

KATERINA MARTINEZ

REBORN



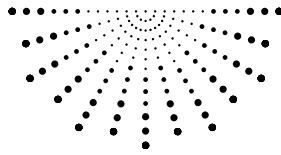
DAUGHTER OF ICE AND
MOONLIGHT

III

REBORN

DAUGHTER OF ICE AND MOONLIGHT

BOOK THREE



KATERINA MARTINEZ

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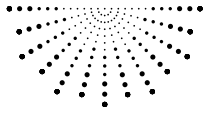
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CHAPTER ONE



I had thirteen days to right a great wrong... and I had no idea where to start. For the longest time, I had yearned to return to Arcadia. I had wanted so badly to be given a chance to fix the damage I had caused to this world and its people. Now that I was here, witnessing for the first time the true extent of that damage, I found myself entirely lost.

The forest of the Moon Children was gone, hacked apart and cut down. Windhelm, instead of a beacon of light and hope, was a darkened void that sucked the light out of the very landscape around it. How much time had passed in Arcadia since the last time I was here? Months? Years? It seemed unlikely that it had been years, but who knew how my actions had disrupted the flow of time?

I was sick to my stomach.

I felt Valerian's hand rest on my shoulder, and my instinct was to sob... but I held my tears. Crying wasn't going to fix anything. It certainly wasn't going to make me feel better, either. I turned my eyes up at him, but he wasn't looking at me; he was scanning the horizon, his eyes narrow, his gaze sharp and true.

Then he said something I wasn't expecting to hear.

"We are not alone."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Stand up, but keep your voice low, and don't make any sudden movements."

We were standing at the top of a hill, overlooking what was left of the forest and Windhelm far off in the distance. The macabre sight had been too much for me, and I had fallen to my knees. I got up now, slowly, using his

hand for support.

“What is it?” I dared to ask.

“A Souldirge,” Valerian said, keeping his voice low. “It hasn’t made itself known yet, but it’s out there.”

The word sent a shudder down my spine.

Souldirge.

I remembered that creature from the Royal Selection. It had almost torn up Lord Cyr after it broke free of its restraints. Had I not leapt into the arena to try distract it, the creature may have ripped the lordling limb from limb. The sheen of its white exoskeleton, its bony crown, its long, razor-sharp claws... I didn’t want to have to come across another one.

We had only just gotten back.

“Why would there be one of those out here?” I asked, barely whispering. “They aren’t native to the forests.”

“No,” Valerian’s voice was low, and gruff. “*They aren’t.*”

Another bit of memory came back. I had only distracted the Souldirge, but I’d had no idea how to deal with the beast. It was Valerian who had subdued it, and he hadn’t done it by brute force. I actually wasn’t sure what he had done to it. To this day, we hadn’t really talked about the Royal Selection or about his affinity with—*wait.*

We had talked about his past. He had called himself a hunter, of a sort. The kind that dealt with dark magic, curses, and dangerous or misunderstood creatures. I remembered, now. It seemed like so long ago we’d had that brief conversation, a conversation he had tried to deflect and then cut short. I had even accused him of smelling like he was wreathed in dark magic.

Like it curled off him.

Maybe it was because we had spent so much time together, or maybe the fact that we had been on Earth for so long, with so many other scents to distract my nose, I hadn’t smelled it on him since. I still couldn’t, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. It didn’t mean his abilities, and his mystery, was gone; maybe they were just suppressed.

The last time he had dealt with a Souldirge, he had put it to sleep. He could do that again, *right?* The tension in his muscles, the punctuation in his words, and the way his eyes were darting left and right told me he wasn’t so confident in his abilities as he had been that day, during the Royal Selection.

“We need to move,” he said, “Slowly.”

“Move?” I asked, “Move where?”

“Anywhere. That way.”

“Are you sure one of those things is out there?”

“It’s definitely out there, and it’s hungry.”

That was enough for me to decide not to stick around. I started moving down the hill, away from the general direction Valerian thought the creature was in, and away from the place where the portal remained. It was still there, though it wasn’t shimmering anymore; it was little more than a haze, a distortion of the air around it.

It would remain that way for a while, maybe for a few days, unfurling only if someone got near enough to it to make it open. Going back through it had crossed my mind at least once, especially considering there was a hungry creature out there, somewhere, whose attention we didn’t want. It was only a fleeting thought, though. Valerian and I were exactly where we were supposed to be.

There was no going back, now.

The only problem was, we were still spent. Though we were back in Arcadia, my Fae magic had only just begun to recharge. I wouldn’t be back to fighting form until at least the morning, and Valerian was in the same boat. Our best bet right now was to walk, to come down the hill, and begin our trek toward... anywhere that wasn’t here.

And anywhere but home.

Windhelm had changed. Neither of us were truly ready to deal with what was waiting for us there, where I could only imagine there were plenty more horrible revelations to be discovered. Because already I knew, deep in my gut, that something terrible had happened at the palace.

How could my parents have allowed the forest to have been cut down like this? My mother is a Moon Child herself. She would never have let her family’s ancestral home be desecrated like this. It didn’t make sense, and thinking about it only made the sickness I was feeling even worse.

“Act naturally,” Valerian said, keeping his voice low, “But know that we are being followed.”

Those words made my blood run cold. “It knows we’re here?”

“It knew the moment we crested the hill. The Souldirge’s sense of smell is unparalleled in Arcadia, and we smell like *Earth*.”

“How long will it follow us?”

“It’s hard to say, but if we let it know that we’ve detected it, it will attack. We need to keep walking, pretend we don’t know it’s there, and avoid any

dark areas.”

Valerian then grunted, as if he had just thought of something.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Strange that this creature would be hunting in broad moonlight like this. It must be starving.”

“And it could be anywhere...” I said, trailing off.

White, glistening snow blanketed the landscape around us, and while the trees were in fact gone, their stumps were covered in that same, shiny snow and ice that covered the ground. This creature, what I remembered of it, was entirely cased in a white exoskeleton that shone like it was made of glossy ice. It could have been hiding in plain sight, and I wouldn’t have had a single chance at spotting it.

That being said, if it was following us, then it was behind us, and I wasn’t about to turn around and check for it.

“This isn’t the welcome I wanted,” I said.

“You expected something else?” Valerian asked.

“I didn’t expect anything, but I had hoped for something better...” I trailed off. “Being captured by Windhelm’s Swords would’ve been preferable to this.”

“How would that have been preferable?”

“Because it would have been *normal*. Windhelm’s Swords frequently patrol portal sites. They know when they’re supposed to open, and they station Fae at those portals to try to keep human incursions to a minimum. They should have been waiting for us. The fact that they’re not there just makes this all... worse.”

Valerian took a deep breath, then exhaled. “This is not the place I expected to return to, either. I have always known of this forest’s existence, and I have never known Windhelm to be anything less than a glimmering jewel in the snow... even if that jewel stood for everything that was wrong with the rest of the Winter Kingdom.”

“How could you say that?”

“We’ve been over this, Amara.”

“I know, and I know I’ve lived a life of privilege and luxury, but my parents... they’ve always done their best to foster a system of equality, and justice.”

“And freedom?”

I frowned. “That’s unfair.”

“You ran away from the castle because they wanted you to marry someone you didn’t want to marry. They didn’t give you a choice in the matter. I think it’s fair to say you’ve witnessed some of the oppression many of the Fae who live outside of the castle’s walls feel every single day that goes by in this place. Arcadia isn’t the magical wonderland humans fantasize it to be.”

My frown turned into a scowl. “Is a political discussion really what we should be doing right now?”

“The only thing we should be doing right now is trying to make it to that other hill, and making sure the creature following us doesn’t know we’ve spotted it.”

“Why that hill?”

“Because we’ll be able to see a little more of the area around us. I don’t know where the road is, exactly, but we may be able to see it from up there. Once we can see it, we can start moving toward it. Hopefully, the closer we get to the road, the less inclined the Souldirge will be to keep following us.”

I sighed. “Alright, fine. I guess we should be used to being stalked by now. Will it lose interest eventually?”

“Not likely. Not until we reach the road. If we reach the road.”

“If?”

“The Souldirge will attack when it feels like it can grab one of us and flee without being attacked in return. They’re opportunistic hunters. So long as we stay close to each other and don’t—*stop*.”

Valerian shoved a hand across my chest, forcing me to stop in my tracks. My heart leapt into my throat, and my heart started instantly pounding against the sides of my neck. “What is it?” I dared ask.

“Don’t move a muscle,” he said. “I’ve just seen a Souldirge skirt behind the hill we’re about to climb.”

“But that’s in front of us... how did it get there so fast?”

“It’s not the same creature.”

The blood drained from my face. “There are *two*?”

“Yes. Be as quiet as you can, and stay perfectly still.”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

I didn’t know where to look. I couldn’t see either of the two creatures which were stalking us, but if what Valerian had just said was true, then there was one in front of us, and one behind us. Two Souldirges; one for each of

us.

Valerian carefully stepped in front of me, moving slowly but with conviction. I dared turn my head and scan the way we had come. What I saw back there turned my blood to ice. It wasn't a creature—no. What I saw were our tracks, two sets of footprints in the snow... followed by a third set of much larger, much more bestial footprints. The kinds of marks a large creature with long limbs, long fingers, and claws might make.

But no Souldirge.

"I can't see it," I said. "Why can't I see it?"

"It's using the terrain to mask it's presence."

"But there's nothing back here! No trees, no rocks. How can it be hiding in plain sight like this?"

"Now is not the time to consider that. You need to run."

"Me? What about you?"

"You can turn into a wolf and maybe outrun them. I can't. I'll distract them and draw them that way, you run in the opposite direction."

"That's your plan? Really?"

"It's the only one I have."

"It's a stupid plan, Valerian."

"I'm not important, Amara. Not as important as you are. You're the only one who can set things right. If I have to give my life up so that you can do that, I will. You go that way, you get into your wolf form, you put your head down, and you start running for the both of us. Don't stop. Don't ever stop running, do you understand?"

My heart skipped faster, thumped harder. Tears came this time, totally unbidden. "I'm not... leaving you here to die."

"We don't have a choice. You don't have a choice."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Amara, we don't have the time for this."

I was about to reply, when I heard a sound coming from the other side of the hill we were about to climb. It had sounded like a crack, followed by a thud. I heard something hiss, a sound that made my already freezing blood run even colder. There was another thud, another crack, and what sounded like a scuffle.

I wasn't sure what was happening, but none of it was good. Valerian and I found ourselves backing away from the hill, watching the source of the noise that had died down as suddenly as it had been initially heard.

“What was that?” I dared ask.

“I’m not sure,” Valerian said. “Stay behind me.”

My worst fears were realized when a creature rose to the top of the hill. At first, all I saw were antlers. I was expecting to see the hunched form of a Souldirge follow those large antlers, until I realized, this creature was way too tall to be one of those beasts.

Watching on bated breath, my eyes widened, and my heart surged as the creature that crested the hill wasn’t a Souldirge at all... but a Maukibou, tall, and white, and majestic against the full moon behind it. The creature padded the ground, warm puffs of breath issuing out of its nostrils. Its white fur was scraggly in places, patchy, and dirty, and one of its antlers was busted and broken, but it was unmistakably him.

“Colbolt?” I dared.

The Maukibou padded the ground once more and lowered its head.

“Colbolt!” I yelled, and I broke past Valerian and sprinted toward the creature, climbing the hill like a mad woman and throwing my arms around the warm, fluffy, white Maukibou’s neck. “It’s really you,” I cried, tears spilling from my eyes. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Colbolt snorted. When I pulled away, I realized he had a series of nasty scars down the side of his face. The scars went past one of his eyes, which looked milky, and unseeing. I rubbed him gently along his mottled neck, feeling more scar tissue under my hand.

“What happened to you?” I asked, my heart breaking. “Have you been out here all this time?”

Another snort. He turned his head, giving me his good eye. In it, I saw recognition, determination, and happiness. Without having to say the words I knew, he *had* been here, in this forest, since we left... waiting for me to come back. Who knows what he had seen, or what monster he had run afoul of to have been left with those scars.

Valerian joined us at the top of the hill. He also patted Colbolt on the neck, and Colbolt rubbed his cheek along Valerian’s hand. “That’s a good boy,” Valerian said. “Thank you, my friend.”

Colbolt lowered his head, padded the ground, and snorted again. “I think he wants us to get on,” I said.

Wasting no time, Valerian climbed on Colbolt’s back. He extended his hand, helping me to do the same. When we were both settled, Colbolt turned around and started moving down the hill.

“Where is he taking us?” Valerian asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

Colbolt grunted.

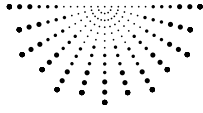
“I could be wrong,” Valerian said, “But I think that means, *somewhere safe.*”

“I hope that’s true,” I said. “I could do with a rest.”

“Wherever we’re going, we would probably do well to remember... this isn’t the same Arcadia we left behind. There are going to be dangers and monsters everywhere.”

“I know... but if Colbolt survived out here, waiting for us all this time, then there’s hope, too. That’s worth fighting for.”

CHAPTER TWO



I opened my eyes with a start, my heart wedged in my throat. I blinked rapidly, trying to get my bearings. Had I fallen asleep? Turning my head up slightly, I found myself staring at Valerian's chin. He had his arms wrapped around my waist, and I was leaning against his body. Both of us were bobbing gently up and down as Colbolt carried us along the frozen wasteland the Winter Kingdom had become.

Valerian gently tilted his head down. "You're awake," he said.

"I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep," I croaked. "How long was I out?"

"A few hours."

"Hours?"

"You were clearly more tired than you knew."

Valerian went to remove his arms from around my waist, but I placed my hands on top of his. "No," I said, "It's okay."

"I only wanted to make sure you wouldn't fall... and that you would be comfortable."

"I was clearly too comfortable." I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have fallen asleep and left you to keep watch."

"Don't apologize. Colbolt has been alert enough for all three of us."

I smiled at the back of the Maukibou's head, then rubbed his furry neck. "He's a good boy."

Colbolt grunted, warm puffs of steam issuing out of his nose.

"He has been waiting for us," Valerian said.

"That's incredible."

"It is when you consider how long we have been gone."

"Do you know how long it's been since we left?"

“By Colbolt’s estimates, over a year.”

“A year? Colbolt told you that?”

“He’s told me a lot of things... he has seen hardship and strife the likes of which he could not have imagined the day he was made to leave our side.”

“Colbolt... what happened?”

“Arcadia has changed. Colbolt’s accounts are limited to his perceptions, so he couldn’t tell me how exactly things have changed, but he was there the day Windhelm’s troops arrived at the edge of the forest with intent to cut it down.”

“Windhelm did this...”

“First they destroyed the trees, then they drove out the Moon Children, and then they unleashed a number of Souldirges into what remained of the forest to ensure nothing else would live here.”

“Did he see where the Moon Children went?”

“East, away from the castle, and away from what remained of their ancestral glade. It was a mass exodus of wolves and Fae.”

“Radulf...” I said to myself, shutting my eyes. “Why would Windhelm have done this?”

“I’m not sure, and neither is Colbolt. He chose to remain in the forest even after the Souldirges were introduced. He’s been fighting them off ever since, but there are many of them, and with each fight they take more and more of him. He is glad we came back when we did... he is glad to see his friend.”

I rubbed Colbolt again, cringing slightly as my fingertips touched what felt like scar tissue underneath some of his mottled fur. The poor thing... to have waited for us for so long, fighting off those horrible creatures and surviving the injuries they dealt. It made my heart break all over again.

I caused this.

I did.

“Do you know where he’s taking us?” I asked.

“Somewhere safe, as far as I can tell. We seem to have avoided the main roads, but we appear to be headed in the direction of Lysa. Why, I can’t say, and neither will he.”

“He must know where he’s going, right? You didn’t ask him to bring us to Lysa.”

“I didn’t, but Lysa may be the best place for us right now.”

“Why Lysa?”

“Fate changed around us, Arcadia is different, but I can still feel my connection to the safehouse I keep in the city. I’m not yet strong enough to reach it with my magic, I’ll need to sleep first. But if we can get to it, we’ll have somewhere safe to hold out.”

“I’m not sure hiding out is the best play, Valerian. We have thirteen days to fix this mess... maybe less, now.”

“I know how much time we have, but we have no magic, no weapons, and no allies. We aren’t going to accomplish anything in this state.”

Colbolt snorted.

“You’re right,” Valerian said, “We do have allies. But I’m not about to ask you to go to war for us.”

Another grunt.

Valerian smiled to himself. “Your friend is stubborn. Like you.”

I couldn’t help but admire the connection he and Colbolt seemed to have. It almost looked like Valerian understood exactly what Colbolt was saying, even though the Maukibou couldn’t actually speak. It was an impressive feat, and thinking about it allowed me a moment of distraction; a happy thought to chew over instead of all the doom and gloom unfolding around us.

It was then that I felt something, a strange tingling sensation at the very edge of my senses. I wasn’t sure why, but that feeling reminded me of my grandmothers. It smelled like cinnamon, like old books, like perfume. *Like Tallin*, who had given up his immortality so that I could make it to Arcadia at all.

I was thankful for them all.

Pepper, Evie, Helen, Tallin.

Without them, Valerian and I wouldn’t be here right now. We wouldn’t even have survived on Earth. Where would we have gone upon stumbling out of that portal if my grandmothers hadn’t been able to remember who I was? Maybe the bonds of family were stronger than I had been originally told.

Which meant maybe, just maybe, my mother, father, and brother still knew who I was; all I had to do was find them.

Valerian tapped me on the arm, and nodded up ahead. Colbolt was slowly trotting down a curved hill, at the base of which, nestled against the rockface, was something that looked a little like a cottage. It was built right up against the wall and made of the same dark wood common in the forest of the Moon Children.

A small, warm firelight glinted by its door, lending a little illumination to

the otherwise covered area.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Valerian said, “But Colbolt has brought us right to it.”

Colbolt came to a stop a little way away from the cottage. I perked up, took a deep breath, and caught a scent in the air that made my eyes widen. I turned my head, glanced at Valerian, and unwrapped myself from him in an instant.

“Amara, what are you doing?” he asked, as I slid off Colbolt’s back.

But I couldn’t reply. Frantic, I let myself fall to the floor next to Colbolt, and I dashed toward the door to the cottage, letting that warm, sweet, almost flowery scent fill my nostrils. My heart was racing, my mind spinning out of control.

When I reached the door, I started pounding on it with my fists. My nerves had gotten the better of me, and I had lost almost all control. When the door opened, the aroma I was bathing in bloomed, as did the smile on my face.

“*Gullie...*” I breathed.

The Pixie stood before me, fully as tall as I was, her green hair held in a tight ponytail, her translucent butterfly wings tucked behind her back. She was beautiful, a sight for sore eyes. Seeing her made my heart surge, but it also made my entire body freeze.

I wasn’t sure whether to leap into her arms and hug her or get ready for one hell of a telling off. Gullie wasn’t in the scolding mood, though. She reached out to me, wrapped her arms around my neck, and pulled me close.

That powerful Pixie scent was all I could smell right now. It was such an intoxicating smell, a scent that reminded me of warmth, of care, of *home*.

“You’re here...” Gullie said against my shoulder. “You’re *actually* here.”

I pulled back and stared at her. “Did you think I was dead?”

“No, just gone. *Exiled*. We all thought that.”

I frowned at her. “Who’s all?”

From a room in the back of the cottage came another woman. Lithe, tall, her hair the deep blue of an icy lake. Unlike most Fae, she didn’t have antlers on her head, but her canines were sharp, giving her a wolf-like look. “Both of us,” said my auntie Melina, her voice husky and low, “And Colbolt, of course.”

My eyes watered. “I’m so happy to see you both,” I said, shaking my head. “What... what are you all doing out here? And how do you know who I

am?”

