits, and I don't want her to offer me any help or tell me I can't sail again, so I hurry to the side and climb out before she can reach me.

The temperature soars, and I freeze in place, because I know why.

Kain steps out from behind one of the large statues.

He looks exactly as he did two nights ago, except the coarse hair on his face has moved closer to something I might call a beard.

I don't have it in me right now to push about the vault or the helm. I don't have much in me at all. I want to be alone.

His eyes narrow when they move slowly up and down my bedraggled form. "You're wet."

"And you're a genius," I croak sarcastically. There's a nasty taste in my mouth, and I want to drink something to take it away.

I start up the stairs, leaving wet footprints as I move past him.

"Did you faint on the boat?"

My steps slow, and I close my eyes a second then move faster.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Please, leave me alone."

"The others will not leave you alone."

I whirl, glaring. Drops spatter the steps but miss him. “You think I don’t know that?” All my insecurities are parading before my eyes, yesterday’s confidence squashed to nothing beneath them.

When he says nothing, I turn back, marching up the steps. I head for Odin’s High Hall, and when I reach the shining wood, I pause. I can only hear my own footsteps. I turn, and he is gone.

CHAPTER 29

MADDY



I don't go to dinner. Part of me wants to hold my head high and show everyone I don't care what they think or say. But the larger part is in no mood to deal with the whispers. Or the outright goading.

Refusing to feel sorry for myself, I list ways I can improve instead, writing everything down on my parchment. Strength is the most obvious. Better equipment is next. Shield first, then a sword or axe. Maybe a bow, as archery is probably my best fighting skill.

Now keenly aware that I have three weeks until I will be sent out into the canopy on the Wild Hunt, I use the deadline to push myself.

I will have my shield finished then, I will be able to run ten laps of the Battleyard by then, and I will be able to lift the heaviest horseshoes.

I will ask Eldith to train with me more often. I will make pastes and healing potions to carry with me.

All things I *can* do. *Will* do.

The three-week deadline is also how long I have to decide whether to help Kain get into the vault, but I shove that aside. Right now, nothing is more important than proving to Featherblade and the gods that I am supposed to be here—and earning my snake *val-tivar*.



When Navi enters the room, I pretend to be asleep. It's not hard, because I'm tired, and real sleep takes me surprisingly quickly.

I dream of Kain.

It starts with me soaring over the canopy of *Yggdrasil*, high in the sky, at one with the mists. I have huge wings, the color of my sister's hair, and a pale blue snake is coiled around my neck, its long body wrapped around my shoulders, comforting and solid. But then the tree below me changes, and my wings falter.

The world is burning.

Everything beneath me is on fire. A wolf the size of Odin's High Hall, made of huge, lethal, blazing flames, is incinerating everything in its path. It moves through the canopy, through the courts, and nothing is left in its wake but ash-covered desolation.

On the beast's back, a maniacal look in his eyes, his arms outstretched and colossal wings made from fire erupting from his shoulders, is Kain the Ruinous.



I struggle to forget the dream when I wake. It was so vivid, and it lingers as I wash and dress. Every time I think of the fire-fae, I see the twisted, power-hungry look in his eyes as he rode the flaming wolf.

Do I really fear him destroying the world? My overactive imagination has taken whatever may be in that vault, and turned it into something else, I tell myself.

When I return from the bathing chambers, Navi has left our room, so I lock myself in and retrieve my sister's mirror from its dress-wrapped hiding place.

My stomach flutters as I open it. I need Freydis' counsel more than I ever have. She is deliberate where I am impulsive, sensible where I am whimsical, and calm where I am scattered.

Once again, the blue enamel becomes freezing cold in my hands. I send as many silent prayers as I can out into the world, that my sister has the mirror on her today, that she feels it turn freezing cold and she opens it, so that I might see her face.

But after ten minutes, there is no sign of her, just my own increasingly sad reflection. I don't want to believe that she's deliberately ignoring me. I *can't* believe that she's deliberately ignoring me. So I put the mirror back and try not to think about it as I head down to the feasting hall.

I hold my chin high when I enter. A few fae fall quiet, but most don't pay me any attention. Relieved, I load up with oats and fruit.

The schedule says that Friday is event day, but Erik stands up and informs everyone that there are no events until the first strength display when Sigrun visits, so it is a free day.

I don't have to think hard at all about what I'm going to do with my time. When I've eaten, I go straight to the weight room and lift the next set of horseshoes. I see nobody else while I'm there, and happily, I don't find it too difficult to keep my mind focused and not wander as I count the repetitions.

Next, I go to the Battleyard. There are other fae practicing and training, but none of them pay me any mind when I begin to run my laps. I manage three, and I'm pleased with myself because I don't feel like I'm going to throw up after.

I go back to my room, change into more comfortable clothes and my leather wrap, and then I head straight to the forge. Six hours pass before I realize that I'm starving. I've gone through twenty small sheets of metal in failed attempts to get the frame the shape that Sarra helped me design. And even now, I'm not sure it's correct. I'm trying prototypes on small scales, and I take two of the strongest contenders with me to show Sarra after dinner.

Kain is in the feasting hall when I go up for dinner, and he's glowering so hard at everybody that there is a six-foot clearance around his stool.

I am leaning over a large cauldron of meat stew with a ladle when somebody bangs hard into my shoulder, making me drop the spoon. It clatters as I turn.

Branka is glaring at me, and my curse dies on my lips. I know immediately that there's no point defending myself against this fae. Orgid gives me grief in a way that feels personal, like he actually has some resentment toward me for some reason. But Branka is just... *violent*. I can't think of any other word for it. Her eyes shift too fast, her lips are set in a permanent snarl, and there's a feral edge to her that defies platitudes.

She shoves me again, moving her bowl to the stew and just dunking the whole thing into the cauldron.

I scowl. "Can't you use a spoon?" I can't help the words escaping.

She doesn't even answer me, just makes a growling sound and jabs her elbow toward me. I move out of the way just in time.

She stalks away, and I decide to take a meat pie, instead of the stew.

I am expecting to sit alone, but Eldith bangs down a plate beside me a few minutes after I select a stool.

"I heard about the river," she says.

I swallow my mouthful of pie. "Huh. I'm sure everybody's heard about the river by now," I say.

"Does it happen often?" she asks me.

There's no point lying to her. "Yes."

"You're a walking calamity."

I go back to my pie. If she sat with me to mock me, I won't give her the satisfaction of my attention.

"You'll need help if you're going to weight-train, or you'll risk killing yourself."

I blink at her. "Are you offering?"

She nods. “Yes. When you get up to a weight that you can’t lift safely on your own, let me know.”

“Thank you.”

She nods and then eats her food in silence.

I can’t help still being a little suspicious of her, but I could use the help. She’s strong and wiry, and will be able to teach me more about strengthening myself than Sarra and I could work out on our own.

There’s a commotion at the main doors to the hall, which are almost always open, and we both look over.

A female shadow-fae staggers against the end of one table, hauling the limp form of an earth-fae with her. Blood is running down her face and from her thigh.

Everybody stands, except Kain.

“Get Erik,” booms Harald, striding toward the panting fae.

“Shrieks,” I hear her gasp.

Eldith moves away from me, toward the commotion, and curiosity makes me follow her.

I wish I hadn’t.

The earth-fae is missing his left arm.

He’s not conscious. Hell, I don’t know if he’s even alive. But I’m pretty sure Erik’s snake won’t be able to fix this.

“They volunteered for the *Oskorela*,” I hear someone say behind me.

“Fuck that.”

“Why would they go before they have their *val-tivar*?”

“I could take down a shriek.”

“Could you fuck! If there were six of us, maybe...”

I filter out all the voices around me and try to focus on Harald. He’s talking to the shadow-fae female. I think her name is Garda. She’s strong, six feet tall at least, and shadows are still trickling from her staff toward the form on the floor.

“How did you manage to get him back here?”

“My shadows helped.” She staggers against the table, knocking off plates and tankards. Harald swipes up the nearest one and hands it to her. She hesitates, then drains the contents.

Erik sweeps into the hall, pauses when he sees the fae on the floor, then moves to Garda. His eyes change, the reptilian slits appearing, and then he turns and opens his wings to block everyone’s view. When they fall again, he puts one arm around Garda’s shoulder.

“Come,” he says gently. She looks down at the fae on the floor, opens her mouth, then closes it again. Clutching her side, she lets Erik steer her from the feasting hall.

Everybody falls silent as they look down. I know we are all thinking the same thing. If Erik didn’t even crouch to check him...

“Dinner is over,” Harald barks. “Kain!”