“Long stories,” Gullie said, “Well, actually, not long stories at all. We’re your godparents.”

“Godparents?”

“It’s a human tradition. Your mom insisted you have them—”

“—not without *significant* pushback from the nobility,” Melina interjected, rolling her eyes. “Apparently, we’re the first set of godparents in all of Arcadian history. The court lost its *damn* mind.”

“They did, but that’s besides the point. The point is, your mother chose us to take on that role for her. As far as we can figure, that protected us from the changes Fate made to the Winter Kingdom.”

I took a beat. “Wait, you know about all that?”

Gullie and Melina exchanged confused looks. “Uh... it’s all we’ve been able to talk about for the past year.”

“Oh... right.”

“You’ve been gone for a long time, Amara. Colbolt... he saw you fall off the back of that cliff and into a portal. As far as anyone knew, you were never coming back. But we never lost hope, and now you’re here!”

“Colbolt has been patrolling the forest, looking for you,” said Melina. “Every day he goes out, sometimes he comes back injured. We’ve tried, and tried, and tried to get him to stay here with us, but he’s—”

“—stubborn, like me?” I asked. “I’ve heard.”

“Worse than you,” Gullie said, “Worse than even your father. I’m sure Colbolt could give him a run for his money.”

“What about my parents?” I asked, “And Radulf? Where are they?”

Gullie’s smile weakened. “That’s... well, we should talk about all that.”

“After you tell us who *that* is,” said Melina, and she pointed across my shoulder at Valerian, who was standing a few feet behind me.

“Oh,” I said, my cheeks flushing with warm blood. “That’s Valerian. He’s my... friend.”

Valerian remained silent, and stoic, his arms folded in front of his chest.

Melina’s eyebrow rose. “Friend?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” I said. “An *actually* long story.”

“I hope you’re ready to tell it,” Gullie said, “It seems like we need to get each other up to speed on what’s happened to us.”

I nodded. “Right, but just... what happened to my parents? Are they...” I paused, then dared, “Alive?”

Gullie sighed, then nodded. "They are."

I frowned at her. "Why do you say that like it's a bad thing?"

"Because... they've been exiled. They were sent away a long time ago, forced never to return."

"Wait... they're gone?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know where they are, and I lost contact with them a long time ago. Your brother, too, but his story was a little different."

"Radulf? What happened to him?"

"He remembered you. As soon as that happened, his pack turned on him. They rejected his story that the Princess was an impostor, and they drove him out. I'm not sure where he went. No one is."

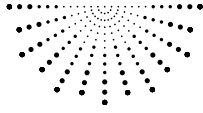
"*Former* princess..." Melina put in.

Gullie shut her eyes. "Right. *Former*."

"*Former*?"

My Pixie auntie looked up at me again. "She's Queen now, Amara. Malys Wolfsbane is *Queen* of Windhelm."

CHAPTER THREE



The room started spinning, and I had to sit down. It hadn't been the news that my parents had been exiled, or that Radulf had been run out of his own pack not to be seen or heard from again. It had been the thought that this... this *crone*, Malys, was now Queen of Windhelm. She had taken my home, my mother's seat, and my last name.

She had taken everything from me.

It was Valerian who swooped in quickly enough to catch me as I toppled, ensuring I sat down comfortably on one of the nearby chairs. Gullie asked Melina to fetch me a glass of water. She then asked Valerian to go and make sure the large side door was open for Colbolt to come into his barn.

When Melina handed me the glass of water, I made the mistake of downing it, instantly regretting my decision. Arcadian water was always ice cold, and I had never had a problem with it, but having been on Earth for as long as I had been, I had lost my resistance to it. The brain-freeze was instant, and it took me a moment to get over it.

"I remember that face," Gullie said, "It took me a while to get used to the cold water here, too."

"This shouldn't hurt," I said.

"Don't worry about it. Just rest, we can't have you passing out on us."

I nodded. "I won't, I won't. That just... that was a lot to process. I don't think I've slept in like, a day—I certainly haven't eaten in a while. There's a lot going on."

"And I don't think we're done yet," Melina said, "But I'll go and get you and your friend some food while Gullie fills you in on what you've missed. Is that okay?" she asked, gently squeezing Gullie's shoulder.

Gullie placed her hand on Melina's and nodded. "I'll take care of this," she said, a soft smile gracing her elfin face.

Melina left us both to speak, to which I gave Gullie my full attention. "It's bad, isn't it?" I asked.

My Pixie aunt nodded. "It's bad," she said, then she shook her head. "I still remember where I was and what I was doing the moment I realized the world I was in wasn't... right."

"What... what were you doing?" I ventured.

"I was with your mother at the castle. Malys... she was getting fitted for a dress your mother was going to make."

I felt my entire body tighten. "My mother was going to make her a dress?"

"Your mother didn't know who Malys really was at the time. She thought Malys was her daughter... we all thought she was the rightful princess. For us, life didn't really change. Not at first, anyway. I couldn't tell you why I came around before your mother did, but that moment was... shattering. I felt myself panic in a way I had never panicked before. I left the room in a hurry, shut the door behind myself, and basically hyperventilated for a few minutes."

"Gullie..." I trailed off.

"It was like having an out-of-body experience. Like I was looking at myself, only I had flipped upside down; the whole world had. I didn't know how I knew, but I was totally convinced that the girl in that room with your mother was an impostor."

"What did you do?"

"I wanted to tell your mother, but there was no separating her from Malys. Every moment I spent in that room after that was just... I had only felt terror like that a few times in my life before. After what happened to your mother and father with the Veridian, I thought that part of my life was over. But as I stood there, remembering you... remembering the day you were born, thinking about all the times we spent together, the games we played, how you painted your antlers *green* that one time."

"I remember that..."

"We all do. Your father was furious."

"Because we were hosting another family that night. That's why I did it."

Gullie shook her head, a mischievous smile painted across her face. "You were a rebel the moment you were born. I tried to warn your parents, but they

wouldn't listen; just like I knew your mother wouldn't listen to me if I tried to convince her of what I'd just learned. I had no idea that I wouldn't even be given a chance to do that."

"I don't understand."

"The moment I set foot back in the room where your mother and Malys were, all hell broke loose. Your mother didn't recognize me. She and Malys called for the guards. If I hadn't been my regular Pixie size at the time, I don't think I would've made it out of the castle alive. I flew as fast as I could, back to my apartment, hoping Melina wasn't about to call the guards on me too. I was lucky... she had snapped out of it at the same time I had."

"Do you have any idea why that happened?"

"Most of what we have are suspicions and theories. As far as we can tell, Melina became aware of Malys' deception at the same time that I did because of our bond with each other. When your mother and father eventually learned the truth, it was at the same time, too. I still remember getting her message in the dead of night, only a few hours after I came around."

"It happened on the same day?"

Gullie nodded. "As far as we can tell, yeah. But Malys must have been aware of it, because your mother was arrested moments after she reached out to me. Arrested, then banished."

"I don't understand. How could Malys have done that? She was only a princess; my mother and father were the sitting royals."

"As soon as they both realized something terrible had happened, the entire world seemed to forget them. From that moment on, they weren't King and Queen of Windhelm anymore, and Malys became the only royal. Your father tried to fight her, but she was too strong, and there were too many soldiers. He begged your mother to flee, but she couldn't leave his side, so she fought too. They lost."

Tears threatened to spill down my cheeks. "They were forgotten... like me."

"Forgotten and exiled, but not killed. Maybe she didn't have the power to kill them."

"You said you lost contact with them?"

"I did. Your mother and I had a telepathic link. She broke it that night, after I heard Malys give the order to send them away. She was probably afraid Malys would use our connection to get to me. Melina and I had to sneak out of the city. Lucky for us, we knew ways of getting out no one else

did. I wanted to stay and help your mother, but I knew she would've wanted me to... well, do this."

"This?"

"Come out here, find a quiet place, figure out how to put a stop to all this... find you. We found Colbolt out here, injured, wandering the forest. After we nursed him back to health, Melina was able to speak to him, and he told us what he saw. We've been here ever since, waiting."

"Because you aren't royals, and you couldn't open a portal to Earth."

"We tried looking for natural portals, but it was no use."

"The portal we used to get us here was a natural portal, but one that could only be opened from Earth. My magic was spent when I got there, and it wouldn't recharge. I would've had no way of getting back if my grandmothers hadn't helped me."

"Your grandmothers..." Gullie beamed. "Of course, they remembered you."

"The crone's magic hadn't touched them. Whatever happened here, it didn't reach Earth."

Gullie frowned. "Crone?"

I shook my head. "Malys Wolfsbane. She is no princess."

"You know her?"

I swallowed hard. "Gullie... I... caused all this."

Her eyes narrowed further. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm the reason all this is happening. I'm the idiot that gave the crone a happy memory and ruined everyone's lives."

"Wait, that's wrangling my brain. You gave a crone a happy memory?"

"It's how all this started," I said, sighing. "I didn't want to be in the Royal Selection, I didn't want to have to marry those stupid Lords. One night, while I was asleep in the village of the Moon Children, this woman came to me in my dreams. She told me she could take me out of the Selection, all I had to do was give her a powerful memory."

Gullie was about to speak, but I stopped her.

"I know what you're going to say," I said, "I'm stupid. I shouldn't have done that. I know all that now, trust me. I've spent the better part of... however long I spent on Earth being hunted down by Fate itself for what I did. The only reason I'm here right now is because I made a deal with it."

"You are saying a lot of words," Gullie said.

"I know I am, but you need to stay with me. This creature, this fate

creature, it gave me thirteen days to find the crone and deal with her. To reverse whatever magic she used. After that, it'll come for me again... and this time there will be no stopping it. I can run, and I can hide, but eventually, it'll find me, and it'll do what it needs to do."

"Tie up the loose end..." Gullie said, her voice low, and soft. "That means the spell is imperfect!"

"What?"

Gullie shot to her feet. "Melina!" she yelled, "You were right! The spell is imperfect!"

"See?!" she shouted from the kitchen. "I told you!"

I stood up. "I figured that out too. Colbolt didn't forget me, and Tallin—he forgot me for a minute, but he remembered who I was pretty quickly."

"We didn't know anything about a crone or a memory," Gullie said, "But we figured it had to have been really powerful magic. Like, impossible magic. That kind of thing is hard to pull off perfectly."

"The most I can figure is, she manipulated the hand of Fate somehow."

"No, it's bigger than that. I think Malys tried to create a new reality, one in which she's Princess of Windhelm. She tried to make that reality assert itself, but something went wrong, and both realities are fighting each other. That's why we can remember you, while other people can't. What I still don't know is exactly *what* went wrong with her spell—why it didn't work as she wanted it to."

Valerian returned at that exact moment, as if my immediate thought of him had summoned him. Looking across at him, standing by the door to the cottage we were in, I knew exactly why the spell Malys had laid out hadn't worked like she had expected it to.

He and I had a bond.

A Fate Bond.

At the time, I hadn't known it existed, and neither had he, which meant she may not have known it had existed either. Maybe if I hadn't been bound to Valerian, her spell would have worked, and I wouldn't be here right now. But the fact that Fate had written our names together in the stars was, it seemed, the reason why I still had a chance at making all of this right.

"I think I know," Valerian said.

Gullie looked over at him. "I don't think we've been properly introduced," she said.

He shook his head and entered the cottage. "My apologies," he said,

taking a soft bow. “My name is Valerian, and I was once part of the Royal Selection.”

“Ah...”

His eyes moved across to me. “It isn’t enough that we were bound by Fate, Amara,” he said.

“It isn’t?”

“You share a bond with many people. Your parents, your family—even your friends. This is a luxury many of us do not have. But that alone wouldn’t have been enough. Our bond is different, written by Fate’s hand itself without any intervention or urging from either mortal or Fae.”

“What are you saying?”

“There is a word the Fae use when describing such a bond. An ancient word full of power and meaning... we call it the Bond of the Bel—”

“—*don’t you dare finish that word*,” Gullie shrieked.

Valerian looked stunned. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

“I’m not offended,” she said, composing herself. “But the last time someone used that word, Arcadia was very nearly destroyed.”

“Gullie...” I said, taking her hand. “It’s okay. I already know.”

“You do?”

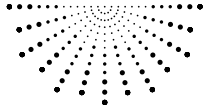
“I figured it out on Earth. He’s my *belore*; My soulmate.”

Gullie’s expression turned desperate. “Why does this always happen to your family? Naturally occurring soulmate bonds are meant to be rare!”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, “But I’m done waiting around.” I looked up at Valerian, who nodded.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “We take the fight to Malys.”

CHAPTER FOUR



I barely registered having slept. I had been beyond exhausted, fueled only by stubbornness and a burning desire, a need to see this thing through. When I woke up the following morning, I woke up thinking about how that would be my undoing if I wasn't careful.

I had, even in recent memory, been known to be a little reckless at times. Well, more than a little. If I wanted to repair the damage I had done to this world, the damage I had done to the strings of fate themselves, I was going to have to think, and act with logic above impulse.

Though Valerian and I slept in the same room, it was in different beds. Not that either of us were in any condition to... revisit... what we had done a few nights ago—*had it really only been a few nights?* Not with Gullie and Melina around, not when there was so much else going on.

There would be time for that later.

Sometime.

Hopefully.

By the time morning's light broke through the window, Valerian was already awake. I saw him lying on his back, one arm tucked behind his head, one knee propped up. He was thinking, a pensive expression on his face.

I watched him for a moment, trying not to let him know I had woken up. There was a calmness to him, a kind of serenity I should probably have expected. Today we were taking the fight to Malys, we were going to Windhelm. He didn't seem bothered by the idea, though. One might say he was entirely unfazed.

But I knew the truth, at least I liked to think I did. Valerian was a man who exuded confidence. His mind was always at work, always puzzling

things out, trying to stay one step ahead of the thing he was hunting, or the thing that was hunting him. That didn't mean he wasn't afraid.

He was.

We all were.

I was about to speak when I heard footsteps coming up to the door to our room. The door wasn't closed, but Gullie—who was on the other side of it—knocked without pushing it open all the same. “Rise and shine,” she said, “It's time to go kick some impostor arse.”

Valerian took a deep breath in through the nose, exhaled, and turned his head to the side. He smiled at me, soft and reassuring. “Your godmother seems eager.”

“A little too eager,” I said, making sure to be loud enough that Gullie could hear me.

“Hey,” she said, “The mortal peril you faced on Earth may have kept you on your toes while you were there, but I've been sat on my hands here for a year. I'm ready for some action.”

“Action,” Valerian said, his smile turning into a grin.

I nodded, sat upright, and stretched. “Action,” I agreed. “I guess there's no time like the present.”

“That's the spirit!” Gullie said, “Mel made breakfast, so come and eat, and we'll make for the castle as soon as we're done.”

That, however, wasn't a great idea, as we discussed over breakfast. It seemed a little preemptive, and a little presumptuous of us, that we would just be able to walk up to the castle without running into problems. The first one being, what in the world did we expect we would do once we got there?

Were we going to kill every guard in Windhelm until we got to Malys? Then what? Fate had given me a chance to make things right. What if by killing Malys we ruined our only chance at actually fixing whatever damage she caused?

And also, why in the hell were we talking about *killing people*?

“I didn't know Pixies were so bloodthirsty,” Valerian said, after he finished the last bit of sausage on his plate.

“We aren't,” Gullie said, blushing slightly. “I don't mean to come off as a mass murderer, or anything. I really am a lovely person.”

“She is,” Melina said, “I can vouch for her. She'd literally never hurt a fly.”

“And that's saying something, because in my Pixie form, flies are

basically the size of dogs to me.”

“So, what’s with all the bloodshed talk?” I asked.

“Look, I wasn’t suggesting we actually *kill* anyone.”

“Just seriously injure them,” Valerian ventured.

“Exactly... or, okay, maybe not seriously. Just injure them enough that they can’t block our path anymore.”

“Okay,” I paused, “So, the plan is... we get to Windhelm, injure the Swords that stand in our way, then fight our way to Malys... and we convince her to make everything right again?”

“The last part I can get behind,” Melina said, “But the fighting our way to her... I think we’re going to need stealth, here. There are only four of us.”

A defiant snort came from the open window to where Colbolt was standing.

“*Five* of us,” Melina added, correcting herself. “There’s no way we get into that castle without being detected, and there’s probably no way we get past all the swords that’ll be standing between us and the Queen.

“She’s right. You don’t just *walk* into Windhelm these days,” Gullie said.

“You don’t?” I asked.

She shook her head. “There are swords posted at both sides of the bridge. They scan every carriage that goes in and out, traders need special papers to get through... it’s bad.”

“I had no idea.”

“There’s also the matter that... well,” Melina paused, “We’re not exactly *armed*. Even if we wanted to get in using force, what are we supposed to do against fully armed and armored guards? I’m happy to hurl harsh language at them, but I’m not sure that’ll get the four of us very far.”

Another annoyed snort from the window.

“Sorry, *five*,” Melina added.

“We have magic, right?” I asked, “I can already feel mine moving through me again. That should give us an edge.”

“The guards’ shields give them protection against magic. It was one of Malys’ first commandments. She rounded up as many spellcasters as she could find, had them brought to Windhelm, and put them to work.”

“Whether they liked it or not...” Gullie added.

Melina nodded. “We have to assume our magic will just be a nuisance to them more than anything else.”

I stared at my empty plate and exhaled. “This is looking more and more

hopeless by the minute,” I said. “There has to be something we can do, though.”

“At the risk of sounding like I condone the idea of hurting otherwise innocent people,” said Valerian, “I may have... something... that can help.”

I frowned at him. “What’s that?”

Valerian stood, flexed his right hand, and reached out across from him. For a moment I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but then I remembered. Gullie and Melina watched as Valerian’s arm began to disappear, fingers first. He seemed to be rummaging around somewhere, a concentrated look on his face.

When he pulled his arm back, he had a sword gripped in his hand.

Melina shot to her feet. “What!” she shrieked. “How did you do that?”

Valerian grinned as he examined the blade in his hand. “*It’s still there,*” he said, almost like he was muttering to himself.

“Your safehouse,” I said, “In Lysa, right?”

Valerian nodded. “I didn’t think I’d be able to reach it.”

“Wait a second,” Gullie said, “Explain to me what’s happening here.”

“I think it’s best if I just show you,” Valerian said, and after he set the sword down on the table, he stuck his hand back into the ether, where it disappeared again. His eyebrows furrowed while he worked, his eyes narrowing. When he retrieved his arm this time, it came back with a suit of what looked like black leather armor with bits of metal at the shoulders and chest.

He set that down on the ground, then reached into nothing again where he began to produce weapons.: daggers, axes, a polearm, more armor. Gullie and Melina seemed to have absolutely no idea how he was doing what he was doing. I didn’t either, but I also didn’t question it. I just watched, astonished, and impressed.

“That should probably do it,” he said, after pulling out a second sword.

In minutes we had gone from having no weapons, to standing in front of a veritable armory. “Holy shit,” I said.

“*Language!*” Gullie snapped. “It is impressive, though. How did you do that?”

“It’s a simple spell,” Valerian said, “One that allows me to retrieve items I keep in a safehouse in Lysa. I was afraid it had been compromised, but it’s all still there.”

“Can you only retrieve stuff through it?” asked Melina.

“I can put things back,” he said, “I’ve never tried going through myself. I’m not sure if I could... or if I’d even survive the trip.”

“It’s still a neat trick.”

“I’d be happy to teach you all... assuming we survive this.”

“That’s grim,” said Gullie, “But not entirely incorrect.”

I shook my head. “If it comes down to us really having to use these,” I said, “I think we would really need to consider the decisions that got us to that point.”

“Because we’d be in deep trouble if we found ourselves in that situation?” asked Melina.

“Exactly. I think we should still do everything we can to get in undetected and sneak our way up to the false Queen.”