Kain’s stool scrapes on the floor as he stands. Rooks begin to leave the hall, all staring at the body on the ground as they pass, until shadows burst from Harald’s hands, swarming the body, hiding it from view.

I don’t want to watch them remove the dead fae. And I’m certainly not interested in the rest of my dinner. Trying not to wonder whether his missing arm made it back to Featherblade with him, I follow the other quiet rooks from the hall.

Three weeks. I have just under three weeks until I have to leave Featherblade’s protection and face the monstrous birds.

CHAPTER 30

MADDY



I make my way straight to Sarra's workshop, hoping she's there.

"Maddy!" She rushes at me when I enter, surprising me by wrapping her arms around me. I return the hug and feel some of the tension leave my shoulders. "Everybody is talking about a dismembered fae! I didn't think it was you, because they said something about them leaving Featherblade voluntarily, and I didn't think you would do that, but then all this stuff with the fire-fae made me worry, and what if he had made you—"

"Sarra, I'm fine." I move her to arm's length and give her a reassuring smile. "And thank you for caring so much."

She shrugs, her eyes warm. "I'm kind of getting used to you being around. And I didn't see you yesterday."

I let out a long sigh. "Yesterday was kind of a shit day. But not as bad as the dead earth-fae's day today, I suppose."

"I stole some brandy," Sarra says, turning to her workstation. "Is this a stolen brandy type of moment?"

"Yes. Definitely."

We sip the strong liquid, and I tell her about fainting on the ship, Eldith offering to help me, and then about the fae who volunteered for the *Oskorela*.

"And you have to go on this hunt in three weeks?"

"Parties will be sent once Sigrun comes back for the strength display. I might not be one of the first to be sent out,

but rooks will start going out then, yeah.”

“I wonder what rewards could be out there that are worth facing the shrieks for?”

“Whatever they are, they had better be good. Have you seen a shriek?” I ask her.

“No. I’ve seen drawings, though. Have you?”

“Yes. They killed a fae on our boat when I came here. The one who owned that staff.” I nod my head toward her bench and Aldrich’s staff.

“Hmm.” She tilts her head thoughtfully, then looks guilty. “Sorry. That’s shit you had to deal with that. But I’ve tried all sorts, and I can’t get that staff to respond to me. There is definitely something odd about it—perhaps it has something to do with the shrieks. Featherblade can make all sorts of weird magic happen.”

I nod, thinking about the vault. “Do you think it could have changed Aldrich’s staff after he died?”

“Yes. I think it can do anything,” she says firmly. She starts to tell me things she’s learned about the hall from her studies, which seem to be mostly led by Brynhild, and from stories the other thralls have been sharing. “One of them stumbled across a waterfall once and has never been able to find it again,” she says. “And another swears that a spider the size of a cat spoke to her. But she steals a lot more brandy than this, so maybe she’s a less trustworthy source.”

I feel a lot calmer than I did when I left the feasting hall—a combination of Sarra’s reassuring chatter and the brandy, no doubt. “Do you think I should trust Eldith?” I ask.

“I don’t think you have much choice.” She shrugs. “And if she can help you when you faint, then she could make your life a lot easier. And safer. Falling in the river must have been awful.”

“More embarrassing than anything,” I say, though my fingers move to my throat. It burned all evening. “If I faint holding a sword, or at the top of stone steps, or in front of an

opponent like Orgid, or Branka, then..." I trail off. I don't need to finish the sentence.

"Well, a shield is all the more important, then. Maybe it can cover you when you're down." She says it resolutely, and I try to soak up her positivity.

"Yes. I need to talk to Harald about a metal light enough for me to hold if the shield is large. But I made some prototype frames today."

We spend the next few hours making lists of things that she thinks could go wrong with both of them, and poring over the book I took from Harald's forge to try to refine the design.

When I start to tire, she tinkers with the staff, and I curl up on the furs with the bard tales book. I'm asleep before she leaves.



The next day, I faint in front of everybody.

All twenty-four other rooks and Valdis see me crash to the ground, holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other.

Nobody moves to catch me, obviously, and I bang my shoulder pretty hard. But other than that, I'm okay.

659 blackouts survived.

I'm back on my feet within what I'm sure is a few minutes, bow and arrows gathered up. Valdis doesn't ask this time if I need to leave. She just claps her hands and bellows for everybody to get back to target practice.

Standing in a line with the others, nausea rolling through me and my vision still settling, it's impossible not to hear the mutters.

"What's wrong with her?"

"What if she faints while she's flying?"

"I won't do any formation fighting with her, not if she can just drop to the ground at any point. She'll get us all killed."

Wishing my cheeks weren't hot, I try to continue hitting the target with my arrows. After a shaky half-hour, I find that when desperation to prove myself worthy of the place the gods have given me is surging through my body, my aim is actually better.

Is that the key? *Using* the desperation?

The problem is, though, that the others are not wrong. There's only so long I can cling to any kind of indignation or anger.

I will be a liability during formation fighting.

What if I do faint while I'm flying?

There *is* something wrong with me.

I push myself extra hard with the weights when we are dismissed, managing to move to the next heavier set with my legs. My arms are still too weak to move up, but I'm sure I'm getting faster with the current ones. I run four laps around the Battleyard and am encouraged that I don't limp back to the high hall. The running is definitely getting easier, and it has only been a week.

I skip dinner in the feasting hall that night, instead eating bread and dried meat that Sarra saves me from her meal. We work on the wooden part of my shield, sketching up designs that mean something to me. I'm struggling to choose what the focal point should be, so I leave the center blank for now. I'm tempted to make it a snake, but I don't think I could bear the heartbreak if I fail to earn my *val-tivar* and am left with a painful reminder of what I failed to be worthy of.

I make myself go up to bed in my shared chamber when Sarra says she's going to retire for the night. To my surprise, Navi isn't there, even though it's easily late enough that I would have expected her to be in bed. I make the most of being able to read my book in bed with the light on until I drift off.

Navi is not in her bed when I wake up, and I consider trying the mirror again. Fear stops me, though. If it doesn't work again, it will be harder to convince myself that Freydis

isn't ignoring it because she doesn't want to speak to me. The thought is too difficult to accept, so I avoid it instead.



The next few days pass remarkably quickly. I faint twice.

The first time is in runes class. Eldith is sitting close enough to me that she catches me awkwardly as I slide off my stool and hauls me upright again. I do my best to ignore the laughs and mutters around me, though Brynhild's disgusted expression is more difficult to deal with, and I don't really take many notes or pay much attention to what we are taught after that.

The second time I am alone, in bed. It's two more blackouts survived, though, and I am taking that as a win.

The only time I miss my weights is after I take an absolute beating in sword and axe training on Monday because I don't get paired with Eldith. Instead, I'm paired with a hulking gold-fae who is lethally proficient. He doesn't actually try to hurt me at any point, but he's relentless and certainly doesn't take it easy on me. His blade never comes near my face, though, never pierces my skin, and as soon as I'm down, he steps back and lets me get back up. I'm exhausted afterward.

The next day, when everybody else is training in magic, I make up for it. I do twice as many repetitions in the weight room and push myself to five laps around the Battleyard, although I think this is a mistake when I find myself practically unable to breathe and convinced I'll be sick.

I spend the rest of the day in the forge. I still haven't had the chance to ask Harald about metals, so I go through everything on the shelves using a fine blowtorch to see how the metal reacts when I heat it and make notes. I find myself enjoying working with fire and heat more than I expected to. As an ice-fae, it's hardly something I've spent much time around, and whilst I've never been scared of it, I do find myself hesitant at first. But when I'm wearing the thick gloves and prepared for the blast of heat from the torch, it's mesmerizing watching the metal change color and hardness. Like ice melting and freezing, but more violent.

I feel Kain's eyes on me a number of times, but I ignore him. I don't trust my mouth when I'm in his presence, and I can't work out what I think about the helm. I get the odd snide comment and elbow jab from Orgid and Inga, but nothing that causes Kain to break any more bones in my defense. As strong as my resolve to keep away from him stays, though, my curiosity grows.

I could get past the no-wings mystery, the secret he thinks my parents have that he wants, even perhaps what might be in the vault—if it weren't for the wolf statue.

The statue is a part of me. A part of the gallery, from its inception. And here, now, hundreds of miles from my home, the fire-fae and an old artifact took me to it, and made it change. How in the name of the fates am I supposed to ignore that?

It isn't an immediate problem to solve, though. That's what I tell myself when my mind inevitably wanders. Making my shield, getting stronger, getting faster, and learning to defend myself are all immediate problems. The clock is ticking down to my being sent out into the canopy, and I am damn well going to stand half a chance out there. *Unless I faint*, the irritatingly loud doubt in my head reminds me.

Do what you can. Ignore what you can't.