“I don’t think that’s realistic,” Valerian said, “But there’s no harm in trying.”

Colbolt padded at the floor outside the window.

“I think he’s itching to get moving,” said Gullie.

Melina grabbed one of the swords on the table, then picked up a suit of leathers Valerian had pulled out of his safehouse in Lysa. Gullie gave her a side-eye. “Are you planning on wearing that?” she asked.

Melina scanned the outfit. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing,” Gullie blushed. “I’ll, uh, get Colbolt ready!” she said, and she bounded off.

As Melina headed into their bedroom, and Gullie went outside, that left Valerian and me alone together. He had a sword in his hand, and he was reacquainting himself with the weight. I walked up to him, placed my hand on his chest, and gently kissed him on the cheek.

Valerian stopped what he was doing and looked down at me, his eyes wide. “What was that for?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Just... reaffirming something.”

“Reaffirming...”

“Something better left unsaid.”

He nodded after a moment. “We are going to make it through this.”

“I hope so. There couldn’t possibly be more people counting on us... and I won’t ever be able to repay you or anyone else for the damage I caused to their lives.”

“With any luck, when all this is over, no one will remember what happened, and this version of the Winter Kingdom will be little more than a

forgotten dream.”

“And they all lived happily ever after, right?”

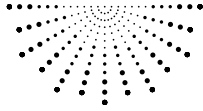
“That’s what the stories say.”

“I hope they’re right,” I said. “I really do.”

But I knew better than that. Fairy tales with happy endings were just that, stories told to children to give them enough hope to survive the rigors and truths of life. When we were ready, we headed outside. We weren’t all going to fit on Colbolt’s back, so I took my wolf form and Gullie shrank to about the size of a hand, leaving Valerian and Melina to ride on Colbolt’s back.

The five of us, together, armed to the teeth, then set off for Windhelm... and the inevitable end of this horrible, horrible nightmare we were in.

CHAPTER FIVE



The ride to Windhelm was shorter than I had anticipated. Perhaps because in order to get to the cottage we had set out from, we'd stuck to the backroads and travelled off the beaten path. It was true, though, that in the Winter Kingdom, all roads led to Windhelm. Getting there wasn't difficult, but seeing it again was.

By night, the castle had been a void darker than the sky itself; by day, it was much worse than that. Instead of a bright, shimmering palace, Windhelm was like a bruised thumb the color of the darkest pond in the deepest underground cavern.

It stuck out from the landscape around it for all the wrong reasons. It was no longer a beacon of light, and hope, and civilization. Now, it was an imposing figure that sent a cold spike of dread deep into my heart.

"What happened to it?" I asked Gullie, who had buried herself in my fur to keep warm.

"Malys," she said. "It happened the night your parents found out she was an impostor. First, she became Queen, then the palace... changed. It was as if your parents learning the truth and being written out of the minds of the people gave her even more power."

"And nobody cares?"

"I don't think anyone's noticed. In their minds, this is what Windhelm has always looked like. We're the only ones who know this isn't right."

"So, everyone else is just... living like this."

"What else can they do? Their lives have been entirely altered, but they have no idea. In a way, it's a mercy."

"A mercy?"

“Well, if you woke up one day and knew everything had changed, you’d panic, right? But if you didn’t know... you’d just wake up and go about your day as normal. Sure, everything’s different, but you don’t know that it is.”

“I guess you’re right. That doesn’t make me feel any better, though.”

“It should make you feel a little better, at least. If we’re somehow able to fix all this, then no one should know it even happened.”

“Assuming it all works like that.”

“Well, yeah. I guess I’m just used to being an optimist. I was usually the one who had to reel your mother back in whenever she’d start to spiral.”

“My mother...” I paused, “Spiraling. I don’t believe it.”

“Oh yeah, big time.”

“That can’t be true. My mother is like, the most well put together person I know.”

“Sure, *now*, but you should’ve heard her complaints back when we were going on adventures! *Oh, what if they find out I’m human? Oh no, the Prince is so handsome, but I need to stay away from him. Oh, everyone’s going to think I’m ugly even though this dress I made is made of literal stardust.*”

“My mother doesn’t sound like that.”

“You’re welcome,” she whispered against my furry ear, which caused it to twitch.

“Over there,” Valerian called out, “We’ll wait behind that hill and figure out a plan.”

I was about to question why we needed a plan, but then I saw the four soldiers standing at the edge of the only bridge that led into and out of the city. I followed Valerian, Melina and Colbolt as they made their way off the main road and onto a hill that overlooked the way into Windhelm.

I took my Fae form when I reached the top, just as Valerian hopped off Colbolt’s back. Together we slunk toward the edge of the hill and observed the soldiers as they stood around. They were armed with swords, and shields. One of them had a bow. None of them seemed to be doing much except stand around chatting about something I couldn’t quite hear over the gentle gust of wind rushing through the area.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Four of them, five of us,” Valerian said. “We outnumber them.”

“Except they’re trained soldiers, and we aren’t.”

“We have the element of surprise from up here... I could take two of them.”

“And I could take the other two, but it’s dangerous, Valerian.”

Valerian sighed. “I know.” He shook his head. “But there are too many of them for us to cross that bridge without being detected. We have to consider fighting them.”

“What if they call for help?”

“We’ll have to take them down quickly.”

“I may have another idea,” said Melina, who joined us at the crest of the hill. Gullie was riding on her shoulder, holding onto her blue hair. Melina pointed down the road, back the way we had come. There, riding up toward the city, was what looked like a small, blue carriage being pulled by a white Elk. “That could be our way in.”

“It’s tiny,” I said. “Would we all fit?”

“I’m not sure,” said Valerian. “Colbolt wouldn’t fit, that’s for sure.”

“That thing’s already got one creature pulling it,” said Melina. “Maybe we can make it look like Colbolt is pulling it too.”

“I think it’s a stretch,” I added, “But it’s better than charging those soldiers from up here and hoping for the best.”

“We’re going to have to deal with the soldiers one way or another,” said Gullie, “Those soldiers are going to want to see the caravan rider’s paperwork and identification. Those papers will probably single him out as the only rider, and they’ll also have an inventory of what he’s carrying. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Elk’s name was on that manifest as well.”

I shook my head. “Then we’re screwed either way.” I paused. “Unless... wait, what if you and I sneak in on that carriage?”

“Us?” Gullie asked.

“You’re small, and I can make myself small. I may be able to hide underneath the carriage, and then we’ll be able to sneak into the city.”

“The two of us. Against all of Windhelm, and Malys Wolfsbane. You’re bloody mad.”

“Now you sound like my mother.”

“Maybe, but you are.”

“No, wait, that could work,” said Valerian.

“What?” Gullie asked. “How could that work?”

“We aren’t getting past those guards without paperwork, or without fighting them. We can’t get the right paperwork, and we won’t all fit on that carriage, so that leaves fighting them. Only if we do that, we need to take them all down quickly.” He turned his attention to me. “You said you can

take two of them?”

I took a deep breath, watched the soldiers for a moment, then exhaled. “I think so,” I said. “Especially if I can get close without them seeing me.”

“So, you hide under the carriage, wait for the right moment, then come out to attack. While they’re distracted, the three of us will charge down the hill and deal with the other two.”

A cold chill passed between all of us, then. Nobody spoke for a long moment, not until the clip-clop of the approaching Elk became audible to all of us. “It’s risky,” said Melina, “But it’s the only plan we have. I think we should do it... with one modification.”

“Modification?” Valerian asked.

“There are some trees behind this hill. See where they end up, over there? That’s only a few yards from where the guards are standing.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“You take Colbolt through the trees, Gullie and Amara sneak onto the carriage, and you let me create another diversion.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Gullie said. “What kind of diversion?”

“The kind I know I can pull off. You’ll just have to trust me.”

“What if they send a signal to the rest of the castle as soon as they see you?”

“They won’t. Fae men are stupid when it comes to women, remember?”

Gullie blushed, then grinned. She suddenly remembered Valerian was there, too, and shot him a worried look. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Valerian paused, his eyebrow arched. “*Naturally,*” he grumbled.

When she looked over at me, my cheeks were also flushed and red. She smiled, awkwardly. “Okay, well, uh... maybe we should get moving with this? Or we’ll miss our chance to sneak aboard the carriage.”

I didn’t like the plan, but if we could take the guards out in one go, they wouldn’t be able to raise an alarm. At least, that was the hope. We didn’t know what other magical defenses we would be dealing with, and there was also the carriage and the rider to consider. That was a hurdle we would have to jump later, assuming we didn’t instantly botch this and get arrested.

Valerian drew his sword, hopped on Colbolt’s back and led him into the nearby trees. I took my wolf form, Gullie zipped over to me and held onto my back, and together we made our way down the other side of the hill, heading toward the road. The Elk and the rider didn’t spot us as we approached, and

as they began to pull away from where we were hiding, I shot out toward it and slipped into the cart it was pulling.

Inside, there were bundles of clothes, parcels wrapped in paper, and various jugs and jars filled with sloshing liquids, some that smelled alcoholic to my heightened senses. The carriage came to a stop a little way down the road, and still Melina hadn't done whatever she was going to do.

I heard voices, the guards calling out to the rider, demanding that he stop. They approached, two of them by my count, their heavy boots crunching the snow beneath them. The rider attempted to exchange pleasantries, but the guards weren't having it. They barked for him to show them his paperwork, which he began to do... nervously.

I had to admit, my heart was starting to race. This wasn't the Windhelm I was used to. It was an alien place, an oppressive place; not at all the home I had grown up in—and we hadn't even gotten to the city itself.

Then I heard something, a voice calling out from somewhere nearby. It was Melina. "Help!" she yelled. "Please, somebody!"

"My wife is insane," I heard Gullie mutter to herself.

"That was her plan?" I asked.

"She told me to trust her! So, I trusted her."

"Please," Melina continued, "There's a beast in the woods, I need help!" She was coming closer, clearly making her way down the hill we had been hiding behind.

One of the guards barked to two of his men to *go and see what that woman wants*. When the two men broke off, they called out to her, asked her to explain herself. She told them her carriage had been attacked by a Souldirge, that she was wounded and needed healing.

Her plan may have been insane, but there were definitely only two guards by the carriage now, and the other two seemed to have bought her story—for now, at least.

"This won't last," said Gullie. "They're going to realize she's not bleeding the moment they reach her."

I nodded. "So, we need to make sure they don't reach her."

By my estimation, the two guards who had broken off and were now demanding that Melina drop to her knees were about halfway to her. That left Valerian with more than enough room to charge them from the trees. It also meant they couldn't help the two guards near the carriage after I leapt out from the cart I was hiding in.

The cart that was about to get inspected.

One guard moved into position behind the cart, placed his hand on the tarp, and began to pull. I was about to leap out, but it was Gullie who surged forth first, the little Pixie racing up toward the guard's face. She stopped in front of him, then blew a handful of sparkling green Pixie dust into his helmet. In an instant, he began sneezing wildly.

This caused the second guard to draw his sword from his sheath. He hadn't finished pulling his blade out before I was on top of him, my powerful paws bashing against his chest and unbalancing him. I made him topple to the floor, his clunky armor dragging him down to the ground.

Chaos erupted, then. Shouts, the sound of swords being unsheathed. The men who had gone to check on Melina had turned around and were starting to make their way toward me, so they hadn't spotted Valerian and Colbolt as they came charging out of the tree line. By the time they did, Valerian bashed one of them with his sword hard enough to knock the guard's helmet clean off and send him crashing to the ground.

The other guard turned around to go after Valerian, but Melina was behind him, with a swift kick delivered precisely to the back of his knee, where there was no armor to protect his tender ligaments from the heel of her foot. He went down with a grunt. With another shove, she dropped him fully, and when he turned his head up, Colbolt was there, ready to deliver a powerful knock to his head that sent him into unconsciousness.

That only left the two guards Gullie and I were dealing with. One of them was sneezing non-stop, while the other was scrambling to get up. I bit into his gloved hand with my fangs as he tried to reach his sword, dissuading him from trying it. He cried out in pain and drew his bleeding hand back, covering it with his other hand.

"You had better stay right where you are," I growled. "Otherwise, you won't live to see tomorrow."

Gullie blew another handful of Pixie dust into the sneezing guard's face, enough to send him flat on his ass, and then onto his back, unconscious.

"Fate's hand," she said to me, "That was absolutely *terrifying*."

"I know," I said, "But I think that's all of them."

"No, not the fight—what you just said to that man!"

"Oh," I realized he was still conscious and staring at me with wide eyes. I snapped him another harsh look. "*I meant it, too.*"

"D-don't kill me," he stuttered.

Gullie flew over to him. “She won’t kill you,” Gullie said. “But it’s time for you to go to sleep.” Another puff of Pixie dust sent this guard off for a nap, and then there were no guards left for us to dispatch.

Valerian hopped off Colbolt’s back and marched over to the carriage rider, who had his hands up. He looked like a totally normal Fae, a little round at the waist, a little long in the tooth. He wanted absolutely no trouble, and he was clearly going to cause none.

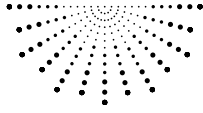
I shrugged out of my wolf form and ran up to him, putting myself between the rider and Valerian. “He’s okay,” I said, “He’s not the enemy.”

“We are in hostile territory,” said Valerian. “Everyone is an enemy.”

I turned around to look at the rider, whose eyes suddenly grew wide; not with fear, but with something else. Then he said something I... never would have expected to hear.

“Princess Amara...” he trailed off. “Is that really you?”

CHAPTER SIX



“You... know who I am?” I asked.

The carriage rider’s eyes remained wide, his breath caught in his chest—as was mine. “Unless my eyes deceive me... the ride has been long, and I am weary, but I would remember your face anywhere, Princess.”

Valerian didn’t understand what was going on. Though he lowered his blade, he still looked ready to attack at a moment’s notice. “This is a trick...” he grumbled. “It has to be.”

The rider couldn’t help but keep his eyes on Valerian and his sword. “I wouldn’t dream of tricking you or anyone in your company, Princess. I simply... I... what is happening?”

“Who is the Queen of Windhelm?” I asked him, after a pause.

The rider seemed hesitant. I could hear his heart hammering against his chest, emphasizing his fear as if the look in his eyes didn’t already make clear what he was feeling. “The current Queen of Windhelm,” he said, pausing, “Is... Dahlia Wolfsbane.”

I exhaled, relieved, the sting of tears threatening to spill pinching my eyes. “Not Malys?” I asked.

“I-if you could pardon my saying,” he said, stammering slightly, “That woman is no Queen.” He paused again, this time to wipe tears from his eyes. “I do not know what has happened that has seen the Royalty scattered and replaced, but it gladdens me to see you, Princess.”

“Well, there’s a shocker,” said Melina from behind us.

“Yeah, this is weird,” Gullie said, echoing the sentiment.

“This Fae knows who I am,” I said, not taking my eyes off him. “Which means he knows that all is not right in Arcadia... don’t you?”

“I do,” he said, nodding, “And if I may be so bold, I am not the only one.”

“What?” Valerian asked, “Explain yourself.”

“Ease down on him,” I said, laying my hand on his. “He’s terrified, but we aren’t going to hurt him. Are we?”

Valerian’s eyes narrowed. “We aren’t,” he grudgingly said.

“I appreciate that,” said the rider.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“If it pleases your highness, my name is Balahil. I run a general trade business out of Windhelm.” He lowered his head. “I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

“Do you know what’s happened to the castle?”

“Only that some dark sorcery is afoot. It’s not right that the castle should be so dark, and ominous. It’s not right that your mother and father, fates bless them, should have been run out of the city like they were.”

“You know about that?”

“I was there that night, working late. I heard the commotion, saw them being carted out of the city at sword point.”

“Did you see where they went?”

“I couldn’t tell you, I’m afraid. I didn’t dare go out into the streets, not with so many swords around. That was when... well, that was the night Malys Wolfsbane took the throne for herself. She didn’t even have to declare herself Queen. The next morning, it was as if everyone simply... accepted her.”

“But not you.”

“Not me... and I am not alone. My dear wife understood the truth with me, but we dared not speak of it, not when so many had readily accepted Malys as their Queen. That was the night we knew something terrible had happened.”

“Figures you would’ve been spared the same fate as the royals,” said Melina. “Malys probably didn’t even know you existed and wouldn’t have known whether you recognized her as your Queen or not even if she did. No offense.”

“None taken,” said Balahil, shaking his head. “The smallfolk usually go underneath the attention of royals. Such is the way of things.”

“My friend, I would say her lack of attention has given you an advantage,” said Valerian, “That you have been able to continue working and

living for as long as you have, that is a comfort.”

“It has been, though it has pained me to live and work in a place that is no longer recognizable as my home, under the rule of a woman who attained the throne by impersonating a princess and ousting the royal family. How could she have done this?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“Wait,” Gullie zipped closer to the rider. “You said there are more of you who know the truth? Did you mean just you and your wife, or are there others?”

Balahil’s eyes darted left and right, as if he were searching for potential eavesdroppers. He then leaned a little closer to my Pixie aunt. “There are others,” he said, “Scattered across all corners of the Winter Kingdom. Amara’s name is spoken of in hushed tones in the dead of night, as are those of the rest of the royal family. Many Fae know the truth, but none dare speak of it in polite company out of fear.”

“Fear of being killed,” said Valerian.

The rider nodded. “Many Fae have gone missing... Fae who had previously talked ill of the *False Queen of Windhelm*.”

“Her spell is more broken than we had anticipated,” said Melina. “If there are many other Fae out there who know the truth... there may be people willing to help us with what we need to do.”

“What we need to do?” asked Balahil.

I gave him my eyes for a moment, then pulled Valerian, Melina, and Gullie back, asking him to allow us a moment to speak in private. My mind was racing, I didn’t think I could string together two coherent thoughts, but I needed to process what I had just learned.

Malys’ spell was failing.

People knew who I was.

“This has broken my brain,” said Gullie. “I never would’ve known other people had shrugged off Malys’ magic like that.”

“In our defense,” Melina put in, “We’ve been living in a cottage under a literal rock for, like, a whole year.”

“Right... still, I feel like this is something I should’ve known.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about that right now,” I said. “This is good news.”

“I hate to be that person,” said Valerian.

“Then don’t be...” Melina put in, shrugging.

Valerian grunted. "If the crone's sorcery is unravelling, then that means two things."

"What's that?" I asked.

"She's probably desperate... and that makes her more dangerous than ever."

"Dangerous?"

"Desperation makes people do terrible things. If her spell fails utterly, she'll be ousted as a fraud, all of Windhelm will turn on her, and then she's done. At which point she will either need to flee, or if she's been cornered, people could die by her hand. Perhaps many—we don't know the true extent of her power."

"He's right," said Gullie. "If I was her right now, I would be desperate to fix my spell and make it work properly."

"Maybe she doesn't know how?" asked Melina.

"Which means..." I paused, shaking my head. "Which means she needs me."

"You?" asked Valerian.

"I'm the one who started this. She needed me to set things in motion... it stands to reason that I'm the only one who can tip things in her favor again."

"And we're walking right into her mouth," said Valerian. "Unarmed and with no support, on a wing and a prayer."

I glanced over at Windhelm, then looked to the rider of the carriage, who was patting his elk. I broke from the group and walked over to him. "I hate to ask you... but do you think you could do me a favor?"

His eyes lit up. "I would be honored to serve you, my Princess."

I smiled at him. "Could you get me into the city unnoticed?"

"I... believe I could. There should be no more checkpoints between myself and my place of work. The guards at the inner gate are not likely to check my cargo."

"We won't all fit in the cart," Valerian called out, "Or did you forget?"

I turned to look at him. "I'm going in alone," I said.

"What?! You can't do that."

"It's insane, I know. But if she wants me, then I should go to her alone."

Valerian advanced on me, the outrage on his face serving only to emphasize how much he cared about me. "She'll kill you, Amara."

I shook my head. "She won't. Not if she needs me."

"If?"

“I think I’m right about this, Valerian. And you’re right, too.”

“What exactly am I right about?”

“We can’t do this on our own. We can’t take Malys down.”

He shook his head. “You aren’t making sense... and you are starting to worry me.”

I placed a hand on his cheek. “If we all go in there, and we all get caught, there’s no hope for Windhelm or the rest of the Winter Kingdom. She’ll have us, and she’ll make me give her what she wants by threatening to hurt any of you.”

“And you think she wouldn’t do terrible things to you to make you give her what she wants?”

“Maybe, but by then, you’ll have gathered all the support you need.”

“Support?” Valerian frowned. “For what?”

“I need you to gather what support you can... find anyone who could help us bring the fight to Windhelm. I can keep her busy enough that she won’t realize what’s happening. Then, when you arrive with all the help you’ve been able to muster, you lay siege to the castle, and I’ll be in a position to take her down from inside.”

“Are you seriously suggesting I try to find an army out there?”

“There has to be someone.”

“With due respect,” said Balahil, “And begging your pardon... there are many, many of us out there who would be willing to lay down their lives in service of the true Princess of Windhelm.” He paused, wiping tears from his eyes again. “It isn’t just the royals... it’s the city itself. It pains us to see it like this, the oppressiveness of it all... the corruption. We all want it to go back to the way it was, whatever it takes.”

There goes my conversation with Gullie, I thought, remembering how we had talked about people being none the wiser about everything that had happened. They knew, and that means there was a chance they’d know after we put things right. Gullie would probably tell me they didn’t have to know I caused all this, but I wasn’t sure if I would be able to live peacefully knowing I had taken something away from them, if that was how things actually played out.

“Amara...” Valerian trailed off, “You *don’t* know what she’ll do to you.”

“She can do whatever she wants to me,” I said. “I won’t give her what she needs. *I won’t.*”

Valerian’s eyes fluttered from left to right. He was scanning my face,

trying to find cracks in my composure—a way to convince me against this course of action, a way in. He sighed, in the end. It was pointless. We both know I was stubborn.

“Dammit,” he cursed, then shook his head.

“We’ll take Colbolt,” said Melina. “He can get us to Lysa by tomorrow afternoon, if we make good pace.”

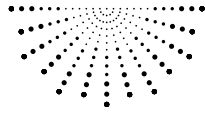
Colbolt snorted and padded the ground, only when I looked over at him, he seemed startled. When he reared and roared, I knew something was wrong. The hairs on the nape of my neck stood on their ends, the sky darkened, and as I turned around again to face the source of what I was feeling, I saw something that made my blood run cold.

There, on the bridge to Windhelm, was a single figure walking towards us. Lithe, feminine, and entirely alone, was a woman whose confident stride easily identified her as Malys Wolfsbane even though I had never seen her before in my life. Valerian stood in front of me, Balahil’s Elk became instantly unsettled, as did Balahil himself.

I was about to open my mouth to call out to the advancing crone, but she pointed at us, and while I didn’t see a flash of light or feel any magic, I heard Balahil begin to choke and gargle. Hot blood spilled from a wound in his throat, his eyes rolled back into his skull, and he started to convulse.

I couldn’t help myself; I ran over to him and placed my frantic hands on the wound in his neck. I couldn’t see what had caused it, but that didn’t matter. The damage was done, and it was severe. He was dead in an instant, and now I had his blood on my hands.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Valerian pulled me away from Balahil's corpse. He then smacked the elk on the ass and sent it, and the cart, scurrying off down the road, away from the woman coming toward us from across the bridge. I couldn't think, I could barely take a solid breath. I had blood on my hands, actual blood on my hands. It wasn't hypothetical anymore.

I had caused someone to die because I had brought Malys into existence.

"I need you to get behind me," Valerian said.

I wouldn't have been able to argue with him even if I had wanted to. The stink of the rapidly cooling blood on my hands was everywhere, assaulting my nostrils, invading my lungs. Stupidly, I wiped my hands on my clothes, but that only made things worse.

"We need to go!" Melina yelled, though her voice sounded distant to me, and somehow *slow*.

When I looked up at her, I saw her standing next to Colbolt, who looked entirely unsettled. Gullie was buzzing around them both; she was also yelling for Valerian and me to run toward them, to leave this place of death.

But I knew I couldn't leave. She wasn't about to let us just leave; she was almost on top of us already, her lithe silhouette looking far closer than it had been mere seconds ago. The way she moved, the way she walked, the way her hips swayed, it was with utter confidence and calm.

She wasn't worried that she was alone, and that there were five of us. Malys didn't care that she was outnumbered, nor did she seem to care that Valerian was with us. Surely she knew about him, or knew enough about him to understand the kinds of abilities he had. Of all of us, he was the only one wielding a weapon, after all.

The fact that she wasn't afraid of him, or of any of us, made me even more terrified of her than I already was.

"Amara!" Valerian said, his voice snapping me out of my trance. "Are you with me?"

"I... yes. I am," I said, shaking off the daze I had been in. It was as if the world suddenly came into focus; time reasserted itself, the sounds around me grew sharper, and clearer, and I was no longer entirely focused on the blood on my hands.

"Good," he said, "Because we're going to need your help."

"What we need to do is get the hells out of here!" Gullie yelled. "Before she gets here!"

"She's already here," came Malys' voice. It low, and husky; like the purr of a jungle cat. She was already standing at our end of the bridge, only a few feet from where we were standing... and for the first time in my life, I got a good look at the woman pretending to be me.

I had expected a doppelganger, but that wasn't at all the case. Malys was lithe, and tall, and while her skin was as fair as mine and some of our facial features were similar, *similar* was about where the line was drawn.

Instead of antlers rising from the crown of her head, she had curved ram's horns that traced the shape of her skull, their points ending along the sides of her jaw. Her hair was dark, and long, and there, nestled between those horns was a crown that looked like it was made of pure, white ice, adorned with blue jewels.

She angled her head to the side slightly and smiled at me, her purple painted lips parting to reveal perfect, pearly white teeth and two enlarged and sharpened canines. "Hello, Amara," she said, as if she were greeting an old friend, "I have been eager to see you again."

"Don't come any closer," said Valerian, wielding his sword in front of him like he was ready to fight.

Malys' striking violet eyes swung over to him. "This is a private conversation," she said, "I suggest you *shut up*."

I felt something, then; a pulse of magic that was so subtle, I may not have detected it if I hadn't been as focused on her as I was.

Valerian suddenly dropped his sword. He grabbed hold of his throat and began to hack. My heartrate shot up. I turned to him and tried to look at his throat, horrified that I was about to see blood gushing out of it. There wasn't any blood, but he was having trouble pulling in any kind of breath.

“Valerian!” I yelled, as he fell to his knees. He was struggling to breathe, each inhalation was labored, and raspy, but he *was* breathing. I glared at Malys. “What did you do to him?!”

“I just gave him something to think about,” she said. “And you...”

“Release him from this magic.”

Malys’ eyes narrowed. “*Or what?*” she asked. “You and your friends have no power here. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can have a conversation.”

“We have nothing to talk about.”

“Oh, but we do. If your friends stay out of this, I promise, they’ll remain unharmed.”

“You’re a liar. Why should I believe a word you say?”

“I have not lied to you once. You, on the other hand, have lied many times. Though, I suppose you can’t be blamed. That’s a trait that runs in your family.”

I gave Valerian my attention again. He had his hands splayed on the ground, and he was breathing, but he could do little else. Standing up, I turned to face Malys who stood not fifteen feet away from me. I was done showing her how scared I was, how out of my depth I was. I wanted to show her who I *really* was; someone not to be *fucked* with.

“You made a mistake coming out here,” I said.

Malys shook her head. “You are mistaken,” she said. “Unless you haven’t noticed, this is *my* domain. Nothing happens in Windhelm without my knowing about it. Did you really think you could sneak into my home and I wouldn’t find you out?”

“This is not your home.”

“Oh, but it is. I have known about your return to Arcadia ever since you set foot on the snow. I knew you were at my bridge before you had hatched your foolish plan and sentenced that poor man to death. I know all, I hear all, and I see all, for this is my house. That’s another thing you should accept quickly—it will make this whole process much quicker, and far less bloody.”

“You already killed that man,” I snapped. “How many others have you killed?”

“Though we Fae have long lives, we die. Some of us die quickly and bloodily if we disrespect those with higher power than we have. That Fae chose to go against his Queen. There was to be no other consequence.”

“You are Queen of nothing!” I yelled, my voice shooting out of me like

gunshot that echoed into the distance.

She shook her head, as if disappointed. “Amara, could we start over? I feel like, perhaps, we misunderstand each other.”

With a deep breath held in my lungs, I took a step toward her. “I think we understand each other just fine,” I said.

“Oh, really? Enlighten me. Who do you think I am?”

“I think you’re a snake. You manipulated me and twisted Fate itself to get something you could never have.”

“And why did I do that?”

“Because you’re evil and twisted yourself.”

“It’s that black and white, is it?”

“It is. You’ve lied, cheated, and killed to get where you are... but it’s not going to work, in the end, because your spell is failing.”

“It was not a perfect spell, I will admit. There were certain factors I hadn’t anticipated,” her eyes darted quickly to Valerian, then came back to me. “And I will confess, my hold on this reality is slipping... but it will hold long enough.”

“Long enough?”

“You still haven’t figured it out?”

“How about you *enlighten* me, now?”

Malys smiled, her purple lips parting to reveal her sharp canines once more. “Fate has rules even I can’t break. I am forbidden from killing you, your family, and your *belore*. Killing you, of course, would solve all of my problems. Fate as I have written it would assert itself, this reality would prevail over the other, and I will remain Queen of Windhelm and all its people... forever.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because the fact that you are here tells me you have struck a bargain with Fate’s relentless hunter. You have perhaps been given some time to... deal with me. Am I wrong?”

“You already know the answer.”

“Which means I also know the outcome. I cannot kill you, but Fate’s hunter will. And when you and your *belore* are dead, all will be right in the world again. My spell will become perfect, and you will be forgotten.” She paused. “I will have my life back; a life your family stole from me.”

My blood boiled, my jaw clenched. “I didn’t take anything from you.”

“You didn’t, but your mother did. Or didn’t she tell you?”

“Amara, *don’t listen to her!*” Gullie yelled.

Malys’ grin widened. “I would say your godmother doth protest too viciously...”

My heart was pounding and my head was spinning; all of this was suddenly made worse by the thought that Malys was right. Gullie had called out far too suddenly, too urgently. I already knew there was something my parents weren’t telling me. Was there a secret Gullie also knew about? Or was the crone trying to trick me by preying on my insecurities?

She had been able to infiltrate my dreams; maybe she also knew what I was thinking.

“Leave them out of this,” I said.

“I will,” said Malys, “I promise. If you do what I need you to do, not only will I ensure you aren’t killed by Fate’s hunter; I will also allow for you and your before to leave, to retire somewhere nice where you can live out the rest of your days as outcasts... but together.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good deal to me.”

“Oh, *I’m sorry*. I didn’t realize you don’t like him enough to want to spend more time with him.”

“Don’t twist my words!”

Malys stuck her hands up and grimaced, as if she’d just embarrassed herself. “*Oops*,” she chuckled, “That’s awkward, isn’t it? I mistakenly assumed someone’s before was their perfect match. I guess even Fate makes mistakes.”

“Shut up!” I yelled, and having had enough, I lunged, throwing myself to the ground and taking my wolf form. I snarled at her as I approached, stalking closer to her slowly, *lethally*, my nose close to the ground, my fangs barred.

“That’s cute,” she said. “Is that meant to intimidate me?”

“Undo what you’ve done,” I snarled. “You may be forbidden from killing me, but I’m not forbidden from killing you.”

“My dear, first you have to have the opportunity, and then you need the *gall*—and you have neither.”

Growling, I launched myself at her. To the hells with her magic, to the hells with how dangerous she was. I was done listening to her speak; it was time to act. Malys was quicker than I gave her credit for, though, and she side-stepped out of the line of my bite. By the time I backpedaled and turned around to go for her again, she was gone.

“Where did she go?!” I yelled.

“Amara!” Melina called out.

I looked over at her; she was pointing across my shoulder. By the time I turned my head, I was hit with something hard and sharp. I staggered, whimpering. My face stung, and I couldn’t open one of my eyes. Looking down at the snow underneath me with my one open eye, I saw blood trickling from my snout.

Now when I turned my head to the side, I didn’t see Malys anymore, but I saw what she had become. Instead of the lithe Fae with the curved horns and the long, black dress that had been standing before me a moment ago was a large jungle cat covered in silky black fur. Her back was curved, her paws pressed against the snow, her long, dark tail swishing almost playfully.

Though she had lost her horns, she still kept those violet eyes.

“Close,” she said, “But not close enough.”

I shook my head, trying to recover from the hit I had just taken. I was just barely able to open my other eye, but I could tell there was blood pouring down my face. “You’re going to have to do better than that if you want to kill me,” I said.

“I can’t kill you... but I can hurt you, and hurt you, and hurt you until you beg for death. Or, you can give me what I need, and I can make this all go away. You can have your happily ever after, and I can have mine. The one that was stolen from me.”

I saw a glimmer of green light go shooting away from Melina. *Gullie*. I lost track of her instantly, though.

“If you really thought you could hold out long enough for my deal with Fate to run out, you wouldn’t be asking for my help.”

“I’m not asking for you to help me, Amara; I want you to help yourself. Eventually, Fate kills you. That’s how this ends. But I can prevent that.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “There’s another way, and I’m going to find it.”

Malys approached, her stance growing deadlier by the second. “I can’t kill you,” she said, “But I can kill *them*. I can kill both of them right now, right in front of you... and I will. Please, don’t make me... but I will.”

I saw the glimmer of green again, this time across *Malys*’ shoulder. “You’re a murderer,” I said, “If you could have, you would have... and you can’t. I think you’re the one who has no power here.”

Malys’ jaw dropped, revealing even more, large, sharp teeth. She was

about to pounce, but I knew what I had to do. I had no chance at beating her in a direct confrontation; not from where I was. What I could do was distract her.

I scraped the bloody snow under my paw and launched it at the panther's face. Malys groaned, shut her eyes, and turned her head to the side to avoid getting the snow in her eyes. What she got instead was a face full of glimmering, green Pixie dust.

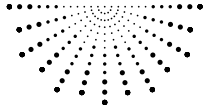
Malys started violently sneezing, one quick snort after the other, the way cats often did.

“What are you waiting for?!” Gullie screamed. “Run!”

I turned tail and ran, heading to where Colbolt was. Melina was already there, helping Valerian to get on Colbolt's back. Part of me wanted to stay and fight, but I knew it was pointless. She had beaten us; she was way too powerful. All we could do right now was get away with our lives.

“Think about my offer, princess!” Malys yelled as we made our escape. “It has an expiration date.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



“*T*hat sneezing powder trick isn’t going to work every time,” Valerian said, “But all things considered, you may have saved our lives.”

Gullie didn’t seem to be in too good a mood to accept the compliment, though. Without replying to Valerian, she flicked herself off Melina’s shoulder and buzzed over to me as I settled down on the snow and took my Fae form. We had stopped running, but the fates only knew after how long. Having followed the road for what felt like an age, we had finally dipped away from it and scattered into the first tree line we could find.

Once inside, we had searched for a clearing, happening upon a small, frozen pond in a calm grove a fair ways in. The wound on my face had stopped bleeding, but I couldn’t see properly out of one eye. I could still feel the impression Malys’ claws had left on my skin. The wound burned and itched, but I hadn’t wanted to stop running to treat it until we were safe.

Safer, at any rate. I didn’t think Malys had come after us, not considering what she had declared as we ran away from her. *As she let us run*. The more I thought about it, the more I knew with total certainty that she had allowed us to escape unharmed.

Well, mostly unharmed.

This display of her power had intended to serve as a message, and it had been received.

“Will you hold still?” Gullie asked, “I’m trying to heal you.”

I focused my attention on her instead of anxiously scanning the trees for signs of *other* dangers. “Sorry,” I said, “I’m still on edge.”

“And covered in blood. Melina, could you get us some water to clean her

up?”

“On it,” said auntie Melina, and she hopped off Colbolt’s back and went over to the frozen pond. With a slight touch of her fingertip against the ice, a small section of it melted, creating a circular pool from which gentle steam feathers rose.

As Valerian walked up to the pool, he stretched his arm off to the side where it disappeared. It came back a moment later with a bowl. Another reach into the ether, and Valerian produced a rag from thin air. My attention returned to Gullie, who was still buzzing around in front of me, grimacing at the sight of the wound.

“She really got you,” Gullie said.

“How bad is it?” I asked.

“Bad. I’ll try to heal it, but it may not heal all the way.”

“Do what you can, my body will take care of the rest—but only if you can spare the magic. I have a feeling we’re going to need every last drop of it if we’re going to beat Malys.”

“*Beat her?* Did you see what just happened? We got our bloody arses handed to us, and you’re lucky you didn’t lose that eye.”

“She’s right,” said Valerian, who was on his way over to me with a bowl of steaming water and a wet rag. “Malys is more powerful than we had anticipated. She made sure we knew that.”

“So, what, after one fight with her we’re all done?” I asked. “You heard what she said to me, right? What her offer was?”

“I did, and I’m not suggesting our fight is over. Only that dealing with her won’t be a matter of simplicity, or only subtlety.”

“Friends,” said Melina. “We’ll need friends. You heard what that rider said... there are people out there who remember you. People who don’t recognize Malys as their Queen. We need to go out and find them, just like we planned to do.”

“She let us go,” Gullie said, “She knows what we’ll try to do, she knows we’ll gather support. It won’t be enough.”

“Or she thinks it won’t be enough. Maybe she doesn’t know how many people out there really don’t like her.”

“You’re forgetting most of the Winter Court’s military power rests within Windhelm,” said Valerian. “We won’t find an army out there that can threaten her, only people. People without training, without weapons, without armor.”

Gullie began to glow bright green. I felt her small, Pixie hands press against my cheek. An instant later came a flood of warmth and good feelings that were more than welcomed. I sighed, shut my eyes, and enjoyed the sensation. It was relief. I was *relieved*.

It wasn't enough, but it helped.

When Gullie was finished, she pulled her hands back and looked at them. The blood on my face was dry by now, caked onto my skin, but some of it had still transferred to her palms, staining them brown. Valerian offered her the bowl.

"I've done what I can," Gullie said, as she fluttered up to the bowl and washed her hands. "It still looks really grim."

"Nothing a little rest won't fix," I said, although in truth, I wasn't sure how bad the injury was, so I didn't know if it would heal perfectly. Being part Moon Child blessed me with enhanced regenerative powers, but most of the Moon Children I had met had scars all over their bodies, and they were *full* breeds.

I wasn't.

I really didn't want a giant, gnarly scar across my face, but... scars were *bad-ass*, and I could see myself rocking one.

"What happened today sucked," I said, looking up at them all, "But she's shown us what we're dealing with. That gives us an advantage."

"Advantage?" asked Gullie.

"We know how powerful and quick her magic is. We know she can shapeshift... somehow. We also know she has the entire army of Windhelm under her command, and they're all jerks."

"They were jerks before," said Melina, shrugging. "We're the *coldest* Fae, remember?"

"Right..." I paused. "So, we need to gather support, and people won't be enough. What about Radulf?"

"What about him?"

"You guys said my family was exiled, but he left on his own... maybe we can find him."

"We tried. I mean, neither of us are terribly proficient with magic, and we can't shapeshift to improve our tracking abilities like you can, but we did try to figure out where he had gone. The man left no trace, though."

"No one would be able to track Radulf down except for Radulf," said Gullie. "There's a reason they made him Alpha of the Moon Children. He's

strong, and capable. If he needed to hide his tracks, there would be none.”