If I faint in front of a shriek, all I *can* do is hope they eat me before I come around.

CHAPTER 31

MADDY



The morning of our next *glima* session, I wake from another vivid dream about the fire-fae Valkyrie. This time, he was flying, and I was soaring right alongside him. His wings were made up of individual feathers of flame, and I was so transfixed by them that I flew right into the waiting talons of a shriek.

It is before dawn, but Navi is moving around quietly. Taking advantage of the earlier-than-usual start, I decide to thoroughly wash my hair. I've been doing the best I can with it, but there's so much of it, and it will be good to give it a proper soak.

I make my way to the bathing chamber in the oversized shirt I've been wearing to bed and fill one of the copper tubs. The bathing room is shared between three bedchambers, so six of us, and there are only two tubs. They stand behind large woven screens and offer a decent amount of privacy from the basins where I usually wash my face and teeth. Hot water flows straight from large metal taps, a luxury I had heard was uncommon outside of palaces. But Featherblade is filled with magic, so hot running water isn't too much of a surprise.

While the tub is filling, I examine my reflection. My arms might be getting bigger? And perhaps my waist has shrunk a little? I'm not convinced, though, as I fold my shirt and set it on the stool next to the pile of toweled cotton. There are plenty of bits still wobbling as I climb into the warm water.

I learned when I was young not to fill a tub up so much that if I faint in it, I'll slip under the surface. That turns out to

be well-learned lesson today. I'm only in the water for a couple of minutes before my stomach swoops and I lose consciousness.

662, I count when I come around.

Another one survived, and, even better, alone. And if I've passed out early in the day, maybe I'll make it through the whole of today's sessions without fainting. Who would have thought I would consider blacking out a good start to the day?

A noise garners my attention, and I turn in the water. It must be somebody using the basins, but I can't see from here. If it's Navi, I don't want to talk to her anyway.

I take a few deep breaths while the disorientation fades, then soak my hair, rubbing it with the lavender soap.

When I get out of the tub, and I've wrung as much water as I can from my hair, I move to the pile of towels. Except they've all gone. My stomach sinks. My shirt isn't here, either. Nor are my staff or room key, which were set on top.

My cheeks flame, anger seeping through me. Somebody has come in here and stolen the towels and my clothes. *What are they, children?*

"Pathetic *heimskrs*," I snarl. I'm willing to bet it is Orgid or Inga. Navi doesn't strike me as immature enough, and this isn't Branka's style.

What are they trying to achieve? Embarrassment? I fucking faint all over the place, and every other rook here can put me on my arse. Surely I'm getting enough of that without their help?

My anger is morphing into a rage I'm not very familiar with. Usually, it is frustration that leads me to the edge of my temper, but this is directed at others, not myself.

My shoulders square, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

Why would they think that being naked would embarrass me more than being weaker, slower, and more powerless than everyone else here?

If they want to act like children, stealing clothes, then I will show them that *I* am no child. I am a grown fucking female, and if I am forced to show everyone that, so be it.

I open the bathing chamber door, not sure what to expect, but angry enough that I don't care. It's empty. I walk along the corridor to my own room, my bare feet silent on the earthy floor and my hair dripping water behind me.

My door is locked. *Of course my door is locked.*

I take a deep breath. Sarra's is the only place I can think to go to. Even if she's not there, there are blankets and furs. But that means walking through Odin's High Hall. Light is filtering through the windows now, and I know at least some of the rooks are awake. *The ones who stole my fucking stuff.*

I grind my teeth and make my way to the stairs.

I hear the laughs before I see the fae. And it's not just Orgid and Inga waiting for me down there. They've got half the rooks at least.

My cheeks get even hotter, but I don't falter. I avoid looking at any of them as I start down the steps.

If they think this is what will make me crumble, they're wrong.

All of them are warriors, lean and hard, and made of muscle. I'm soft, my backside and chest curvy where theirs are straight.

None of them look like me with no clothes on.

And I'm going to fucking own it.

"I knew you were obsessed with me, Orgid," I say loudly as I walk down the stairs, swinging my round hips. "But this is quite some lengths to go to in order to see me naked."

Inga steps out from an alcove, holding my shirt and staff. Her eyes are flashing, and there aren't flames in them like I saw in Kain's, but they are glowing.

"He's not fucking interested in you," she snarls. "He's not even here."

“So it’s you who wants to see me like this?” I cock my head at her. It’s so hard to resist the desire to cover myself, but I force my hands onto my hips.

She wants me to react. She wants me to cower and hide.

I won’t.

“Like what you see?”

“You’re a weakling. You shouldn’t fucking be here,” she snarls, then throws my shirt in the air and lifts her staff. The shirt catches fire immediately.

I hear more chuckles from the assembled fae.

“I’m already naked,” I say to her slowly, like she’s stupid. “Setting fire to my shirt is hardly going to upset me now.”

She lifts my staff, and I can’t help my reaction. I may not be precious about it, but I do need it.

It’s too late. The metal rod begins to melt as flames lick over it. I watch as the halo over the top melts, the small diamond ornament in the middle softening, then disappearing.

Inga drops the malformed metal to the ground, where it lands on the ash of my shirt. “It’s not like you’ll miss it, since your magic is pathetic anyway.”

I want to hit her, enough that I raise my fist. But I see the satisfaction in her eyes when I do.

This is what she wants. A rise. A reaction. To feel like she’s important, like she’s the biggest thing in my life today.

I lower my fist and turn away from her, toward the back of the room where the door to the workshops is.

Kain steps out from behind Odin’s throne.

His eyes are alight, and heat rolls from him like a battering ram.

Suddenly, I care very, very much that I’m naked.

The laughter dies instantly, and I hear rushed footsteps. Everyone is scrambling as he advances.

“I’ve got this,” I say to him as he gets close. It’s taking every gods-given thing I have not to cover myself, not to dart behind a pillar and sink to the fucking floor. But I stand tall. “She is behaving like a child, and I am showing her how a grown woman behaves.”

A noise that is more animal than fae escapes him, and he blasts straight past me. I turn in time to see him snatch Inga’s staff from her hand. She fights it, but she’s far too late; he’s too fast.

He pulls off his glove, wraps his fingers around the rod, and within a second the whole thing is ash. Not just melted metal, like mine, but ash.

She gapes a minute, then glares at him. “You trying to teach me a lesson, *hersir*?” she growls. “Going to burn off my clothes too?”

“I wouldn’t want to see you naked if you were the last fucking female in *Yggdrasil*,” he hisses. “Now, fuck off!”

She does, slowly at first, but picking up speed when she reaches the door.

The hall is empty, and my heart is pounding, adrenaline making my skin tingle. Part of me wants to thank Kain because she deserved to have her staff destroyed. *Let’s see how she likes having no magic.*

But part of me is annoyed that he reacted to her and gave her the satisfaction.

“I had it,” I say. “But thanks.”

His shoulders are heaving, and the air around him is shimmering so strongly with heat that he is becoming a blur.

Run!

Run!

Run!

“I suggest that you get the fuck out of here, too,” he growls, without looking at me.

Fear, a primal reaction to the growing lethal aura now rolling over me in waves, makes my feet move. I hurry to the door beyond the throne and cast only one glance back as I slam it closed behind me. For the briefest of moments, I swear I see glowing eyes, charging across the hall after me.

CHAPTER 32

MADDY



I don't stop running until I get to Sarra's workshop. I'm sure neither Kain nor his wolf came through the door after me, but my feet keep propelling me forward, fueled by fear and adrenaline.

"What in the name of Odin's arse?" Sarra is in her workshop, and when I burst through her door, she takes one look at me, drops her tools, and races to the pile of furs in front of the fire. Hurrying to me with a large blanket, she stares wide-eyed. "What happened?" she asks.

I wrap the fur around myself and slump into the large chair. "Inga happened," I say, breathing hard. "And then, well, *Kain* happened." I didn't think her eyes could be any wider than when I burst in naked, but somehow, now they are.

"Is he the reason you have no clothes on? Maddy, that is definitely not a good idea."

I snort. "You think I think getting naked with the unhinged fire-fae murderer is a good idea?" I'm not going to admit that I've thought about it more than once. I shake my head. "No, Inga stole my clothes and my staff while I was having a bath."

Sarra's pretty face screws up. "What is she, five?"

I sigh. "My thoughts exactly. She locked me out of my room, forced me to walk through the hall naked in front of a load of fae she'd gotten together, and then melted my staff."

"Oh, shit," murmurs Sarra. "And you ran here?"

“No, not at first. I pushed my chest out and accused her of being obsessed with me.”

Sarra grins at me. “Excellent.”