“Maybe... but I don’t believe my brother would abandon his family and accept exile. Maybe he left clues we can follow, some kind of trail we can pick up.”

“After all this time, there would be no trail,” said Valerian.

“Not a scent trail, but maybe something else... there has to be something.”

“Even if we did try to find him, we are on a time limit.”

“Twelve days, now. I know.”

“It took us months before we gave up our search,” said Gullie. “What makes you think you’ll find him in twelve days?”

“I don’t, but I have to believe it’s possible. Just like it has to be possible that we can find my parents.”

Gullie fluttered over to me and hovered in front of my face. “Do you understand what exile means?” she asked. “Because I don’t think you’ve come to terms with it yet.”

I frowned at her. “It means they left and promised not to return.”

Gullie shook her Pixie head. “No. It means they were *exiled*. They are no longer in Arcadia.”

“What? Where are they, then?”

“No one really knows. Another dimension? Maybe a pocket dimension like the one Malys offered to send you to.”

“She said we’d be outcasts.”

“Outcasts, exiles, I’m sure those two things are the same to her. What I’m trying to say is, your parents are nowhere to be found. We’d need incredibly powerful magic to even try to find them, and none of us have it. We’re more likely to find Radulf, and he’s... he’s just *gone*, and I think anything we can do will fix that.”

The disappointment in her voice was clear. Gullie held a grudge against him for leaving, even though she understood why he had done it. I could see it on her face. She had hoped that one day, he would come back to her and Melina, and the three of them would be able to figure out how to topple Malys. But that day never came, so Gullie and Melina were forced to stay in that cottage, powerless to stop what was unfolding around them.

Valerian interjected now, taking a deep breath and scanning the grove we were in. “Alright,” he said, “There are a few things we need to deal with; the first one is shelter.”

“We’re going back to the cottage, right?” I asked.

“No. We should go to Lysa. If people remember you, then they may remember me. I have friends there, other hunters. We’re going to need help taking on Malys, and I’d be more comfortable seeking out capable hunters than conscripting the general populace. Besides, one of them may have heard something about your brother.”

“One of your hunter friends might know where my brother went?”

“Alpha of the Moon Children striking out on his own? You can bet my friends heard about it; it’s possible one or two may even have a lead we can follow.”

“Why aren’t we going back to our house?” asked Gullie, “Out of curiosity.”

“Because we have to assume it’s compromised.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I think Malys is five steps ahead of us. I think she knew you and Melina were hunkering down there and allowed you to do so, knowing Amara would come back and that you would find her before she came to the castle.”

“So, are you suggesting she knows the future?” asked Melina, folding her arms in front of her chest.

“Maybe it’s not exactly like that, but she has the power to manipulate Fate. That’s a lot harder than simply seeing where its strands are and what they’re linked to. Malys was on that bridge moments after we arrived. She was waiting for us.”

“If she knew where we were, and knew what would happen today, then she’ll know what we’re going to do tomorrow and all of this is pointless.”

“I think I know someone who’s going to help us with that.”

“Who?” I asked.

Valerian took my hand and helped me stand. He then tipped my chin to the side, and there, amidst the trees, I saw movement. Shapes coming toward us. My hackles rose and I stiffened, my muscles tightening. I realized, though, that they weren’t marching towards us like soldiers, but kind of meandering, moving between the trees like ghosts, never fully becoming visible or even making a sound.

My heart fell into my stomach.

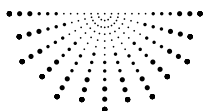
“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No *fucking* way.”

The approaching figures stopped dead in their tracks. From within the trees, I heard a woman shout. “Language!”

In that moment, something happened to me that had never happened before. Dread, actual dread, danced hand in hand with relief. How such a thing was even possible I didn't know and could never know. Because even before the figures emerged from beyond the trees, I knew who was there, and my heart both fell and soared simultaneously.

“Pepper is right, child,” said Grandmother Helen as she made herself visible. “I know these are trying times, but there really is no need for such vulgarity.”

CHAPTER NINE



“No,” I snapped, raising my voice higher than I had intended for it to go. “Absolutely not. Why are you here? You *can’t* be here!”

“I think that ship has sailed, dear,” said Grandmother Helen.

I waved my hand and aimed it at a clear space near me, focusing my energy into my fingertips and summoning my Fae magic. “I’m opening a portal back to Earth and sending you home. You can’t be here!”

My grandmother’s hand whipped in response to my movements, and I found my own arm lashing back against my chest, as if it had been pulled back against my will. “Please, child, don’t do that. We aren’t going back.”

“But this isn’t a safe place for you! You’re *human!*”

Grandmother Helen smiled softly. “I know you’re worried, but I can assure you, we’re quite alright. We got this far, didn’t we?”

“Because we had an excellent guide,” said Grandmother Evie, who was holding Tallin in her arms.

My heart sank further. He was no longer immortal, having given up part of his essence to get me here in the first place. I couldn’t bear to see him here, but I also wanted so badly to hug them all. I was shaking, barely able to control myself. I wasn’t sure what to do, what to say, or even where to look.

It was Valerian, placing his hand on my shoulder, that helped to ground me.

“I can’t say I’m not happy to see you,” said Gullie, who floated up ahead of me and went to speak to my grandmothers.

“And I you, Gullie,” said grandmother Helen. “I only wish our reunion came at a better time and under better circumstances.”

“I know.”

“Any word from Dahlia?”

Gullie shook her head. “She’s gone, Helen. Exiled.”

My grandmother nodded. “That’s... troubling.”

“It’s a disaster, really,” Melina put in. “We have no way of getting to her, no way of contacting her.”

“The real disaster is the blood down my granddaughter’s face,” said Pepper, who had noticed the traces of brown on my skin that Valerian hadn’t quite managed to wipe off. She rushed over to me, her boots crunching against the snow, a plum-colored handkerchief in her hand. “What in the world happened to you, dear?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, putting my hands up. “Really.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing. Who did this to you?”

Valerian squeezed my shoulder. “It was Malys,” he said. I looked up at him and saw him scanning my grandmothers’ faces. “We should all talk... but maybe not here. We aren’t far enough away from the castle for my liking.”

“We’re far away from Lysa,” said Melina with a shrug. “If we get moving now, we may make it there by nightfall.”

Grandmother Helen scanned the grove we were in, then looked at her sisters. Each of them nodded. “This place will do... for now,” she said. “Sisters?”

Pepper took her place next to Helen and Evie. Each of them raised one hand to the sky, then they began to wave them in circles, counterclockwise. Valerian had a suspicious frown on his face, Melina shrugged, and Gullie also didn’t appear to know what was going on, but we could all feel the magic at work.

The power radiating from those three women was subtle, but intense. That they had survived in Arcadia on their own was already a testament to how strong they were. Arcadia had a habit of eating human hearts and twisting their shells into wicked monstrosities should they linger too long in this place where they were not meant to be.

My grandmothers were probably too difficult even for Arcadia to digest.

Astonished I watched as a portion of the woods around us began to suddenly bend and crack. It was as if the trees had decided they weren’t happy being rooted to the spots in which they were standing and chose to separate and rejoin in ways trees weren’t meant to move. They side-stepped, raised themselves, lowered themselves—it was like a weird dance of shifting

branches, and trunks, and roots—and when they were done moving, I noticed the door.

It was small and brown, with wrought iron hinges and a knocker. Grandmother Helen flicked her wrist, and the door unlocked itself and opened, revealing a dark space beyond it. “Yes,” she said to herself, as if admiring her own work, “That will do.” She turned her eyes to me. “After you.”

“After me?” I asked. “Where will that door take me?”

“To a safe place. Your Maukibou may join us also.”

“You know what a Maukibou is?”

Grandmother Helen’s eyebrows arched. She tapped her fingers against her chin. “I wasn’t born yesterday, dear. Come, now—you’ll catch a cold out here.”

I still wanted to send my grandmothers back to Earth, where they would be safe, but I knew they wouldn’t let me open a portal out of hand. I was going to have to convince them, and that meant sitting down to talk to them... wherever they were about to take me. So, a little reluctantly, I walked over to this door in the middle of nowhere and stepped inside.

To my surprise, I wasn’t transported somewhere else. Instead, I found myself entering what looked like a cottage; a cottage similar to the one Valerian and I had stayed in before we came to Arcadia. Bulbs with small, buzzing motes of light in them sprang to life as I walked past them, illuminating the foyer of the house I had just entered. The air smelled of cinnamon and freshly baked bread. There were windows, and doors leading to other rooms, and even a staircase that went somewhere upstairs.

Stepping into what looked like a living room, I noticed a lit fireplace already starting to crackle and pop. A bay window overlooked the pond we had just come from, the scene quiet and serene. I wondered, suddenly, how in the world Colbolt was meant to fit in here. When I turned around to look at the front door, the ceilings were taller, and the entire room seemed to have expanded to accommodate the Maukibou as he lowered his head to enter.

“What is this place?” I asked, my voice bouncing off the walls and rising into the vaulted ceiling.

“A place of magic,” said Evie, her eyes lighting up.

“Fantastic, isn’t it?” asked Tallin. “It was a lot smaller last night.”

“This abode is precisely as large as we need it to be,” said Helen as she shut the door and entered the room behind Valerian and Melina. Gullie was

already floating near the fireplace, warming up her hands. “More importantly, it should protect us from prying eyes. Pepper, dear, could you put a kettle on?” asked Helen.

“Already on it,” said Pepper with a warm smile.

Evie sat down on a comfortable looking armchair by the fire, Tallin settling in her lap. “I tried to stop them,” he said.

“I know you did,” I said.

“They overruled me.”

“It wasn’t difficult,” said Evie. “He wanted to help you as much as we did. We weren’t about to sit around and wait for you to come back.”

“Or not...” Tallin put in.

“I get it,” I said, and before I said anything else, I shook my head and smiled. “I just... it’s good to see you all.”

“It must feel like an age has passed here,” grandmother Helen said as she entered the living room. “How long has it been since you last saw us?”

“A couple of days,” said Valerian.

“It’s been minutes for us. We have barely shaken the snow off our shoulders.”

“How did you find us so fast, then?” I asked.

“That wasn’t difficult either,” said Evie, tapping the side of her nose.

“You sniffed us out?”

“In a manner...” said Helen, trailing off. “To use that same analogy, Arcadia doesn’t quite smell right. You’re about the only thing that does. You and your godparents, of course.”

Gullie buzzed over to my grandmother. “What do you mean?”

Helen took a deep breath. “I’m going to have a bit of trouble cutting to the chase.”

Valerian frowned. “Why?” he asked.

“Because,” Helen continued, though she threw Evie a stern look before going on, “I have a feeling I know what’s going on here. At least, I have a theory.”

“Wait,” I said, “A theory about what?”

Helen smiled. “How about we have some tea first? We should also get you cleaned up, you poor thing. You’re still covered in blood.”

“I wouldn’t say she’s *covered*...” Valerian added.

“Wait, no,” I said, “Do you *actually* know what’s going on here? I want to talk about that.”

“I have a suspicion.”

“Based on how this place smells?” Melina asked. “How is that even possible?”

“Arcadian magic and Earthly magic have entirely different properties from each other. A skilled witch can tell them apart instantly, and I am nothing if not a skilled witch.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Arcadia should not *smell* like Earth. More specifically, it should not smell familiar. I sensed it as soon as I set foot in this realm. It was impossible to ignore.”

Valerian folded his arms in front of his chest. “We all know I’m a fan of saying as little as possible,” he said, “But I think I can speak for all of us when I ask you to please tell us what you’re trying to say.”

Helen seemed almost reluctant. I wasn’t sure why. She took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and then opened them again. “For you, this was a long time ago. Long, long before you were born. For me, not nearly as much time has passed. Any longer, and I may have forgotten what her magic resonance smelled like.”

“Who?!” Gullie asked, desperate.

“You’ll remember her also... maybe. But please, let me start from the beginning.” She paused. “There once was a woman, a witch like me. On Earth, witches and mages consider themselves to be leagues above the throngs of regular mortals that walk among them; a notion we don’t subscribe to, by the way.”

“Shit,” Gullie said.

“Shit is right,” Helen conceded. “As creatures who can wield magic, it isn’t uncommon for witches and the Fae to do business sometimes. The Fae make it clear, however, that they hold themselves leagues above the witches of our world. We use magic, the Fae *are* magic—or so they say.”

“I don’t understand where this is going,” I said.

“A long time ago,” my grandmother continued. “A witch snubbed our family. Your mother made a dress for a very prominent figure. It was an incredible dress, truly breathtaking... *magic*. But the witch refused to pay what she had agreed. She stuck her thumb out at us, even after I went to speak with her. I thought the matter was done... at the time, in any case, I was more concerned with your mother’s sudden disappearance to even pay this witch any mind.”

“Your mother left us a note one night,” Evie continued. “A note and a beautiful dress she had made, here, in Arcadia.”

“The very next day,” said Helen, “According to what I heard... the *Fae Prince of Winter* barged into her studio and humiliated her in front of her peers and her students, then demanded that she pay her debts lest she bring the wrath of winter down on her and the rest of her kind. The mages and witches of London didn’t want anything to do with her after that. She lost her studio, her peers, and any station she may have had... then she vanished.”

“That *bitch*,” Gullie said, frowning. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it!”

“Language!” barked Pepper from the kitchen.

“What bitch?” I asked. “Also, did my father really say that?”

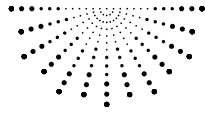
“Your father was a jerk before your mother got to him,” Gullie said, “But *Madame Lydia Whitmore* is the bitch in question.”

I stared at her, my eyes wide. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

“No,” Gullie said, “But your mother does. Or did, anyway.” She spun around in midair and stared at my grandmother. “Are you telling me she’s has something to do with what’s happened to us?”

“Dear,” said Helen. “I’m telling you she has everything to do with what’s happened to us. Everything.”

CHAPTER TEN



So, if I had processed everything correctly, my grandmother had just told me that the person now masquerading as the Queen of Windhelm, the crone I had met in my dreams, was a witch who felt like she had been snubbed by my father a long time ago.

A long time ago for me, I guess, but not for her.

As we all sat around, warming up and drinking tea, I found myself running through it all in my mind. I couldn't figure out what any of this had to do with the Royal Selection, or why my parents had been trying to rush me through it, but it helped to be able to unmask the person responsible for the misery I'd had to endure recently.

Misery I was entirely and solely responsible for, yes, but misery nonetheless.

I had questions. So many questions. My grandmothers, however, didn't have answers. They knew without a shadow of a doubt that this land, the Winter Kingdom, bore the mark of Madame Lydia Whitmore; a mark they would've been able to recognize anywhere given how prominent of a witch she was back in London.

While that was more information than we'd had an hour ago, it was about everything we had at this point, and I didn't know how it helped us. Whoever that woman was before she came to Arcadia and did all this, she wasn't that person anymore. She certainly hadn't been able to shapeshift back on Earth—at least, that wasn't an ability my grandmothers were aware she possessed.

For all intents and purposes, it seemed, she had somehow made herself Fae. One question above all others loomed supreme, though; was she still as powerful a witch as she used to be, or had she been forced to give that up?

“I knew that woman was trouble,” Gullie said, breaking the curtain of silence that had fallen around us for a while. “I didn’t think I’d be talking about her again, though.”

“You’ve been in Arcadia for a long time,” Evie said, “On Earth, not that much time has passed since Dahlia crossed over. People still talk about Whitmore... wonder where she went.”

“It was a tragic thing,” Pepper said from across the rim of her cup of tea, “Watching her implode like that. She deserved it, though.” I thought she’d mumbled a swear word before sipping, but I wasn’t sure.

“I remember you telling me about Lydia,” Melina said. She was standing by the bay window, overlooking the frozen pond. “I thought it was pretty funny that Cillian had chewed her ear out for Dahlia. Probably the first, nicest thing he ever did in his entire life.”

“To be fair,” Gullie said, “He was kind of possessed by his brother’s spirit at the time. Uncle Radulf was nasty, nasty, nasty.”

I shook my head. “That... sounds entirely made up when I hear it out loud,” I said.

Valerian remained silent, though his eyebrows were both arched, and his expression gave away his utter disbelief.

“I guess what I’m wondering is,” said Melina, “Does this give us some kind of edge?”

“Knowledge is power, dear,” said Grandmother Helen. “Knowing who lies behind the mask does indeed give us an edge.”

“What edge is that?”

“I’m... not sure yet.”

“Whoever you think she was,” I said, “She’s not that person anymore. She’s twisted Fate on a grand scale, her magic is quick and sharp, and she can turn into a giant cat.” I touched my hand to my throbbing cheek. Now that the adrenaline had worn off, I could feel it pulsating constantly.

“We also believe she knows what our next move will be,” said Valerian. “She knew where we would be earlier today. Malys was ready for us.”

My grandmothers exchanged concerned glances. Helen then turned her attention to Valerian. “We should be safe from her gaze so long as we remain in this cottage. I am sure she is aware of our presence by now, she likely knew we were here the moment we arrived in Arcadia. But whatever decisions we make here, she shouldn’t know about.”

“Until we leave this place...”

“Well, yes.”

“How does that help us?”

“It doesn’t. Not yet. For now, the best thing we can do is formulate a plan of action that we can then execute in synchronicity.”

“Eloquently put,” said Tallin, nodding at my grandmother’s choice of words.

“We need to find Radulf,” I said, “And my mother and father. We need to get them back.”

“You said Dahlia and Cillian were in exile?” asked Helen.

Gullie buzzed in at this point. “As far as we know.”

“Then they are perhaps beyond our reach.”

“What?” I asked, “That... no, that can’t be right.”

“Dear, Fae exile is...” she shook her head, shut her eyes and sighed. “It is not simply a matter of getting them back. We first need to know where they are, then we have to reach out to them and hope they can hear us. Then, and only if we have been able to reach them, they will need to take steps to come back; a task that will not be easy for them.”

“Think of it like...” Pepper paused. “When you came to Earth, and you couldn’t open a portal to bring you back here. You were cut off from Arcadia... you couldn’t reach your friends here, and they couldn’t reach you. It’s kind of like that, but much, much worse.”

I swallowed hard. “Why... why would they have done that?” I asked.

“To protect you,” said Evie. “They must have thought it was the only thing they could do to keep you safe.”

“I don’t see how their exile helps me.”

“Maybe not right now...” she paused and lightly smiled. “Maybe they can explain when we reach out to them.”

“Radulf,” Helen continued. “Radulf *can* be reached. Finding him is of utmost importance.”

“Valerian says he has contacts who may be able to help,” I put in. “That’s a good place to start.”

Valerian nodded. “It may take some time, but I can at least get us some leads.”

“We can get to work on reaching your parents,” said Pepper, her eyes tilted up in a thoughtful expression. “It’ll be difficult, but... I don’t think it’s impossible.”

“Can you actually do that?” I asked.

“If anyone can, it’s us,” Evie said, smiling brightly.

“*And* we can do that from in here,” said Pepper, “So we don’t have to worry about Arcadia trying to gobble us up and spit us back out as monsters.”

I stood up. “Alright, Valerian and I will head to Lysa and try to find Radulf while you try to contact my parents.”

In unison, Gullie and Helen both began to say “Now, just wait here—”

Gullie, red faced, allowed my grandmother to speak first.

“I meant to say,” said “Helen, let us not be too hasty... I would not recommend splitting up.”

“We don’t have the time to sit around and wait,” I said, “There’s a clock counting down somewhere... if Fate’s hunter comes back, and I haven’t done what I have to do,” I paused, not wanting to finish the rest of the sentence.

“We have seen what that creature can do, dear. We know the risks... but would it not be more dangerous to split up? As long as you are here, you are safe from Malys’ prying eyes. Once you leave this house, she may know where you are, and learn of your intentions.”

I looked over at Valerian. “We’ll just have to be quick, then.”

“And unpredictable,” he added.

Helen stood up and looked carefully at Valerian, sizing him up almost. “Are you certain you can help find Winter’s Son? I would not allow you to leave on a fool’s errand.”

“I am part of a guild of hunters and trackers... at least, I was. If there are people in Windhelm who remember Amara, it means there are people in Lysa who remember me. Any one of my people could have caught wind of where he went. The trail may be cold now, but Moon Children aren’t exactly difficult to track once they get on the move. Someone could’ve spotted him when he first made his move.”

“Really?” I asked, frowning. “I thought they were great at keeping their tracks hidden.”

“They... uh, they howl a lot,” Valerian ventured. “It’s beautiful, don’t get me wrong, but it also announces their presence.”

I looked over at my grandmother. “I’ll go with him,” I said. “If Malys figures out what we’re up to, then she’ll have to come to Lysa to get us. I don’t think she’ll do that.”

“You don’t?” Helen asked.

“If we know anything about her, it’s that her spell is failing, and more and more people are rejecting her as their Queen. Her grip on her power is weak.

If she leaves the throne for too long, her enemies will take it from her.”

“And you know that for sure...” Helen trailed off.

“I’m a Royal. I guess I know a thing or two about how the game is played. Not that mother ever had that problem, but she was a *legitimate* Queen, not an impostor.”

I could see her hesitation, her reluctance. Sending me and Valerian to go and look for Radulf was dangerous, and I knew it. We both knew it. We also knew I couldn’t sit around and wait for them to try to contact my parents, and we couldn’t all go chasing after my brother.

These were two separate paths unfolding in front of us, and we couldn’t take them both one after the other. We were going to have to split up if we wanted to see where these paths led us, and considering we were going to need all the help we could get to defeat Malys, we didn’t have a choice but to follow them both.

We needed my brother *and* we needed my parents. There was no guarantee we would accomplish either task, but we had to try.

“I don’t think splitting up is a good idea,” my grandmother said. “I can’t condone this course of action.”

“I’ll go with her,” said Gullie.

“What?” asked Melina.

“I’ll go with them to Lysa,” Gullie continued. “I can set up a telepathic link between me and my wife, we’ll be in contact the entire time. That way, if anything happens, we’ll know about it instantly. Plus, I’ll be able to make sure Amara doesn’t get into too much trouble.”

“Who says I’d get into trouble?” I asked.

“You’re like your mother. Trouble follows you.”

Grandmother Helen’s conflict didn’t seem to settle much, and Melina’s apprehension was clear. She didn’t want to be separated from Gullie, but judging by the look on her face, she also seemed to understand what was at stake.

“Alright,” Melina conceded. “You’re right. Amara could do with a babysitter.”

“Hey!” I frowned.

Gullie beamed, her little green body glowing brightly with excitement. She spun around to look at me. “Consider yourself *babysat*. Let’s get packed and hit the road.”

“Now, hold on just a moment!” said Helen, raising a finger of protest.

“There’s much to discuss!”

“I’m sure there is, but we’re on the clock, and if we don’t head out now, we won’t make it to Lysa before nightfall. Right?”

Valerian considered the question. “Colbolt is strong. He can get us there before nightfall.”

“After that, it’s just a case of finding his friends and seeing what they know. If they know something, we follow the trail. If they don’t, we come back. Easy.”

“You sure make it sound easy, Gullie,” I said.

“It’s probably not going to be nearly as easy. I actually think we’re heading into mortal peril, but that’s never stopped me before!”

Grandmother Helen came over to me, placed her hands on my shoulders, and sighed. “Are you sure about this?” she asked.

“I... have to try to find him,” I said. “He’s my brother, and he’s out there, alone.”

“If Malys gets to you before you get to him...”

“I won’t let that happen. Besides, if she does get to us, you’ll know about it.”

“That doesn’t make me feel *any* better.”

I nodded. “I know. Focus on trying to reach my parents, I’ll bring Radulf home, and then we can end all of this.”

Helen nodded, gave me a kiss on the forehead, and smiled. “I can see both of them in your eyes, your mother and father. I think they’d be immensely proud of you if they saw you right now. And take this, for good luck.” In my hand she placed a small leather thong with a green emerald attached to it.

“Thank you,” I said, “We can find out just how proud my parents are when we get them back.”

She gave Valerian a hard expression. “You had better keep your hands to yourself,” she said.

My cheeks flushed bright red and hot. “Grandmother!”

“I mean it, mister,” she continued. “Otherwise, I’ll turn you into a *toad*. I’ve done it before.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” he said.

After having spoken to Melina, Gullie buzzed over to me and sat on my shoulder. “Ready?” she asked.

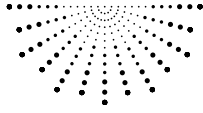
“Not in the slightest,” I said, “But people are counting on us.”

“We’ll find him,” she said, “If anyone can, it’s you.”

“And if we can’t?”

“Let’s try not to think about that.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Though my body ached, and I longed for a hot bath and a warm bed, we didn't have a choice but to set out and hit the snow hard and fast. Colbolt was a trooper, always ready to venture into the great outdoors. Gullie was equally excited to finally see a little action. I had never met a more adventurous Pixie in my entire life.

Valerian, though... Valerian was tight jawed and vigilant. He wasn't exactly silent about his suspicions that we would run into more trouble than we could handle in Lysa. He was probably right. Having left my grandmothers' cottage, we were now exposed to Malys' gaze. We had to assume that she knew where we were going, or at least, where we would be.

Her knowing where we were didn't guarantee an attack, but it made it far more likely than if we had remained in the cottage—though that place's protective power probably wouldn't have lasted forever. We were on the back foot, here. Malys held all the cards. All we could do was press forward as fast as we could, and hope she wasn't waiting for us when we got to where we were going.

Where we were going was Lysa, the *City on the Fjord*.

It was beautiful, especially at night. The city, a glittering, shimmering sprawl of twinkling lights and fires, looked peaceful as we crested the hill that overlooked the base of the valley in which Lysa rested. In the bay there were ships, as still as statues, their sails picked up and tucked away. Even from up here I could smell the warmth of the hearths burning through the night.

I had never been here before. I had barely set foot out of Windhelm before now. Now that I was here, taking in this breathtaking sight, I had a

hard time feeling joy. I couldn't help but feel like a captive, like I had been forced to miss out on all the beauty Arcadia had to offer.

Only it wasn't my parents' fault; it was *Malys*.

"It's stunning," Gullie said.

Colbolt snorted and padded the snowy ground beneath his hooves.

"What's a bigger word than stunning, then?" Gullie answered Colbolt as if she had understood him. Maybe she did?

"I don't think we should be wasting time looking for words to describe this place," said Valerian, his tone stern, and cold. "We're here. We should get to work."

"It's the middle of the night," I said, "And we've been riding all afternoon. I need sleep."

"She's right," Gullie added. "We won't be of much use if we're all exhausted."

Valerian took a deep breath in through the nose and exhaled. "Alright," he said, "We'll get to my safehouse and go from there... assuming we are allowed into the city."

"Allowed in?" I asked, frowning. "Won't they just let us in?"

"Some people remember you, remember us. Whether they do or they don't, the city's guard probably have orders to watch out for us."

"Are we going to sneak in, then?"

"Something like that. Your grandmothers packed robes for us to wear. Put yours on and let me do the talking when we get to the gate."

"You're going to talk to the guards?"

"You are more recognizable than I am."

"I'm pretty sure they'll be expecting two people riding in on a Maukibou. The robes probably won't do us much good."

Valerian tapped the pommel of his sword. "That's why we have a Plan B."

"I don't like Plan B," said Gullie.

Colbolt snorted again, but it was too late to try to find another way into the city. We didn't have a choice but to go through the main gate, and hope the guards didn't attack us on sight. It was a big bet, with really bad odds, but I had to trust that Valerian would be able to see us through... difficult as that was for someone like me.

The ride down from the top of the hill felt painfully slow. Knowing that we were headed right into the heart of danger made things worse. Still, I

pulled my hood up, held myself close to Valerian, and waited with Gullie tucked in behind my hair.

“You should try to relax,” she whispered.

“Relax?” I asked, “How can I relax?”

“Because we’ve got this.”

“You aren’t scared?”

“Terrified, but I have to admit... sitting here, holding onto your hair, kind of reminds me of the old days with your mum. Riding into adventure together, me sitting on her shoulder, taking on Wenlow, crazy spirits, trials.”

“Your thirst for adventure is never going to cease to amaze me.”

“Good. I am amazing. And I’ve got your back... you know that, right?”

“I do... I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ve been hurt before. It’s not that bad. Wounds heal.”

“Yeah, but this... have you ever faced anything like this before?”

“Guards? Sure. Tons of them.”

“No, I meant Malys and what she’s doing.”

“Oh... no. Nothing like that. The Veridian was a powerful storm that brought up all kinds of nastiness, but it didn’t write us out of history.”

“All the more reason for you to leave at the first sign of trouble, then.”

“Um, I may be six inches tall right now, but I’m your auntie and godmother. *You’ll* be the one to bolt at the first sign of trouble. Is that understood, young lady?”

“I guess we’d better avoid any trouble, then.”

“Ideally, yes. Right now, that rests on your boyfriend’s shoulders.”

My cheeks burned bright and hot. “He’s not my boyfriend,” I hissed.

“Oh? What is mister tall, dark, and silent to you then?”

“You know he can hear us right now, yes?”

“I absolutely do know that, yes.”

I shut my eyes and sighed. “Why do you hate me?”

“I could never hate you, but considering you are your parents’ daughter, you are way too modest for your own good. I blame your castle upbringing, and all those fancy staffers you had.”

“We’re almost at the gate,” said Valerian.

My face was so warm, I was sure fingers of steam could be seen rising up and over the lip of my hood. I didn’t dare look up at Valerian. All I could do was sit there, wait, and watch as we approached the gate. There were no guards on this side of it, and the gates were shut, but once we got near

enough to it, someone called out from the ramparts above the gate itself.

“Halt,” came a stern voice. “Come no closer, traveler.”

Colbolt snorted, and slowly came to a stop. Valerian raised a hand. “Well met,” he called out, “I request entry into the city.”

“The gates are closed for the night,” came the reply. “Come back tomorrow.”

“We have nowhere to go, and my sister is ill. Please, we require a warm hearth, a meal, and a bed.”

“*Sister?*” I whispered.

“Trust him,” said Gullie.

A pause from the guards. “What has she got, then?” another voice called out.

“A fever, and she is in desperate need of food. Our rations were stolen on the road here.”

“Is she contagious?”

“She is not. If you would open the gate for us, we will quietly make our way to my home. No one need see or interact with us. There is no danger.”

I dared to look up and around Valerian’s shoulder. There were two guards standing on the ramparts, and both of them seemed to be in a closed discussion with each other. I wasn’t sure if they had bought Valerian’s story, though. They seemed suspicious, cautious eyes looking over at us every couple of seconds as if trying to identify Valerian.

If they didn’t let us in, Valerian was going to trigger plan B, and I hated plan B. I didn’t want to have to hurt anyone, not if it could be helped. These people were under a spell, enchanted, convinced the reality they could see and hear all around them was the real one. They had done nothing wrong, and they didn’t deserve to get hurt.

Or die.

“Alright, open the gate,” came a voice from one the guards. “But if you cause any trouble...”

“You will not even know we are here,” said Valerian. “Thank you for allowing us to return home.”

I heard the gate’s mechanism begin to clunk and turn. The main gate opened, and it was large enough for all of us to go through—even Colbolt. I held tightly to Valerian as we moved past it, careful not to raise my head and make eye contact with any of the guards around us. I could see their feet, and I could hear them standing near us as Colbolt trotted gently past them.

Luckily, they didn't stop us, they didn't check me, and they didn't give us any more grief. They simply let us through, closing the gate behind us. Once we were clear of them, I took a deep breath and exhaled. "That was close," I said.

"It's not over," Valerian said, under his breath.

"What do you mean?"

"They didn't believe us."

"What? How can you know that?!"

"Because one of them is following us right now. Don't look. Colbolt, pick it up a little."

Colbolt did as he had been asked, gently accelerating so as to try to lose the clanker who was following us. I could hear him, now, that armored suit of his making all sorts of noise as he tried to keep pace with our Maukibou. We weren't exactly hard to miss, but once Valerian steered Colbolt into side streets and back alleys, it became clear, the guard hadn't been able to keep up with us.

"How did he know who we were?" I asked.

"I'm not sure that he did, but I think he was suspicious," Valerian said.

"We should get inside and lay low."

"What if she knows we're here?"

"She knows... either they'll tell her, or her magic will."

"We can't stick around, then. We have to go."

Valerian hopped off Colbolt's back, walked up to a door, and unlocked it. "We aren't going anywhere," he said, as he opened the door. "You and Gullie get inside, eat, and get some sleep. I'll take Colbolt somewhere safe and come back for you."

"Wait, where are you going?"

"I can't very well go find my contacts with the Princess of Windhelm at my side. Stay here, I'll be back before dawn."

"And what are we supposed to do until then?"

"Like I said, sleep, and eat. You'll need your strength tomorrow."

"Are you telling me you're going to do this all on your own tonight?"

He shook his head. "Unlikely. I'm going to see if any of my contacts still recognize me. If they do, I will try to get an audience with the Guild of Hunters. That won't be tonight, but the sooner I start the process, the sooner we can get one."

"Valerian, I don't like this," I said. "Sitting around on my hands isn't my

strong suit, especially when we're probably already compromised."

"Me either, but we're on the clock." He helped me off Colbolt's back and held me for a moment, his firm hands gripping my shoulders. "I'll be back. I promise."

"And if you don't come back?"

Valerian grinned. "Don't mourn me for too long. I'm not worth it."

My eyes widened. "Valerian!" I hissed.

"Gullie, take care of her?"

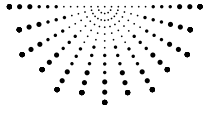
Gullie came buzzing out from inside my hood. "Always," she said. "Come on, let's go."

I gave Valerian another incredulous look. I hadn't come all this way to be sidelined, but right now, I didn't have much of a choice. There was no way he was going to bring me with him, so all I could do was head into the safehouse and wait.

And wait.

And wait.

CHAPTER TWELVE



It wasn't until he was gone, and I was about to enter Valerian's safehouse, that I realized where I actually was and what I was about to do. I had only ever heard of this place, this mythical, magical wardrobe of weapons and armor tucked away somewhere in Lysa. This was the place he was taken from when the Royal Selection came calling. The place he had called home for... a long time.

And I was here, at its door.

Entering felt surreal, not because I felt like I was entering his past, but because the place was so... barren. There was barely anything in here except for a bed, a couple of chests, and a large wardrobe. There was a table, too, and a single chair. Both table and chair were covered in weapons and bits of armor, from daggers, to swords, to leather corslets.

There wasn't a hint of anything remotely homely, or comfortable, or decorative. This place was spartan, and purely functional, just like he was. And maybe he liked it that way, maybe he enjoyed the ascetic life, one where everything he surrounded himself with had a purpose, a reason for it being there. I supposed I was disappointed.

At least, I was until I realized I could smell him on everything.

No one had been here since the last time Valerian had opened that door, and his scent lingered. I could smell his hands on the pommel of the swords strewn across the table, on the armor hanging off the chair, on the feather pillow at the head of his bed.

Weirdly, that was all I needed, enough to soothe the disappointment. He had already opened up to me about having had nothing, and how he'd had to fight to survive his entire life. He didn't care for small comforts, let alone

luxuries. Entering his safehouse confirmed all of that. It confirmed *him*. Another reminder that I could trust him at his word.

“What a boring room,” Gullie said as she buzzed around.

“It’s perfect,” I said.

“Perfect? What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s... him.”

Gullie hovered in the air not far from my face. She moved in slowly, watching me carefully. “You’re totally smitten by him, aren’t you?”

My cheeks reddened. “What? Absolutely not.”

“So, when did you know?”

“Know what?”

“When did you know you had feelings for him? Was it before or after you learned about your bond?”

My eyes widened. “We are not having this conversation right now...”

“Seems like the perfect time to have it, doesn’t it?” Gullie buzzed away, hovering over to the table with all the weapons on it, her green Pixie glow casting light on each individual blade of metal around her. “So?”

“So, what?”

“*When did you know?*”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Come on, that’s not true.”

I groaned. “I really don’t want to have to do this.”

Gullie smiled. “Your mother knew almost right away.”

My eyes narrowed, and I paused. “Didn’t my father kidnap my mother and bring her here against her will?”

“Kind of, yes.”

“Kind of? That’s what happens to everyone who gets drafted into the Selection. Even Valerian.”

“Okay, that’s *not* true. Most of them know they’ve been called in, they spend years and years training for the event. Those who don’t need... fetching.”

“You’re starting to sound like Tellren.”

Gullie shook her head. “Maybe I am, but the guy knows what he’s talking about, so I’m going to choose to take that as a compliment. Anyway, your mother... yeah, she knew pretty much right away. She knew before she had the whole soulmate thing explained to her,” Gullie paused. “Which made things really weird considering the Royal Selection is supposed to seal a two

Fae into a soul bond.”

“Yeah, that *is* weird. It’s almost as if Fate has a sense of humor, forging bonds between two Fae only to then shove them into the Royal Selection where they risk not being able to act on that bond—or worse, have it get destroyed when someone else wins.”

“They always act on the bond,” she added, chuckling. “*Trust me.*”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“I don’t know. What do *you* think it means?”

“I think you’re suggesting I’ve acted on the bond.”

“Have you?”

More redness flushed into my cheeks. When I didn’t answer fast enough, Gullie zipped over to me. “You *have*, haven’t you?!” she said, her eyes wide.

“I really don’t want to be discussing this with you,” I said.

“You’ve said that. I’m your aunt. If you can’t tell me, who can you tell?”

“My mother.”

“*Psh.* You wouldn’t. She’d send him far, far away. She’d be a hypocrite, of course, but she’d still do it.”

“And why would she be a hypocrite?”

“Well, because she and your father were madly in love well before the Royal Selection finished, and like you, she didn’t think she would end up with him when it was all over.”

“If I had stayed where I was, I would’ve ended up with Lord Cyr.”

“I’m not so sure. I think you would’ve found your way to your before, in the end.”

“How? Cyr was clearly going to win. Not on his merit, obviously, but because he was more of a crowd pleaser.”

Gullie shook her head. “The Royal Selection isn’t about who wins and who doesn’t. Yes, the winner gets a soul bond with a Royal, but that’s twice in a row, now, that the Royal has already had a soul bond with a contestant. Your mother ended up with your father, even though she was absolutely not going to win the competition. Not from the beginning, anyway.”

“I didn’t want Valerian when I first saw him. I didn’t want anyone.”

“Maybe not, but you’ve gotten to know him since all of this began. I don’t think that happened by accident.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Fate is all powerful, and its reach goes far beyond even what we can comprehend. Fate can start cooking up a scheme thousands of years before

any of us are born. For us to think that we can truly manipulate it, or interfere with it... it's bullshit, honestly."

I could almost hear my grandmother Pepper yell '*language!*'

"So, I was meant to meet Valerian, I was meant to run away from home, and I was meant to let this crone interfere with Fate?"

"Maybe it's not as clear cut as that. All I'm saying is, you and Valerian meeting, your bond, and the circumstances you have been thrown in... those didn't happen by accident."

"No. They were choices. Choices I made."

"Because of choices others had made for you. Choices that go back years, and years."

I paused. "How did this go from me sleeping with Valerian to us getting into existential philosophy?"

Gullie jabbed a finger at me. "So, you *did* sleep with him!"

"That's not—!" I protested, cutting myself off. "I mean, it's not what I meant."