“Yeah. But then Kain showed up, turned her staff to ash, and then looked like he was about to lose it.”

“That’s when you ran?”

“Yeah.” I groan and rub my hands over my face. “I know my magic is shit, but having no staff...” I trail off.

“Let me go and find the ice-fae rune-marked,” Sarra says to me. “I’m sure she can fix your staff.”

“It’s a pile of melted metal on the floor upstairs,” I say. “But thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I’ll grab you some clothes, too,” she says.

“I would appreciate that also.”

She leaves, then returns ten minutes later with a human woman I’d guess is around sixty years old, with wise eyes and a no-nonsense attitude. She has a mark on her wrist that denotes her as an ice-fae rune-marked, but I don’t recognize her. She doesn’t recognize me either.

“Is it true you are a Verglas, my lady?” she asks me, after curtsying.

“Kind of, yeah. But please, just call me Maddy.” She gives Sarra a sideways glance, and Sarra nods.

“Okay. I’m Frida.”

She asks me some questions about my magic and my old staff, and after a short conversation we decide that trying to recover and fix my old staff is pointless and that she will make me a new one. It will take a week.

A week isn’t so bad. It is well within the deadline of the *Oskorela* beginning.

Once I’ve thanked her and she leaves, I dress in the too-big trousers and too-tight shirt Sarra has found me.

“Are you going to tell the other Valkyrie what Inga did?” Sarra asks.

“No,” I say. “They’re not going to be interested in stupid pranks that immature rooks are playing on each other. Although I imagine they’re going to notice that she no longer has a staff, so Kain might get in more trouble.” I look down at my bare feet. My boots are in my room, so at least Inga didn’t take and burn those. “And I’ll need her to give my chamber key back.”

“You know, I’m not sure there *is* a fire-fae rune-marked here,” says Sarra slowly.

“Really? So... she may be stuck with no magic now?”

She shrugs. “I’ve not met one, and I would have been interested. But with the Fire Court shut off for centuries, it’s not like they’re common. Unless they get one up here, or she earns her *val-tivar*, yeah, I guess she’s got no magic.”

Satisfaction rolls through me. It’s petty, I know. But so is taking somebody’s clothes. And she burned my staff. She deserved what she got.



I make a point of holding my head high when I enter the feasting hall for breakfast.

Half the fae in this room have seen you naked, is the only damn thought swirling through my mind as I walk to the serving table, though, and I know my cheeks are pink.

I take a handful of fruit and decide not to sit down. I’ll eat outside, near the water, and try to get my head straight before *glima*.

Where I will see Kain again.

The thought makes my stomach flutter. The power rolling off him earlier... “Dangerous” doesn’t do justice to the feeling.

I hear voices when I leave the hall, and slow down to listen.

“If you do not send word to my parents, you will regret it! Inga needs her staff replacing, and it is your fault if Featherblade is not equipped to do so!” It’s Orgid, and he sounds furious.

“Do not presume to threaten me,” bellows back Harald, and they round the corner and see me. Harald glares between the two of us, then grabs Orgid’s collar and jabs a finger at me. “Until she has a staff, your girlfriend won’t have one either. You are all allies, and you don’t fuck with each other’s weapons or magic. You hear me?”

Orgid glares at the huge Valkyrie. “Yes, *hersir*,” he growls.

Harald huffs angrily as he lets go of him, then strides into the feasting hall.

Orgid’s face is turning an ugly shade of purple, the bruise around his eye still visible. “You and that fire-fire guard-dog will pay for this,” he hisses at me.

“I don’t know what your problem with me is, Orgid. I really don’t. But I do know that messing with Kain is a really bad idea.”



The fire-fae Valkyrie is in a foul mood when we arrive for *glima*. He sweeps into the training room, barks at everyone to practice kicks, then stalks around the room, criticizing everybody’s technique.

Eldith and I go for it, hard. I have no idea if she’s heard about my naked stroll this morning, but she seems to know I might have some pent-up anger. We have pads today that we are supposed to use to block blows, and she actually staggers behind hers when I land a fierce roundhouse kick to her hip.

“Good,” she says. “Can you kick higher than that?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Your legs are long. If you can use them to stop people getting close to you, that might help. Try my chest—but maybe not so hard.”

The very fact she's asking me not to kick so hard is encouraging.

I find I can kick high quite easily, and we experimentally see if I can get all the way to her head. I have to work on my balance, and I feel the stretch in my pelvis, but with work, it's possible.

"And what will you do if somebody does get close?" Kain growls as I'm congratulating myself.

I turn and scowl at him. "You said we're doing kicks today. Not close work."

"I've changed my mind." He turns to the room. "Groundwork, on the furs!"

There are groans as people drop the pads and move to the end of the room covered with thick furs.

Kain's ash-filled eyes are fixed on mine when he adds, "And you'll all take a turn sparring with me."

I try to focus on Eldith, but it's hard. Kain is moving through the room, systematically putting every fae on their arse. I don't want to miss him flooring Inga or Orgid. Or Navi, for that matter.

When he reaches the shadow-fae noble, the whole room stops practicing and turns to watch, so Eldith shrugs at me, and we do the same.

They face each other; Orgid snarls and swings a fist. It's a feint, and a clumsy one. Even I can see he's going to kick.

Kain moves with impossible speed, slamming an open palm into the center of Orgid's chest. He flies backward, almost catches his footing, but not quite. He falls onto his backside, then begins to wheeze.

"Can't... breathe..." Nobody moves to help him.

"You're just winded," Kain snaps, then turns to his next opponent.

Inga. There is hatred in her eyes. I guess she's realized she's not going to get a replacement staff anytime soon. She

drops into a low crouch, and it's clear she's a shrewder wrestler than Orgid. It takes thirty seconds for Kain to find an opening in her tight defense. But when she lunges with a low, sweeping kick, he jumps over her and plants his boot in her back. She sprawls forward, her jaw hitting the furs.

“Next!”

She's snarling like an animal when she stands, but Orgid puts a hand on her shoulder and her expression changes. He's talking to her telepathically, I guess. He's still sucking down huge gulps of air. As Kain picks up a gold-fae female by the waist and slams her onto her back, the two fae turn away, practicing kicks again.

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. They are planning something, I am sure.

“Next,” Kain snarls, and Eldith shrugs at me.

“Might as well get it over with,” she mutters, and steps forward. She nearly lands a punch on his shoulder, and I think it's because he's looking at me. But he sidesteps at the last moment, then kicks out at her calf. She bites back a cry as the muscle gives out, and she drops to her knees.

He steps toward me. My heart rate soars.

“You're not really teaching us anything,” I murmur, trying not to step backward. “More just... beating folk up.”

“Hit me.”

I clench my jaw and fall back into a defensive stance.

I know I can't hit him. Nobody here has hit him. Is there something else I can do?

Apparently, I've already spent too long thinking about it.

He's on me in a breath. His arm wraps around my waist; I'm lifted clear of the floor and then slammed down onto the furs. Except he's come to the ground with me, and his arm, still around my back, took most of the hit. I'm not winded. Just hotter than I've ever been in my life.

Two hundred pounds of fire-fae muscle is covering my body, and I can't think about anything else. His hips are pressed to mine, his cheek is an inch from my ear, and I'm melting, heat surging through parts of my body that I didn't even know could get hot.

I'm dizzy, and I think it's because I'm not breathing. I don't think I can remember *how* to breathe.

"Help me get into the vault." His words are a rasp, and I feel them against my earlobe.

Breathe, Maddy! Fucking breathe!

I gasp down air, and his weight shifts. A tiny bit of the pressure is relieved, but now his thigh is between my legs. My core is on fucking fire.

"You can find more pretty gems. For your sister."

He stands, the heat leaving so quickly it's like I've been doused with cold water. My insides are still molten, though.

"Next!" he shouts from above me.

A hand grasps mine. It's Eldith, pulling me up. I let her help me to my feet, but his words are finally powering through the heated fog that is filling my brain.

"You can find more pretty gems. For your sister."

There was something about the way he said "for your sister"... He said it sarcastically. With *disbelief*.

He did take the helm.

CHAPTER 33

MADDY



My leg is starting to cramp from my being in this hiding position for so long, but I've yet to see Kain leaving the Wolf Wing.

I don't know whereabouts in this collection of buildings his room is, but I'm certain it's here somewhere. I let out a sigh. Sitting still for prolonged periods of time is my idea of torture.

I'm not sure how long I've been here, maybe an hour, but it feels like my brain has gone through every concern and worry it possibly can. I've not allowed myself to leave and visit the gallery in case I miss Kain leaving or coming in, so I've just been sitting here, wedged behind a large crate opposite the *glima* training room, churning through things I don't want to churn through.