"You can drop the act. I'm not going to tell you that you've done something wrong. I actually think he's good for you."

"Good for me?" I frowned.

"Well, look at you. The old you would've gone racing after him to try to figure out where he was going and what he was doing. Or worse, you would've rushed headlong into the castle and gotten yourself killed or tortured. Instead, here we are, staying put and waiting."

"It's not that I didn't want to go after him."

"No. You trust him to do what he said he would do and come back. That shows restraint. It shows growth."

"You sound like a self-help book."

"Ugh," Gullie shuddered. "When did *I* grow up? I miss the old days. The adventure, the action, narrowly escaping death at every turn!"

"Aren't you happy?"

"Oh, deliriously so, trust me. It's just been a long year of sitting on my hands, that's all."

"Right... I forget it's been that long over here. It's only been a week or two for me."

Gullie shook her head. "That's not a good sign, either."

"What isn't a good sign?"

"The time difference. It means the worlds are drifting further apart."

I frowned. “They are?”

“There’s usually a push and pull. Sometimes Earth and Arcadia are close, and when they’re close, the time differential comes closer to zero. Other times, when the worlds are further apart, the time differential grows. Days there become weeks here. It looks like the difference has grown to days becoming months. That’s never happened, as far as I know.”

“But... it’ll go back to how it was, right? You said there’s a push and pull, like a tide.”

“I really can’t answer that.”

“And if the worlds keep drifting?”

“You ever pulled too hard on a rubber band? I don’t want to say it’ll get to that point because I don’t know, but it’s possible that the connection will break entirely.”

“Gullie, my grandmothers are here. Arcadia is *not* safe for humans, even witches. They can’t stay here forever.”

Gullie gave me grave eyes. “I know.”

I sat down on Valerian’s bed, exhaling deeply. “Great. Something else to worry about.”

“We just need to figure out how to beat Malys, that’s all. If we can put things back to the way they were, then your grandparents can go home again, and we can all forget about this nightmare.”

“This suddenly got really depressing.”

“Arcadia is a rollercoaster of ups and downs these days. Welcome back, I guess.”

We spent a little while in silence after that. I had a lot to think about, a lot to lament and scold myself for. I kept thinking about the day Valerian and I met. I was with my mother, and we were greeting Royal Selection contestants as they headed for their trial. I remembered Lord Cyr, and how outwardly flamboyant he had been. Everybody loved him.

Everybody except me.

Valerian had been the last contestant to come through the doors. Unlike the others, he *looked* like he didn’t have any money to his name, and even though to most other people that would’ve been a turn off, for me, it was refreshing. Until he came up to my mother and I and introduced himself, I hadn’t really even known who he was.

He was the one who was winning all of his trials, but that didn’t matter when it came to the Selection. What mattered more was flair, personality,

charisma. If a Fae had all three of those things *and* they were winning their trials, they were most certainly the ones who could take the whole thing home.

Valerian flew under the radar, until I saw him, until I met him.

Thinking about it now, I knew then that there was something between us. I had felt it, even if I didn't want to admit it. Maybe if I had allowed things to run their course, trusted my parents... maybe things would've been different. Maybe I would've ended up with Lord Cyr, but then again, maybe not?

Gods.

I hadn't wanted to *end up* with anyone back then. I didn't care for a relationship, or for love. Those things weren't as important as my need to be free, and unbound. Now look at me. Valerian had been gone for barely a few hours, and all I could do was wrap myself up in his scent and talk about him.

Was this truly growth, or had I just traded one all-encompassing, selfish need for another?

A knock at Valerian's door sent me shooting out of bed. There was a pause, a moment of silence, then I heard his voice.

"It's me," he said, before opening the door.

Gullie buzzed up into the air, half asleep and flying lazily. She yawned loudly. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost morning," Valerian said.

"Did you find him?" I asked.

"Not your brother," he said, "But we have an audience with the Huntmaster later today. Go back to sleep."

Gullie yawned again. "You don't have to tell me twice," she said, and she let herself fall at the foot of Valerian's bed with a light thud.

"Is it... safe to speak to him?" I ventured.

Valerian simply nodded. "He knows who I am. He's been waiting for me."

"That sounds ominous. Did you learn anything else?"

"No," he said, removing his coat. He threw the coat onto the floor and fluffed it up to make a pillow for his head. "You should rest. We're going to need it."

"You're sleeping on the floor?" I asked.

"You keep the bed. I've slept in worse."

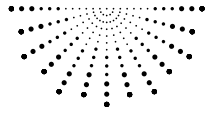
When it was clear he wasn't going to change his mind, I sat down on the bed again. "Do you really think the Huntmaster will know where my brother

is?”

Valerian laid down on the floor and looked up at me. “If anyone does, it’s him.” He paused. “We’ll find him, Amara. I promise.”

I nodded at him, then let myself gently down onto the bed. Barely a moment later, I felt one of his hands climb up along the side of the bed and go searching for mine. I held it, and like that I fell asleep, giving finally into exhaustion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Things were happening quickly. I wasn't upset by that. Before I knew it, morning was upon us, and I could hear the hustle and bustle of the world beyond the door to the room we were in. It was unreal, listening to the voices of Fae, the pushing of carts and wagons, the clip-clop of hooves. It was nothing like being in London with its horns, and its engines, and that almost suffocating thickness in the air.

By the time I woke up, Valerian was already awake. I caught him fitting himself into the suit of leather armor he had left hanging on the back of the chair the last time had been in here, sliding his powerful arms into the sleeves and buttoning it closed at the front. He then picked up a long sword and slipped it into a sheath, following that by pushing daggers into his boots.

Wherever he was going today, he was ready.

I sat upright on the bed and yawned. Valerian turned to look at me. Gullie was still lying face first on the bed, snoring lightly. "Morning," I said to him, maybe a little sheepishly.

"Good morning," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Surprisingly, yes. How long were we out?"

"Long enough."

I watched him grab another longsword and test the weight of it in his hand. "Do you think you have enough weapons?" I asked.

"If it were up to me, I would bring more. It pays to be prepared."

"Clearly."

He stretched his hand over to me, presenting the longsword for me to pick up. "Take it."

I shook my head. "One, I can't use that thing. Two, I can shapeshift."

He frowned. “You’ve never swung a sword before?”

“I mean... I’ve swung a sword before.”

“Fencing doesn’t count.”

I paused. “Then I’ve never swung a sword before.”

“You fenced?”

I nodded. “It was mandatory training. It never went anywhere. Once I learned I could change my form and become a wolf, playing with swords lost its appeal.”

“You won’t always be able to shapeshift...”

“Untrue. I can *always* shapeshift. It’s as easy as breathing.”

“It didn’t look that easy on Earth.”

“I guess... but we’re not on Earth anymore.”

Valerian grunted. “Take it anyway.” With a grin, he added, “You can pretend you know how to use it, and when the time comes, *I* can use it.”

“I’m not holding your sword for you.”

“What? *What?!*” Gullie asked, her wings buzzing and picking her sleepy body up as she rubbed her eyes. “What did I just hear?”

“Oh, my Gods, Gullie, *nothing*. Look.”

Gullie stared at the sword in Valerian’s hand. Her bleary eyes narrowed. “Good...” she said. “Because if I get a whiff of any funny business—”

Warm embarrassment flushed against my cheeks. “—could you not, please?” I begged, interrupting her. “How about we just go and do this thing? Is it time?”

There was a hint of mirth on Valerian’s face when I looked back at him. He withdrew the sword, placed it on the table, and nodded. “Our meeting with the huntmaster is at high noon. We should make our way over to the guild hall before then.”

“Counter point,” Gullie said, “How about we eat first, then go to the guild hall? Is there time?”

Valerian walked over to the chest in the back of the room. He unlocked it, opened it, and pulled out a cloth bundle that he then began to unwrap. Inside the bundle was an assortment of dried meats that looked and smelled like hard leather. I picked one up, sniffed it again, and took a bite. To my surprise, it wasn’t awful. A little dry, sure, but edible.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A little of this,” said Valerian, “A little of that. It helps if you don’t think about it.”

“Oh no... it’s not Maukibou, is it?”

“No. It’s not Fae either.”

“It worries me that he had to say that,” said Gullie, who was trying to pick up a piece that was bigger than she was.

I rolled my eyes and took another bite. “He’s messing with us,” I said.

“Is that something he does often?”

“I’m not known for it, no,” said Valerian. “But it’s easy with you two.”

I smiled at him. “Please stop,” I said, as I took another bite.

We didn’t spend too long in his safehouse. Once we had finished eating jerky, it was time to head out and find the guild hall. I had to admit, I was a little nervous to head into the busy streets of Lysa—what if someone spotted me? What if we were arrested? But there wasn’t any other choice, so I pulled up my hood, and followed Valerian out.

The knot in my stomach untied itself minutes after we left. The people on the streets didn’t care about me, most of them wouldn’t give me a second look. The ones who did were the street vendors and the trinket peddlers; those with something to sell, who would go out of their way to speak to everyone they could.

Lysa was nothing like Windhelm. Though the streets of Windhelm were larger, and just as busy, there was a serene quiet to them. Everywhere you went, music graced your ears, though you would never be able to figure out where it was coming from. And no one pushed past each other to get to where they were going, either.

I had been shoved around more times in the last few minutes than I had been my entire life before now. This city was chaotic. A gaggle of sound, and smells, and Fae. It was fascinating and magnificent, and the deeper I went into the experience, the less tense I found myself. Even Gullie seemed to relax, although she was more drawn in by the heady aromas wafting off the food carts than she was with anything else.

I could tell the weird jerky Valerian had fed us hadn’t really done it for her.

We didn’t have time to hang around, though. We had woken up with just enough time to make it to the guild hall before our meeting with the huntmaster. When Valerian had mentioned a guild hall, I had expected a large, grandiose building that stuck out from the others around it, but we seemed to have stopped by a side door in a quiet alley.

Valerian knocked, and after a moment, a slit in the door opened and a pair

of eyes appeared.

“Beautiful weather we’re having, isn’t it?” asked the eyes.

“Too cold for my comfort,” said Valerian.

The slit drew closed, then the person on the other side of the door began to unlock it.

“That’s a dumb password,” Gullie said against my ear.

“Not if you’re Winter Fae,” I whispered, “We’re never too cold.”

The door opened to reveal a tall man with a wide jaw on the other side of it. He examined us with dark, dangerous eyes, then gestured with his head for us to get inside. Once we were through the door and in the small room beyond it, he scanned the alley and slammed it shut behind us.

“Rolan’s inside and waiting for you,” he barked.

Valerian nodded, then placed his hand against the small of my back and ushered me toward the adjoining room. I pushed the door open and entered a room that was much larger than the one we had come from.

There were round tables here, surrounded by stools. Some of the tables had empty cups and plates on them. There was a bar nearby, a wall of barrels behind it and goblets hanging off hooks. The place was empty, but I could smell the remnants of the breakfast that had been consumed in this place a short while ago.

From a door in the back came a woman with fair skin, pointed ears, and a braid of white hair. She scanned us all, then walked over to the bar and stood behind it. “Take a seat,” she called out, “Rolan will be down in a moment.”

“Thank you, Irena,” said Valerian.

Irena cocked an eyebrow and frowned at him. “I haven’t seen your face around here for a while,” she said. “We all thought you were dead.”

“Rumors of my passing have been gravely exaggerated.”

Feeling like I had to interject myself into the conversation, I pulled my hood down as I took a seat. Irena’s eyes widened, her eyebrows arched, but that was as far as her reaction went. “So, it’s true,” she said.

Valerian looked back at me, his eyebrows pinching in the middle of his face. “I thought I asked you to keep that hood up,” he said.

“We’re in a safe place, right?” I asked.

“It’s not safe yet.”

“You can all relax,” Irena said, “It’s not like I’m going to summon the guards on you... *Princess*. That would require effort.”

“Is that all?”

“I could give a rat’s tail about who’s Queen, or King, or Princess. Valerian’s one of ours, though, and you’re under his protection. So long as that’s true, you have our protection as well.”

“Thank you,” I said, curtly nodding.

“She seems nice,” Gullie whispered. She was hidden by my hair, and speaking quietly enough that I didn’t think she could be heard. “Ex-girlfriend, maybe?”

“Shut up,” I hissed.

“I’m just saying, it looks like they have history.”

“Probably not that kind of history.”

“You sound threatened.”

“I’m absolutely not threatened.”

“Is that why you lowered your hood and made a statement?”

“We can *both* hear you,” said Valerian as he took a seat.

Irena grinned. “And it’s not that kind of history,” she added, from all the way across the bar. “Hunters don’t get involved with other hunters. It gets messy.”

“Could you ask the chef to cook us up some breakfasts?” Valerian asked. “Our Pixie friend is still hungry.”

“I’ll see if there’s leftovers in the back,” said Irena, who then returned to the room she had emerged from.

My cheeks were burning. “Sorry...” I ventured.

“About what?” asked Valerian. “You weren’t threatened.”

“I shouldn’t have pulled my hood down.”

He shook his head. “You were right, we are in a safe place. I’ve been so used to running and looking over my shoulder, I don’t know when to let my guard down anymore.”

“It’s probably best that we don’t, though. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“But she had to,” Gullie said, “Because she likes you.”

“*Gullie!*”

“What? It’s true.”

“You don’t have to say it like that.”

“It’s more fun if I do.”

I buried my face in my hands. “Oh, my Gods.”

“I couldn’t believe it when I heard the news,” came a gruff, male voice from somewhere nearby. “You’re really back.”

Coming down the stairs to the right was a man wearing a suit of leather

armor and carrying almost as many weapons as Valerian was. The Fae, who I could only assume was Rolan, had broad shoulders, but a lithe physique. His hair was long, and dark, and he had a pair of antlers growing out of his forehead that curved around his skull.

Valerian stood. “Rolan,” he said, “It’s good to see you again.”

Rolan came all the way down the stairs, walked up to Valerian, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I can’t believe my own eyes. We all thought you were dead.”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard that this morning.”

Rolan clasped both of Valerian’s shoulders, now, and stared at him almost like a father would look at a son who he hasn’t seen in a long time. A father who had spent days, weeks, and months worrying themselves sick about their son’s whereabouts and wellbeing. It made me think of my own father, my mother, and my brother.

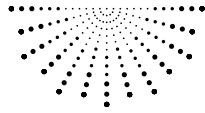
Him especially.

My parents were gone, exiled, but my brother remained in Arcadia, well aware of everything that had happened, and with no way of knowing where I was or if I was still alive. I couldn’t wait to see him again, to ease the pain he was in; to ease the pain we were *both* in.

“What in all the worlds have you gotten yourself into, boy?” Rolan finally asked.

“The Royal *fucking* Selection,” Valerian grunted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*B*y the time Valerian was about halfway through recanting our story to Rolan, Irena had returned from the kitchen with a round of breakfast for all of us. The smell of the sausages, the potatoes, and the eggs brought me back to London, to the *English Breakfasts* Pepper was only eager to make for us.

While Rolan and Valerian spoke, Gullie and I ate, scratching the itch we'd both had ever since we left my grandmothers' cottage yesterday. Gullie was only small, but she had an appetite like a Moon Child, and Moon Children needed to eat often, especially after a fight in which we were wounded, like I had been yesterday. I was just good at masking the discomfort.

Thanks mum and dad.

"*Unbelievable,*" Rolan finally said. "Your story could be published and sold as a work of outlandish fiction that no one would believe was true."

"I'm not that good a writer," Valerian said.

"Still, such a thing hasn't happened to our world since the Veridian." He glanced over at me. "Which her family was also involved in. Troublesome, these royals."

"Hey, that wasn't my family's fault," I said.

"It was, but I'm not passing judgment." He paused. "What happens in Windhelm rarely affects the Fae outside of the city's borders, but this crisis has touched us all. I still recall the exact moment I remembered Valerian existed, the moment I knew the Queen was an impostor. I was in the middle of a hunt, stalking a Wenlow through the forest. Clarity came so suddenly, it was like a bolt of lightning had struck my brain, causing me to lose my

footing and fall. The creature heard me and charged. Had I taken a second longer to recover, it would have skewered me on the spot.”

“I’m glad it didn’t,” I said.

“As am I.” His eyes went back to Valerian. “But I suspect you haven’t smuggled Winter’s Daughter into the city to tell me about your story... you want something.”

“I do,” said Valerian. “Information.”

“Information?”

“I am looking for someone.”

“We are hunters, Valerian, not spies.”

“The person I am looking for is...” he paused, “Someone the guild might consider a person of interest.”

“My brother is a person of interest?” I asked.

Rolan’s eyes narrowed. “Ah,” he said, “That makes sense. Winter’s Daughter searches for Winter’s Son.”

“I do... do you know where he is?”

“As it happens, we do. Or we did. The moment he left his village, our hunters had eyes on him.”

“So, do you know or don’t you?”

Rolan took a deep breath. “The Alpha of the Moon Children made for the mountains after he was ousted by his tribe and sent away. We tracked his movements for a few weeks, but we lost him once he entered the realm of the Frost Giants.”

“Frost Giants...” I breathed. “Why would he have gone there?”

“I cannot say. Perhaps he thought they would shield him from his tribe... they hunted him relentlessly, but they abandoned their search once he disappeared into the mountains.”

“Maybe he took his chances with the giants...” said Valerian, “I can’t imagine being tracked and hunted down by Moon Children is pleasant.”

“There are ways of tricking our senses,” I said. “But I’m sure you both know how to do that very well.”

“It’s true,” Rolan said, “Our hunters are capable of tricking Moon Children into losing our scents. We travel invisibly through their forest and have done for centuries. That was when there *was* a forest, at least. Now we steer clear of that entire region.”

“Do you know where the other Moon Children went after the forest was cut down?” Valerian asked.

“As far as we can tell, they sealed the entrance to their grove and cut themselves off from the world once they gave up the search for their former Alpha. No one has seen a wolf in months, nor heard their howls at night.”

“And my brother is with the Frost Giants,” I said, trailing off.

“At least, that’s the last we heard of him,” Rolan said. “It’s possible he continued through their territory once he got there and emerged on the other side of it. It’s also possible he was killed...”

The words stung. I had to swallow the ball that had surged up and into my throat just then. “He’s not dead,” I said. “He’s smarter than that. If he went up into the mountains knowing he’d find Frost Giants there, he did it for a reason.”

“Perhaps,” Rolan paused. “But he is lost to the world, now.”

“He’s not dead, and he’s not lost unless I give up my search.”

“Venturing into the mountains is a fool’s errand. You are more likely to get yourself killed in the search than to find him up there.”

Valerian shook his head. “I’m afraid we don’t have a choice.”

“You truly believe he can help you?” asked Rolan.

“The witch’s spell is failing, but in that failure she’s growing more desperate, and more dangerous. If we are going to remove her from her throne, we are going to need help. She believes Radulf Wolfsbane is the help that we need, so I’ll help her find him.”

Rolan stared at Valerian, his expression grave and stern. “You are going to get yourself killed, Valerian.”

Valerian looked over at me, a softness in his eyes I hadn’t seen until now. “Maybe,” he said, turning again to Rolan. “Maybe not. But I can’t sit idly by while this woman consumes all of the Winter Kingdom. You cannot be happy living like this.”

“What is one ruler compared to another?” Rolan asked. “The little folk may be better or worse off, getting into and out of Windhelm is more difficult these days, and perhaps there is an air of oppression about the land. But such is the way of life when we live under at whims of royals. To us and our hunters, the current Queen’s reign has made no difference.”

“But she’s not the Queen,” I said, standing bolt upright. “She’s *not*. She stole something that wasn’t hers, and if we don’t stop her before she gains any more power, who knows what she’ll do with her throne? Maybe you aren’t suffering now, but you will suffer if she wins this battle.”