Is my sister avoiding me because she hates me?

What happens if I never earn my val-tivar and get cast out of Featherblade?

Will I get torn apart by a shriek the first time I am sent out on the Oskorela?

What are Orgid and Inga planning for me next?

Will the blackouts kill me before I get a chance to become anything like a Valkyrie?

Why did Featherblade show me that vault?

What does that helm have to do with me and the wolf statue in the gallery?

The helm is the reason I am here. I am touching that piece of old metal again if it kills me. I *have* to know more about it.

I sigh again and try to shift my weight. My arse cheek has gone to sleep. It's no good; I can't stay behind the crate anymore. I creep up and stretch out as quietly as I can, then begin my search.

I put my slippers on before I came, leaving my boots in my room—once I got my key back from Erik—so my feet are silent as I pad along. It's the last building I check, and then the sixth door I open, leading to a small, narrow corridor that finally makes me pause. It's all wood-paneled, but heavier with vines, and the reason I stop is that all of these vines are singed on the edges. Some sections are completely burned.

I follow the small corridor until I reach a simple door. Expecting it to be locked, I'm excited when the knob silently turns, and the door swings open. I enter a dark room lit only by the dying embers of a small fireplace. It's a sitting room, sparsely furnished with one large, upholstered chair, a low table, and a bookcase that takes up all of one wall. I creep over to it, looking for the helm. If these are Kain's living quarters, then I expect most of the books will be about strategy and fighting. But I'm surprised to find that many of them are fiction. Bards' tales, funny stories, myths, and legends. There are a number of small trinkets, and I long to take my time to look at them in more detail, but he could come back at any point.

When I'm sure the helm isn't on the bookcase, I leave the shelves. There are two doors off the room, but before I check either of them, I meticulously go through the piles of furs on the floor, and the contents of the small table. I even look under the chair, but I find nothing.

Both of the doors stand slightly open, no light coming from inside either room. I peek my head around the first one and see that it is a bathing chamber. I assume he wouldn't hide an ancient helm in a bathtub, so I creep around the other door instead.

This room is absolutely pitch black, and I stand still for a painfully long moment to let my eyes adjust. My heart is hammering loudly in my chest, palms itching.

What will Kain do if he catches me in his quarters? He's already in a filthy mood today. The fact that I am probably standing in his bedroom sends a different kind of thrill through me, and my heart rate kicks up yet another notch.

You're an idiot, Maddy. A total heimskr. What part of you thinks it's a good idea to get off on the memory of a maniacal murderer pinning you to the ground with his hips?

I focus on the room gradually revealing itself. There is a bed in front of me, I'm fairly sure, but it's taking forever for my eyes to adjust. I hear a small sound, and then there's movement in front of me.

My breath catches.

It is Kain's bedroom, and Kain is in his bed.

I hold my breath, standing stock-still.

I need to leave immediately, before he wakes up. I start to turn to leave the room, but my eyes fall on something in the gloom. Something on his nightstand.

It's the helm. I can see the horned part of it sticking up and out in the darkness.

With a slow and silent breath, I tiptoe across the room. My arm is outstretched, and my fingers have almost closed over the metal horn, when there is sound and movement to my right.

Searing heat roars up my arm from my wrist, and I cry out, unable to help myself.

The pain stops immediately.

"Princess?" Kain growls in the dark, and then I see his glowing eyes.

I make a split-second decision.

I grab the helm and run.

CHAPTER 34

MADDY



I make it halfway across the sitting room.
But shit, he's fast.

Almost a blur, he crashes across the main door to his rooms, blocking the way. I skid to a stop, gripping the helm.

"This is..." I start, but my words fade away as I take him in.

He's naked.

As naked as I was this morning.

Completely, *gloriously*, unclothed.

His huge, solid chest is covered in silver hair and scars, and my eyes travel south. A fucking army of Valkyrie couldn't have stopped them.

A long scar drags from his abdomen over his hip and all the way down to his thigh. But now I'm not looking at his thigh.

I let out a long breath, the helm temporarily forgotten.

I've never seen anything like him. He's huge, and picturing what he must look like hard has forced every other thought from my mind.

"My eyes are up here, princess," he rasps.

"This is mine!" I say, waving the helm at him, but the words are high-pitched and run into each other, and I sound drunk.

Get a fucking grip, Maddy. It's just a cock. You've seen one before.

Oh, but not like *this*.

Nothing about Kain is like anything I've experienced before. He exudes power, fierce command, an unapologetic disregard for everything I've been taught to respect.

Desire floods my system, and it's so strong I don't know how to switch it off. I've never felt like this before.

I want him to tell me to drop to my knees. To tell me to open my mouth. To tell me to—

"It's mine," he snarls.

Helm, Maddy! Helm!

"I saw it first."

"And you didn't take it." He shakes his head at me, his eyes glowing. His lips are quirking at the corners. He's not going to hurt me. "Silly princess."

Don't look down. Don't look down.

"I'm taking it," I say. The words are weak even to my own ears.

"No. You're not." He steps toward me, and my fate is sealed.

I look down.

I no longer need to imagine what he would look like hard. Need pounds through me so brutally it makes me gasp.

"You're welcome to stay, though."

I force my eyes to his face, and fuck, the look he's giving me is the most sinful promise my imagination could ever conjure.

Danger, danger, danger!

I drop the helm and run.

He doesn't stop me. In fact, he steps aside, and I'm sure I hear him laugh as I race along the corridor, face aflame, heart

beating so fast I'm dizzy, and an almost painful need driving through my core.

I don't stop until I've left the Wolf Wing, and even then, I turn away from the main hall and keep moving.

The path along the branch is narrow and winding, but the foliage overhead is thick, so I keep running.

It's cooler out here, but nothing douses the infernal heat that is consuming me.

I berate myself for going there in the first place. I congratulate myself for leaving, instead of stepping into him.

Or falling to my damn knees in front of him.

But my brain and body alike are *obsessed*. I can't stop the images coming.

I have to deal with the torrent of desire assaulting my body, or I'll never fucking think straight again.

The path opens into a small glade dominated by a huge willow tree in the center, the long, sweeping branches rustling in the wind and offering a curtain of seclusion. I press my back to the trunk and take deep breaths. My body is alive with sensation, every nerve ending on fire. My nipples ache and strain against the fabric of my shirt, craving attention. Between my legs, my sex throbs with need, begging for release.

I slide my hand between my thighs, rubbing myself through my clothes. A strained moan escapes my lips.

With each touch, I imagine Kain before me, his powerful form radiating heat as he grips his massive cock in one hand. My fantasy takes over as I imagine his fingers tracing a path around my breasts, across my nipples, igniting sparks of sensation wherever they land. I slip my own fingers inside my underwear, eager to replicate the rough intensity of his touch. It's not enough, though; I want him here with me, giving me what my body craves. With one hand against the tree behind me for support, I touch myself more forcefully.

Imagining it's him instead of my own hand, I slide my fingers over my sensitive flesh, relishing in the surges of

pleasure that wash over me. What would he think, and say, if he was watching me? If he could see how he has affected me, to know that I am at his mercy?

And fuck, I am.

I imagine him watching me with glowing eyes full of possession and hunger. If he were here right now, he could do whatever he wished with me. The thought only intensifies my need for release. My hand moves faster still as I let out a guttural moan. I imagine his rough fingers entering me, and mimic the motion with my own fingers, slipping in and out of my wet heat as I surrender to the fantasy.

But it's still not enough. I want more. I imagine his thick cock pressing against my lips, demanding entrance as I eagerly oblige. My mouth waters at the thought of tasting him, feeling his hot length slide past my tongue.

I rub my thumb over my clit as I move my fingers, and the friction sends waves of pleasure shooting through me, making me writhe and arch against the tree. In my mind, he turns me, pulling my hair back and pressing himself against my hot, desperate entrance. I moan, my fingers quickening. What would he say to me if he were here right now? If he had me bent over before him, splayed and bared. Ready. *Desperate.*

I hear his voice in my mind—deep and commanding, sending shivers through my body. “*You will take it all,*” he growls. “*Every inch. You’re not a princess to me. You’re a brat. And I’m going to fuck you like one.*”

I climax hard, crying out his name as waves of pleasure crash over me. My body trembles against the tree, every inch of me consumed by the fantasy. As the waves of pleasure subside, I lean against the rough wood, grateful for its support as I try to catch my breath.

Even in my post-orgasmic haze, his powerful presence dominates my thoughts. His eyes, his voice, his aura...

I don't know his touch, though. I look down at my wrist, only now remembering that he grabbed me before he recognized me. The skin is red and hot.

He can't touch me. Whether he wants to or not, he can't touch me like I just imagined him. The images rush back, and need pulses through my sex.

I squeeze my eyes closed. *Oh, Maddy, you utter fool.*

He is wild and dangerous. A convicted prisoner of Featherblade. I shouldn't want him to touch me, ever.

But images flash before me: his fierce eyes, hard body, and wicked smile. My hand moves of its own accord, pressing against me.

I can no longer pretend this is just a fascination with the fire-fae. I want him. More than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

CHAPTER 35

MADDY



I spend the next week doing everything in my power to avoid Kain the Ruinous.

Every time anything pops into my head that has to do with him, nude or otherwise, I recite lines from a story my sister used to read to me about an ice-pixie.

It took me an entire day to realize that touching the helm this time did nothing. Maybe if I had time to study it, I would find out more, but the risk is too great. The effect the fire-fae has on me is dangerously intense. All rational thought—all logical decisions, all regard for my own safety—abandoned me in that room.

Kain *is* a villain. He said it himself. He has lost his wings, he has no regard for the gods or his allies, and he oozes barely contained violence.

I have to stay away from him.

Neither the helm nor the wolf statue are more important than surviving this place, and earning my snake *val-tivar*.

I repeat these thoughts more times than I can count over the next few days.

I work in the kitchens on Thursday, as Orgid and Inga choose to sail. I don't see Branka, but Navi comes to the kitchens. She ignores me for the most part, and I'm fine with that.

I do faint, but to my surprise, Henrik catches me as I slide toward the flagstone floors.

We learn to make a slow-acting poison that isn't lethal but slows a fae's reaction times significantly and will give a weaker fighter a pretty big advantage. I take a lot of notes and store the information as soon as I can.

Between lifting weights, running, and staying up late with Sarra to work on my shield, I sleep like the dead. After being locked out of my bedchamber, I find myself staying in Sarra's workshop most nights, though. She doesn't seem to mind. On the contrary, she wakes me with coffee and cheery conversation most mornings.

On Friday, Henrik comes over to me while I'm eating my breakfast, smiling his easy smile at me. "There's a race today, in the pool."

I raise my brows in question. "The pool?"

"At the bottom of the Silver Springs." I shake my head. I have no idea what he's talking about. "Well, with the fainting and stuff, I wasn't sure you swam, but everyone else is competing, so I thought it only fair to tell you about it." He starts to turn away.

"I can swim," I say. "But you're right. I'll drown if I faint and no one drags me back up."

He looks excited when he turns back to me. "Can you swim well? Ice-fae are supposed to be the best swimmers in *Yggdrasil*, and the other team has most of them."

"Yeah. I'm pretty good."

"If you swim with us, I'll make sure you don't drown," he says, hopefully.

I want to say yes. Competing with others in something I'm actually good at could be great. But behind Henrik, I see Orgid watching me, his eyes narrowed. Plus, I can't trust Henrik to watch me every second. It will only take one distraction, and I will never get the chance to meet my snake. "I'm sorry. I have to work on something else today," I say.

Henrik sighs, then smiles. "Okay. Let me know if you change your mind."

“You...” I start. He raises his eyebrows, prompting me to carry on. “You don’t think I’d be a liability to a team race?”

“Yeah, if you faint.” He shrugs. “But if you don’t, and you’re faster than everyone else, then you could make all the difference.”

I’m heartened by the conversation. Not enough to risk joining in and giving anybody a chance to try to drown me. But enough that I’m pretty cheerful the whole time I work on my shield in the forge. Harald has given me two metal types to test out. One of them actually gets lighter after it is fired, which means I may be able to lift a larger shield than I originally thought.

Being fixated on my work is helping me avoid thinking about Kain, but it is increasingly hard to not think about my sister.

I am too fearful to try the mirror, because each time Freydis doesn’t answer, it is harder to convince myself that it is not on purpose. I think it may be another reason I am avoiding my bedchamber and staying in the workshop so often.

Frida comes to visit once, to tell me that she is working on my staff but that it’s taking longer than she expected. She’s awkward and evasive, and my worry about having no magic for the strength display or the *Oskorela* grows.

On Monday, Erik has us all make a tincture that stops wounds from becoming infected. I have started to carry a small bag that Sarra and I made from scrap leather around with me, and I resolve to keep the little vial in it at all times.

On Tuesday, I hit seven laps around the Battleyard for the first time. There’s nobody there to share my elation, but I celebrate all the same.

I finish the frame for the shield and start to look at the leather arm straps and the best way of attaching them.

I nearly fall into the fireplace in Sarra’s workshop when I black out that evening, but she’s close enough to catch me and alter my course.

“665,” I murmur when I come around. “Survived one more.” I blink at the fireplace and then at Sarra.

“Is that how many times you’ve fainted?” she asks me.

“Yeah.”

“Huh. How about we stand more than a foot from the hearth from now on?”

“Good idea.”



I make it all the way to *glima* the following week before speaking to Kain. I know he’s been around. I can feel him watching me all over Featherblade, and he stares at me when we are in the feasting hall together. But my resolve has been strong, and I haven’t engaged with him once.

My dreams are another matter, but I can’t control them.

“Princess,” he growls at me as I walk past him into the *glima* training room. I can’t help squirming.

Forget the dreams, Maddy. Forget them.

I keep my eyes forward, and my mouth closed. I am here to train, not fantasize about crazy murderers.

CHAPTER 36

MADDY



Eldith is giving me a serious workout, and I'm so caught up in trying to guess her next move that when a gut-wrenching scream rips across the training room, it shocks us both into turning around.

Branka has pinned a shadow-fae female to the ground by her neck. The fae is beating at her arms, her face purple, but Branka isn't moving.

Shouts of "Let her go!" and "What the fuck are you doing?" fill the room. Eldith and I join the rooks rushing toward her, but Kain gets there first and barks something. I don't catch the words over everybody else's voices, but Branka looks up at him.

Everybody in the room falls silent, and the atmosphere changes completely.

There's something wrong with her eyes. They've gone completely black, like the pupils have filled the whole space.

Danger.

Run.

Familiar, instinctual fear takes hold of me. The fae on the ground, her windpipe being crushed under Branka's fingers, takes rasping, desperate breaths.

Branka gives a sudden roar, leaps to her feet, and then stamps her foot across the shadow-fae's throat. There's a sickening, gurgling sound. The fae's limbs spasm, and then she stills.

There's a beat of silence and then complete uproar takes over. Fae are moving fast, away from Branka, arming themselves if they're standing near any weapons.

This is *glima*, though, hand-to-hand combat. Staffs are in a pile by the door, inaccessible to most, and nobody has a sword or axe.

Branka is snarling and spitting, eyes flitting between everyone in the room. Kain lets out a low warning growl. The heat in the room rises notably, and that dangerous aura spreads slowly over everyone. It has a strange effect on most of the fae in the room, who lower any weapons they've found and step backward to the walls.

But not Branka. Branka looks like she's fucking *possessed*.

She's got her gaze fixed on Kain now, like they're in some sort of challenge, and neither of them is willing to make the first move. Then, with a roar that sounds more animal than human, she leaps to the side, grabbing an earth-fae male twice her size and clawing his face.

Her moves are feral, vicious, and he yells, blood welling where her nails have dug in. He shoves her hard, and he's so much bigger than her that he sends her stumbling ten feet. But she tumbles into somebody else then instantly drops to the ground, swipes their legs out from under them, and scrabbles on top of them. It's another gold-fae, a female, but she has her staff. She blasts a beaming shot of light into Branka's face. She cries out and stumbles backward, finding her feet. Her face is red, and her eyes are bulging, and fear roots my feet to the ground.

Something horrific is happening to her.

Her black, soulless eyes fix on me, and all thoughts of what may have possessed her flee, replaced only with thoughts of survival.

She screams, another sound like nothing I've ever heard, and then runs straight at me. Everything Eldith has taught me kicks in. As she reaches me, I drop to the ground, forcing her to fly over me as she lunges. She rolls to her feet so fast it's

unnatural, and for a second, I can feel something else with her. The same way I feel Kain's wolf. She can't have her *val-tivar*, can she?

But then she moves faster than my eyes can actually comprehend, and I know she does. One minute, she's three feet away, and the next minute, she is on top of me, her fingers wrapped around my throat, digging into my neck, drawing hot blood.

She's snarling, frothing at the mouth, and the bloodlust in her is unmistakable. She *is* the wolf.

My knuckles land repeatedly in her ribs, but nothing's making any difference. I hear a *thunk* and realize it's Eldith's boot against her side, and Branka turns to her, growling and hissing. The pressure on my neck loosens, and I gasp for air, the vision of her stamping across the other girl's throat filling my mind. I try to flip her with my hips, and I manage to dislodge her for a second.

That's all it takes.

The moment she is no longer touching me, Kain wraps his bare hands around her shoulders and drags her backward. I'm gulping down air, and there are black dots at the corners of my vision, but I can see the fire, red-hot flames pouring from both of his hands.

Branka screams as the flames engulf her, and then, abruptly, there is silence.

She's gone.

All that can be heard is the panting of the fae she attacked and my own rasping breaths filling the room.

"Her wolf took over," Kain growls into the tangible silence. "There is no coming back from that."

He just burned a fae alive.

I glance over at the dead shadow-fae Branka killed, then at the bleeding earth-fae. I touch my own neck, and my fingers come back hot and wet. I saw in her eyes that nothing would stop her. But surely incapacitating her, rendering her

unconscious, would have been better than *this*? My eyes drift to the pile of ash at his feet, and my stomach lurches.

Kain's eyes find mine. "I do not know why Featherblade bestowed her *val-tivar* on her now, but she was not ready. She could not control the wolf."

The bleeding earth-fae looks at Kain, looks at the pile of ash, and then strides toward the door. "She was a danger to everybody," he snaps, and then leaves the room, presumably heading toward the healing chambers. I wonder if I should do the same. I'm dizzy, and pain is starting to radiate from my neck to my chest and head.

My thoughts are spinning. Kain just incinerated a fae *within a minute*. And I dreamed of him touching me?

He just saved your life, Maddy.

Even between me and Eldith, we wouldn't have stopped Branka; nothing would have. I turn to the older earth-fae. "Thanks," I croak.

"It wasn't a fair fight," she says. Her eyes are fixed on the pile of ash that used to be a gold-fae.

I shake my head slowly. "No, it wasn't."

Branka had been unnecessarily violent since she got here. Had Featherblade caused that? Had her wolf been here for more than a week, trying to break out when she wasn't ready to control it?

I move my eyes to Kain. Or was she just unhinged? Violent by nature? Suited to a wolf *val-tivar* and driven by greed and bloodlust?

I get to my feet carefully. I don't want to be in here with this carnage anymore.

Eldith touches my elbow. "You need to go to Erik."

I nod, which hurts, then I follow her to the door. I can feel Kain's eyes on me all the way out, but I refuse to turn around.

CHAPTER 37

MADDY



Erik is already treating the earth-fae when I reach the Snake Wing, and his usual affable smile is nowhere to be seen. He looks furious.

He inspects my neck very briefly, gives me a poultice, and tells me that it's not serious enough to need his *val-tivar*'s help.

"It's mostly bruising. It will be sore for a few days. I'm sorry, but I am needed elsewhere," he says. I croak my thanks, and his bright eyes fix on mine. "Is it true that Kain killed Branka?"

I nod. *He didn't just kill her, he incinerated her.* "But I genuinely believe she'd have killed every single person in that room if she had a chance," I rasp. "Her wolf... It was out of control."

Erik's eyes bore into mine. "Death should not be the first option," he says tightly.

"He had to stop her," I say, and I can't understand why I'm defending Kain. "If she had been knocked unconscious, would her *val-tivar* have been under control when she woke up?" I ask.

Erik doesn't answer me. He just gives a heavy sigh and leaves.



I take my time making my way from the Snake Wing to Sarra's workshop. I pass a number of other fae in small

groups, talking fervently. Nobody seems to have taken this in stride, but I haven't seen Navi, and I feel if anyone will, it's her.

I'm almost back when I hear the gong from Odin's High Hall. The call to assemble. It doesn't take long for all the fae, rooks and Valkyrie alike, to get there. All except Kain, I notice immediately.

Harald stands up in front of the dais and bangs his chest plate.

"What happened today is regrettable," he says. "If a rook is not ready for their *val-tivar* and it is a particularly aggressive beast, it can result in what happened to Branka." Everybody exchanges glances, and I can see the unspoken fear.

This could happen to any of us.

"However," Harald continues, "we do not condone ending a person's life because their magic has gotten the better of them."

My brows draw together before I can mask my expression.

Erik steps up beside Harald. "You will not see *hersir* Kain for the next three days, as he carries out punishment for his rash actions. Learn from his decision. You cannot question the dead, and you cannot heal the dead."

The hall explodes with protests. All of them are defending Kain, I realize.

"She would have killed us!"

"She was crazy!"

"If he hadn't killed her, one of us would have had to!"

Brynhild holds up a hand, and the protests slowly die away. "This is the first time you have seen a Valkyrie possessed by bloodlust, and it may have alarmed you. That is the point of the bear and the wolf *val-tivar*. To strike fear into their enemies' hearts."

Is she saying we are all overreacting? That Branka was not really a threat?

“Kain’s actions were unnecessary, bordering on a loss of control of his own wolf.”

Indignation swells in me at the untruth. I’m not convinced he had to kill her, but I have no doubt he was in control.

“There will be no further discussion on the subject.” Brynhild strides away before anyone else can say anything.

“No more training today,” Harald calls, and then the other Valkyrie leave too.

I rub my hand over my face. My head is throbbing, and my thoughts are a jumbled mess. I need space, and a moment to think.

I walk to the stairs, thinking about going to the temple garden, but Navi catches my arm, stopping me as I walk past her.

“She would have killed you, you know,” she says to me.

I frown at her. “She *did* kill someone,” I say, confused.

“Where do you keep going at night? Why is that fire-fae obsessed with you?”

I yank my arm from her grip. “Why do you care?”

She doesn’t say anything, and when it’s clear I’m not going to answer her, she narrows her eyes. “You shouldn’t trust him.”

“Do you think he should have killed Branka?” I can’t help asking.

“Yes.” Her answer is immediate, and takes me by surprise, given that I know she doesn’t like Kain.

“Really?”

“I don’t believe that there should be any weak links in the most elite fighting force in *Yggdrasil*,” she says, her voice low and sharp. “Branka’s wolf was too strong. She would have been a risk as long as she lived.”

“And Kain? He is not a *weak link*.” We both know she already thinks I am.

“He regards every rook and Valkyrie here as an enemy.” Her head tilts. “Except you.”

“Why is everyone here so damned interested in me?” I ask. “Just leave me alone.”

I march off toward the nearest door, annoyed that my throat still hurts.

“I’m at the Battleyard.”

The voice is in my head as soon as I step outside, and I stop in my tracks.

Kain.

I wait, but there is no more. I sit on the top step of the main entrance to Odin’s High Hall, and once again drag my hand over my face.

He saved my life.

And he burned a fae alive.

Does he want to justify his actions to me? Because he still needs me to get into the vault, I guess. I swore to stay away from him *before* I knew what his touch was capable of. Where is the sense in going to him now?

Conflict churns through me. I genuinely don’t know if what he did was the right thing. She would have killed more fae, I’m certain. But like Erik said, you can’t heal or help somebody who is dead. Surely there was a better way?

I know he won’t hurt me. I am sure that he waited until Branka wasn’t touching me before grabbing her. In case he burned me by accident?

I look down at my wrist. The mild scald from his touch faded in a day, no mark left there at all. But... Branka burned in a moment.

With a shake of my head, I stand.

There is no point pretending that I am going to go without answers. I'm going to go to him.

CHAPTER 38

MADDY



I stare when I reach the Battleyard. Kain is chained to a column in the center of the dusty ring. I can't sense any of the other Valkyrie around—not that any of them can't hide from me easily. But it's a wide-open space, and we look to be alone.

There is no glowing fire in his eyes as I approach, and I can't feel his wolf. The long gloves with the thin chains are around his arms, which are tied behind him around the wooden post.

“So this is your punishment?” I say when I reach him. “Being tied to a post?”

Ash drifts through his eyes as he stares at me. “I do not like to stay still. They know it,” he growls. “Do you know why I killed her?”

I take a deep breath. He does want to justify his actions to me.

“Why do you want me to know?” I ask. “So that I'll help you get into the vault?”

His expression doesn't change. “I killed her because she didn't deserve the long, slow, drawn-out death that would have awaited her if I rendered her unconscious,” he says.

I stare at him. “She might have been saved,” I say, but I'm not sure I believe it.

“No. And she didn't deserve the guilt that would have accompanied the rest of her short, tormented life.”

“Guilt?”

“Whoever she was before her wolf took her, I doubt she would have wanted to know that she killed mindlessly.”

There’s a bitterness to his tone, and I tilt my head. If he is speaking the truth, then Branka wasn’t mindlessly violent before she came here.

“Is that what happened to you? Did your wolf take over? Is that why they took your wings? And now you’re living with that?”

He snarls, his body tightening against the post. “I will *never* lose control of my wolf.” His face softens just a fraction. “But I know the power of the bloodlust. I know the hunger.”

“Why would her death have been long and drawn-out?” I ask him.

“Because her wolf took her completely. It was too late to undo the bond. Erik may have been able to slow it, to give her some lucid moments, long enough to be horrified by what she had done.” He bares his teeth. “But Erik is a gods-cursed fool. I told him a week ago that this would happen. I knew she was fighting with her wolf the first time she swung for your head.” I swallow hard as he continues. “She was too powerful, and she should have been dealt with earlier. Her blood is on their hands, not mine.”

“Was there no other way to do it?” I ask.

“Than burn her?”

“Yes.”

“You would’ve preferred she had a slow death? Or that I broke her neck and tossed her body aside? Burning is a fast way to go.”

I can’t help but shudder. He wants me to believe that the killing was a mercy.

“I saw her eyes,” I say quietly. “She was no longer even fae. She was...” I pause.

“An animal?” he offers. “A mindless beast?”

I nod as I stare into his scarred, rough face.

“Bloodlust is one of the most powerful magical forces a Valkyrie can possess. It is lethal. It was either her, or everybody in that room with her. She wouldn’t have stopped with your death.”

What is it about him that makes me want to trust him? I shouldn’t. I *know* I shouldn’t.

I lift my chin. “But it was when she attacked *me* that you stepped in.”

He stares but says nothing. A strange, resolute calm falls over me. It’s easier when his power is contained, and I can’t feel his wolf. I take a risk.

“What am I to you?” I ask.

“A way into that vault,” he snarls.

“What is the helm?” I ask.

“It is mine by right,” he says.

“Because you took it first?”

“No, because it belongs to my family.”

I suck in a breath. “What is it? What does it do?” I ask.

“It is part of Eljudnir. The Helm of Embers. And, if I can find the rest of it, it is capable of great magic.”

“Will you use it to hurt anyone?” I ask slowly. I almost don’t want to know the answer.

“Yes.”

I let out a long breath, my stomach twisting.

He’s a villain. A convicted murderer, Maddy. What the fates did you expect?

“Who will you hurt?”

“All those who have wronged me, princess,” he hisses. “Every last fucking one of them.”

I shake my head, taking a step back. “I can’t help you hurt people. I won’t.”

“And I won’t lie to you,” he replies. “Every Valkyrie has blood on their hands, has taken lives, caused death.”

“Yet you’re the only one with no wings.”

His eyes narrow to slits, but I still don’t feel his wolf. “Justice is what the most powerful wish it to be, not honest retribution. This world is run by power-mad, narcissistic liars.”

I know this is true. I’ve been used by own powerful family for long enough to see how they maintain their rule. It is not with honor, or even might. It is with secrets and untruths.

“And that means you can kill indiscriminately?” I challenge.

“It means my revenge belongs to me. It is mine by right, and it will come to fucking pass.”

He doesn’t need the wolf to make the promise fill me with fear. The venom in his words, the hatred in his eyes, the rage in his taut body—I believe him. He will end those who crossed him.

I take more steps back. “I can’t help you.”

A deafening crash echoes through the air, causing both of us to whip our heads in its direction. The small wooden building that proudly displays the flags next to the Battleyard has crumbled, leaving behind a cloud of dust and debris.

I frown, but then movement catches my eye.

My blood turns to ice in my veins as a creature emerges from the wreckage. Standing at least twenty-five feet tall, it towers over the Battleyard. Its skin is an icy blue, covered in a layer of glistening white frost that crackles and crunches with each step it takes. Shards of ice serve as hair on its head, and its piercing red eyes are glowing when they fall on us.

It’s incredible. Like something out of a myth. Or a nightmare.

I am vaguely aware of Kain speaking, but what I’m seeing is so unbelievable that my whole body has just stopped working, and all I can do is watch the monster bearing down on us in utter awe.

Kain's voice blasts through the trance. "Princess, unless you want to be crushed by a Frost Giant, fucking untie me!"

CHAPTER 39

MADDY



I rush to the chains binding Kain's wrists, frantically working with trembling fingers to release him.

Even if I don't trust him, I'm not going to leave him here as a snack for a fucking monster.

The Frost Giant keeps advancing, causing the ground to tremble beneath our feet. Its icy breath billows out in puffs of mist, freezing the air around us.

"Can we reason with it?" I gasp, finally getting one of the sets of chains free.

The Giant's shadow falls over us, and it lets out a deafening roar. Fear spurs me on, and my hands are still shaking as I yank at the chains. They are almost loose, and then Kain bellows back at the beast, tearing his arms apart and destroying the last loop of metal restraining him.

With a rush of heat, I feel his wolf.

"Stand back," he growls, yanking the gloves from his hands.

He can't take on a Frost Giant alone, surely? Not without magic.

His eyes are blazing, flames soaring across his irises. I try to soak up his fight, try to force out the fear that is closing around my chest like a vise. The clamor of battle echoes in the distance, but we're alone.

The creature raises one massive arm, ready to strike. We both dart to the side, narrowly avoiding the Giant's fist as it

crashes down, demolishing the post Kain was tied to.

My mind is tumbling through thoughts at a hundred miles an hour. This is a practice ring for fighting. There are chests filled with weapons everywhere.

My eyes land on a pile of glinting metal amidst the rubble of the flag building.

“Sword!” I yell, pointing.

Without hesitation, Kain sprints toward it, Valkyrie-blessed speed making him a blur.

I scan the practice ring and find what I’m looking for. A chest of bows.

The giant follows me as I run, but an animal roar draws it back to Kain. He charges it, dodging its blows with lupine agility. I reach the chest, yank out a bow and quiver, and try to steady my hands as I nock an arrow.

The Frost Giant roars in fury as Kain lands blow after blow against its frozen skin. The ice is sizzling where his sword lands.

I loose my arrow, aiming high so I won’t hit Kain. It *thunks* into the thing’s shoulder. It swats at it, but I don’t think I’ve wounded it. It gets a lucky swipe in at Kain, sending him stumbling, but the fire-fae is only down for seconds before he’s charging again. This time he drops the sword and throws himself at the Giant’s leg.

He’s climbing the thing like a tree. I gape, then aim for the creature’s legs. The giant is turning and whirling, trying to dislodge Kain and avoid my arrows.

I’m sure we’re going to take it down; its balance seems precarious at best.

When Kain reaches its neck, he presses his hand to side of the thing’s massive head.

It howls in agony, rage and pain contorting its colossal features. It turns toward me, its eyes filled with newfound fury, then jumps in the air, landing in a crouch. The impact is so

great that the ground shakes. Kain is dislodged, and he rolls gracefully as he hits the floor.

But the Giant is closer than Kain realizes. It brings one hand down fast enough that it pins the fire-fae with a loud crunch of ice and earth.

“Kain!”

I watch in horror as the Giant raises its other icy fist, ready to deliver a fatal blow.

Time slows.

I will Kain to stand, will him to escape the Giant’s grasp, to melt the infernal thing to a fucking puddle.

But there is no movement from the prone figure.

Without a second thought, I sprint toward Kain.

It doesn’t even occur to me what I might do if I get there in time. Only that I have to try.

But something else reaches him first.

Something huge and white soars over the top of my head and smashes into the Frost Giant, sending it flying back ten feet or more. I skid to a stop at Kain’s side. He’s barely conscious, but he’s alive.

I snap my head back up to see an enormous bear, larger than I knew could exist, tearing a chunk of ice from the Frost Giant’s neck.

My ears begin to ring, and my vision narrows as the Giant howls, then collapses to the dirt.

I drop to my knees, my breath not coming properly, my senses dulled.

Something is happening to me. My skin feels too tight; my body isn’t working properly.

Kain is saying my name, and there is the beat of wings overhead, but all I can see is the behemoth of muscle and white fur before me.

Freya and the fates above.

The bear's massive black eyes lock on mine, the only real thing I can see in my blurring vision, and I know.

She's my *val-tivar*.

TO BE CONTINUED

THANKS FOR READING!

Thank you so much for reading *Of Blades and Wings*, I hope you enjoyed it!

I am truly in love with these characters and this world, and I'm so excited about what is coming next.

I actually tried to make this one a great big meaty book with less of a cliffhanger. It didn't work.

My brain, a bit like Maddy's, does what it does without my permission, and this is the result. So, I am sorry about the cliff, but trust me when I tell you, IT WILL BE WORTH IT!

The story continues in the next book, *Of Frost and Feather*, which you can get here.

You can also get exclusive first looks at artwork and story ideas, plus free short stories and audiobooks if you sign up to my [newsletter at elizaraine.com](http://elizaraine.com/newsletter).

I love you, amazing readers!!