“And you know that for sure, Princess? You are certain her rule will be

worse than that of your parents, or your grandparents? The great Bear of Windhelm... the one who would've burned the entire Kingdom if it brought his firstborn son back from the dead?"

"My grandfather was hurting."

"And in his torment he committed atrocities for which we all suffered. Your mother and father's rule had been quiet, yes, but our people were only slightly better or worse off with them on the throne. The same can be said for Malys."

"So, you're happy for her to just stay there? Is that it?"

Rolan sighed. "This is personal for you, I understand. But try to understand my position for a moment."

"I understand it just fine. You could care less who's on the throne so long as your operation doesn't get interfered with."

"If you were in my position, you would want the same. I cannot help you."

"I didn't ask for your help," Valerian said. "But you're wrong."

Rolan frowned. "Wrong?"

"I am one of your people, Rolan. I am a hunter, a member of your guild, and I was also ripped from the minds of the people of my kingdom. Allowing Malys to continue her rule and cast out the royals forever means casting me out as well."

"Valerian..."

Valerian stood. "You have made yourself perfectly clear. I thank you for your hospitality and for the information you have given us. We'll take our leave, now. Amara, Gullie?"

Gullie fluttered off the table and leapt back onto my shoulder, her small wings pulling her body through the air like a little green bullet.

"I want to help you," Rolan said, almost scrambling to stand. "I do. But you have to consider what that means for me, for the guild. We are hunters, not soldiers."

"I did not come here asking for you to give me an army. I only wanted information that I could use to track down her brother. We will fight Malys and her loyalists ourselves while you sit here in your guild hall and cower."

Rolan squared up to Valerian, shoving a stool out of his way so that he could reach him. "Take that back."

"I won't. First you try to dissuade me from going after Radulf Wolfsbane, then you insult this woman and her family without cause before telling me

you won't offer aid I have not asked for. You are not the Fae I remembered."

"Valerian, I'm warning you. Take those words back. Please, sit down and let us talk this through. Let me help you see sense."

"Something's not right," Gullie whispered.

I backed up a step, knowing I would be heard if I spoke. I instead tilted my head rapidly, to let Gullie know that I had heard her.

"Look," Gullie said, tugging on my left earlobe. "The door is closed, and I think I just heard it lock."

My blood drained from my face and my heart started to pound. I had been too busy listening to the conversation between Rolan and Valerian to have noticed anything else. Gullie, on the other hand, had been quietly observing the place. "Valerian, we need to leave," I said.

Valerian looked at me, and the moment he saw the pallor of my skin, he turned to Rolan and grabbed him by the scruff. "What have you done?" he snarled.

"What I had to do to ensure the survival of my guild," Rolan simply said.

Valerian pulled Rolan closer to him. "I should kill you where you stand," he said, his voice low and filled with lethal intent.

"Do it. I deserve nothing less for what I have done." I heard the outer door open, now, and the clanking of metal boots entering the building. "I'm sorry, Valerian. It was the only way."

"Amara, get away from the door," Valerian barked. "And you, give me the key to the underground passage. Now."

"It's no use. They have every exit surrounded. There's only one way out of here, and it's bloody."

I heard the inner door unlock. As soon as it did, I rushed toward a nearby table, flipped it onto its side, and shoved it toward the door, doing my best to keep it notched between the door handle and the indents in the stony ground so that the door wouldn't open.

That was when I heard a metal fist slam against the door. "In the name of Queen Malys Wolfsbane," someone yelled from the other side, "Open this door!"

"This won't hold them forever," I called out to Valerian.

Valerian let Rolan go. "You have killed us, then," he said, shaking his head. It wasn't anger I heard in his voice, but an intense kind of sadness laced with disappointment. Rolan had meant a lot to him. There may even have been something fatherly about their bond. Whatever it had been before, I

watched it shatter, now, because Rolan had sold us out knowing full well who Valerian really was; he hadn't been enchanted, or under a spell.

The worst part was, I couldn't blame him for putting himself first. Hadn't I done the same?

"We need to get out of here," Gullie said. "How are we going to do that with all the exits blocked?"

"They aren't all blocked," came a voice from behind the bar.

"Irena, what are you doing?!" Rolan hissed.

Irena came striding out from behind the bar, a dagger held in her right hand and a ring of keys in her left. "We can't stand here and watch them get taken away," she said. "I won't be able to sleep at night, and neither will you. It's not too late to fix this."

Rolan shook his head. "Either they get taken, or we get killed. Don't you see?!"

"Let the soldiers come, then. We'll buy time for Valerian to escape along the rooftops. Those clanky soldiers won't be able to reach them up there." Having said that, she handed the ring of keys over to Valerian. "Go," she said, "And make this all right again."

"Irena, we *can't*!" Rolan said, backing away from Valerian and appearing like he was ready to draw one of his blades.

Irena aimed the tip of her dagger at him. "*We don't abandon our own,*" she said. "Those were your words before they were ours."

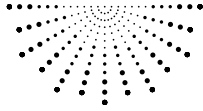
"Alright, break it down!" I heard one of the soldiers on the other side of the door yell. Not long before that, the door started to shake, and thud, and splinter in places. When I saw the tip of a sword poke through it, I knew, it was time to go.

I raced around the table where Valerian stood, grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward the stairs. "Thank you," I said to Irena. "I won't forget this."

"I don't think that matters much," she called out. "We may well be dead by the time you leave this building. But on the off chance we survive this, I appreciate it."

Valerian looked like he wasn't done with Rolan, but when the door began to break apart into smaller pieces of itself and the first soldier tried to squeeze his way through, it was clear even to him that we had to leave. So, as fast as we could, we made for the roof, and prayed we would find away out of this.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The keyring we had been given came in handy when we reached the door that led to the rooftop. Not only had that door been locked, but so was the trapdoor at the top of the ladder that would take us outside. We crammed ourselves into the room with the ladder, shut the door and locked it, and then made our way up and outside.

As soon as Valerian pushed open the trapdoor above us, I heard the sounds of shouting, yelling, of heavily armored soldiers moving around to gain a better position. From somewhere underneath us a soldier called out, *they're on the roof!* I thought of Irena, and hoped she hadn't been killed for letting us escape as I made my way outside.

I was about to run over to one of the rooftop's edges, when Valerian grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me back. "If they are smart," he said, "There are archers waiting for us to do exactly what you were about to do."

"I don't which way to go," I said, "How am I supposed to jump off this thing if I don't know where to jump to?"

"That way," he said, cocking his thumb over his shoulder. "That's our way out."

"That's a sheer ledge."

"There's a rooftop on the other side of it, about seven feet across and four feet down."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know this building like the back of my hand, and I was the one who planned this escape route to begin with."

"If you know about it, then Rolan knows about it, which means the soldiers know about it."

“All we need to do is stay out of sight and keep moving.”

“And go where?”

“We get Colbolt, then we get out of the city.”

“Valerian, you aren’t thinking right. If the Queen’s soldiers came for us here, and they have us surrounded, then they’ve closed the gates and blocked every possible way out of Lysa.”

“Trust me, I have an idea, but first we need to get to Colbolt. We can’t leave him here.”

“I definitely agree with that,” said Gullie. “Amara, it doesn’t look like we have many options, here.”

I shook my head. “Alright, fine. We’ll do it your way.”

“Good,” Valerian said. “How are your magic reserves?”

“My... what? Good, I think. I haven’t had to use any magic since we got here.”

He nodded. “Keep it that way. We’ll need it.”

“What? *Why?!?*”

“Just trust me!” he yelled, and he tugged me along with him as he rushed toward the ledge of the building. Already I could hear arrows go whizzing past my ears—he had been right, there were archers waiting for us to make our move. He was also right about the distance to the other rooftop, which at first glance I wasn’t sure I could clear.

I didn’t hesitate, though. Instead, I launched myself through the air after him. Valerian landed on his shoulder and tucked into a roll, while I landed on my feet, momentum still pushing me forward. I could hear the guards around us yelling at each other, announcing our positions, our directions. We didn’t stop moving. Instead, we continued forging ahead, leaping from rooftop to rooftop following Valerian’s path.

It was a rush. *Exhilarating*. The wind in my hair, the arrows going past us, the adrenaline surging through me. I hated how alive I felt when I was in the midst of this kind of activity, but I needed that anger because it gave me focus. It helped me clear my head and maintain my concentration on what I was doing, where I was going, and what my body needed to do to make sure I achieved that goal.

Time slowed to a complete stop the moment we reached ground level, though, and found ourselves face to face with three of the Queen’s soldiers all clad in steel, and one tall, slender looking man draped in a violet cloak. I couldn’t recognize him, his face was pale, and his hair was dark and long, but

he had no antlers on his head.

He stepped ahead of the soldiers and raised his hand toward us. "I'm afraid this is where the road ends for you," he said with a soft, floaty voice. "Surrender now, and you will not be harmed."

"If you want us to surrender, you should've brought more soldiers with you," said Valerian.

"Soldiers were never going to keep you two contained," said the strange Fae in the violet cloak. "Which is precisely why I'm here." He turned his hand upside down, and in his palm erupted a small, blue flame which quickly grew in intensity.

Valerian drew his sword, but I didn't wait for this Fae to strike us with magic. "Hold on tight!" I said to Gullie, and I threw myself to the ground, shrugging into my wolf form and snarling at the magic user.

"Cute," he said, "But that won't help you."

He pulled his hand back like he was about to launch a ball of fire at me, and I surged toward him, ignoring the three soldiers behind him and aiming to knock him off his feet. My jaws widened, I turned my head to the side, and went to clamp my teeth around his midsection, but the Fae in the violet cloak burst into a cloud of smoke and disappeared.

My jaws slammed shut on nothing but air.

"What the hell?!" Gullie shrieked.

"Over here," came that soft, almost melodious voice. By the time I turned my head to the side, I was struck with something that felt like a sledgehammer made of ice and cold fire. It knocked the wind out of me and threw me to the ground, dazed and entirely spun around.

As I went to right myself, I saw the three Fae converge on Valerian's position, trying to encircle him so that he couldn't escape. I wanted to help him, but this spellcaster wasn't about to let me go anywhere unless I dealt with him first. Considering he could burst into clouds of smoke, that was going to be difficult.

"Come quietly," said the Fae with the fire hands. "Your friends will be spared, for our Queen is merciful."

"She is not our Queen," I snarled. "She stole that throne, and I intend on making sure she doesn't keep it."

"Queen Malys would like you to reconsider your stance. She has already stated her terms... do you agree to them?"

"That woman is insane if she thinks I'm going to allow myself to be

exiled like my parents were. Don't you see what she's done to this world? To you?"

"Thanks to her, I have attained power like I never would've dreamed. Or should I say, thanks to you?"

Steel clashed on steel as the soldiers moved in on Valerian. I turned my head in time to catch him lock swords with one of the soldiers. With a hard shove, he sent the soldier stumbling back, arms pinwheeling before the soldier hit the ground with a loud thud. In an instant, though, another soldier was on him, sword swinging violently at Valerian; swinging with intent to seriously injure, or even kill.

Meanwhile, I was only being winded.

Delayed.

Malys was serious... she didn't care about whether my friends lived or died, but she needed me alive. By resisting, I was gambling with their lives, but giving in to what she wanted from me was worse, wasn't it? Condemning Arcadia's Winter Kingdom to live under her rule, to suffer under the yoke of her tyranny, that was way worse.

A breeze rolled in, and on the back of that breeze I caught a scent that I felt was getting stronger, growing nearer.

Colbolt.

"You can tell your Queen I'll never submit," I said.

"Pity..." said the Fae. "Perhaps she could have found a place for you, but you lack the imagination to see the kind of future you could have had if you had only cooperated."

"I am Amara Wolfsbane," I said, as swords clashed around me and clanking soldiers converged on our position. "I am the rightful Princess of Windhelm, heiress to Winter's Throne, Daughter of the White Wolf and the Vanquisher of Evil. I will never submit this realm to suffer an impostor's rule."

"Then you'll die," said the Fae, and wound back his arm, the fireball in his hand suddenly growing in intensity.

I rose up onto my legs and took my Fae form, preparing myself to avoid this Fae's cold, fiery blast of magic. That was when Colbolt strode onto the scene, hooves pounding heavily against the snow. He came shrieking around a corner, his head low, his antlers poised. With a sweeping gesture of his neck, he picked up one of the soldiers and sent him easily ten feet into the air. Valerian, seizing his chance, slammed the side of his sword against the head

of the last, still standing soldier, knocking him out cold.

The spellcaster hadn't yet launched his fireball at me. He seemed like he was considering his choices, especially since now there were three of us standing before him, and the soldiers backing him up were still trying to get to where we were.

"Amara!" Valerian yelled. He was already getting on Colbolt's back.

I swung around, taking Valerian's hand and leaping up and over the Maukibou to land on his back as well. "The gates are closed," I said, "We'll never make it out of here."

"Hold on," Valerian yelled, and he urged Colbolt to start moving. The Maukibou took off just as the Fae spellcaster launched an icy blue bolt of magic at us. The magic shrieked through the air, missing us only by a hair's length. "Take us to Earth," said Valerian as we turned a corner.

"What?! I can't do that!"

"You can. And this time, you can bring us back, too."

"Valerian, we'll lose time..." I said. "The longer we spend on Earth, the shorter our window gets."

"We don't have a choice."

"Dammit," I cursed, but he was right. I didn't think about it again. Without wasting another second, I performed the necessary gestures and summoned my power to create a gateway between worlds. Colbolt had brought us into a long, empty stretch of alleyway that I could do this in, placing the portal far enough away from us that I could open it before we reached it.

I was sending us back to London, back to Carnaby Street. I couldn't believe we were going back.

"For the record," Gullie said, "I hate this plan."

The portal crackled open, and the Maukibou surged ahead and took us through it, leaping as he reached the threshold. When he landed, it was in the middle of a busy, pedestrianized street. People screamed and cleared out of our way as we made our entrance, bringing with us a hail of snow and wind all the way from Arcadia.

When Colbolt caught his footing and stopped, I turned around to seal the portal, only by the time I managed to force it closed, the spellcasting Fae had managed to teleport his way through it. The portal shut, leaving a flurry of snowflakes in its place, and the figure of the Fae who had chased us across worlds.

“That,” he said, charging another bolt of magic into his hand, “Was a grave mistake.”

“Get us out of here!” I yelled, and Colbolt snorted and started to move, only he didn’t rush deeper into Carnaby Street which was full of frightened people—instead, he headed for the road. Car horns blared and tires screeched as we entered the stream of oncoming traffic, but Colbolt was nimble enough to avoid hitting any vehicles as he ran.

“This was a really bad idea,” Gullie said, “A really bad idea!”

“We’re going to need another portal,” Valerian said. “Can you do that?”

A bolt of icy magic streaked past us and struck a black London cab. The magic crackled over the cab, transforming it entirely into something like an ice sculpture which exploded into a million shards of ice a moment later.

“Holy shit!” I screamed. “We’re going to have to lose this guy first!”

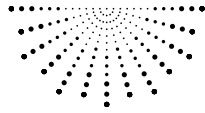
“You heard the lady,” Valerian called out. “Run, Colbolt!”

But I didn’t think that was going to be enough, because the spellcaster was hot on our heels, teleporting from place to place. I needed a clearing if I wanted to create a portal back to Arcadia, and at least a moment of concentration for me to be able to pull it off. But we were rushing through the middle of a busy, London street, and every second spent here could’ve meant minutes passing in Arcadia—maybe even hours.

Bringing us here once had meant the difference between life and death.

Bringing us back here a second time could’ve doomed us all.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Colbolt ducked and weaved past oncoming traffic like he had been born to do just that. He galloped hard and galloped fast, leaping this way and that, avoiding cars as they came toward him with all the grace a Maukibou could muster. He was quick, and strong, and capable—and so far, he was keeping us ahead of the spellcaster who wanted to turn us into *popsicles*.

After the initial chaos Colbolt had caused by rushing out onto the road, traffic seemed to grind to a halt, allowing Colbolt to make much more calculated movements as he dashed through the street. Valerian hadn't even needed to encourage him or tell him where to go; our Maukibou had told us in no uncertain terms that *he got this*.

All we had to do was take care of the arsehole behind us.

“Get down!” I yelled, and all three of us lowered our heads just as bolt of magic came shooting toward us. This streak of blue light slammed into a traffic light, turning the entire pole and all the mechanics into ice in an instant. The ice shattered a moment later, small shards and chunks raining down on us as we zoomed past it.

People on the street screamed and began to get clear of us and the lunatic chasing us. That helped. The fewer humans there were around us, the smaller the chance that any of them would get sucked into the portal I was trying to get opened. The last thing I wanted was to accidentally pull humans into Arcadia where they could get lost, or worse, become Wenlow.

“We need to lose this guy,” I said, “I need to concentrate if I want to be able to take us home.”

“I don't have any ranged weapons,” said Valerian. He then pulled one of

his daggers out from one of his boots. “But I have this.”

I leaned to the left to give him a shot at the Fae chasing us. He wasn’t running, to be sure; he was keeping up with us by teleporting, bursting into a cloud of smoke in one place only to appear almost next to us the moment after. There was no way of knowing where exactly he would show up next, so Valerian couldn’t exactly line up his dagger for a decent shot.

“I need to get him to stop doing that,” he snarled.

“I could try to interrupt his magic,” I said, “But I need every ounce of my own power that I can muster if I’m going to send us back home. If we get stuck here, with my grandmothers in Arcadia... there’s no going back. Ever.”

“It won’t come to that.”

“Whatever we’re going to do, we have to do it fast. We’re on the clock.”

“I know. Let me think.”

The Fae on our tail teleported onto the roof of a car not far from where we were. He was about to launch a bolt of magic at us when Colbolt leapt into the air and soared over a car, leaving its driver entirely stunned. The blue magic bolt sailed right past us only to slam harmlessly into the side of a building a moment later.

“There!” I yelled, “Colbolt, over there!”

Colbolt turned his head to look at where I was pointing, then he rapidly changed course and moved toward an alleyway between buildings. For a moment I wasn’t sure if we were going to fit through the narrow gap, but Colbolt managed to squeeze through without losing any speed. Suddenly, we were in a long stretch, without a car or a human in sight.

“This is it,” Valerian said, “Do it!”

“Right,” I said, nodding. I pulled my hands up and began performing the necessary gestures, drawing my magic out of me and sending it directly ahead of us where it could begin to coalesce.

Queen Malys’ lackey, however, wasn’t done with us just yet. I wasn’t even halfway done summoning the portal when I felt him teleport behind us. Valerian looked over my shoulder, and without hesitating, he launched his dagger at the spellcaster. After I heard it clatter against solid ground, I knew, Valerian had missed.

“Fuck!” he cursed.

Ahead of us, the portal was beginning to take shape, but the spellcaster appeared in front of it, blocking our path. Colbolt picked up the pace, his hooves slamming hard against the concrete. If he was too quick, we would

overshoot the portal before it manifested. If he was too slow, that spellcaster was going to turn us into a block of ice.

And I was powerless to stop him.

Gullie suddenly flew out of my hair and surged ahead, leaving a trail of green Pixie dust in the air behind her. “Gullie!” I screamed, but she couldn’t hear me.

I had never seen her fly so fast before. She had shot past me like a bullet, her body glowing more brightly by the second. As the spellcaster went to wind back his arm and hurl a bolt of magic at us, Gullie’s body suddenly shone like a small, green sun. Colbolt lowered his head, and I shut my eyes to shield them from the light, having succeeded in opening the portal only a fraction of a second before.

The bolt of magic that was meant for us never came. Colbolt grunted, then leapt into the air. I felt my stomach lurch and tilt, and when we landed again, it wasn’t on solid concrete, but on crunchy snow. We were back in Arcadia, the cold air caressing my skin, a fluffy flurry of snow circling around us.

Opening my eyes, I turned around and concentrated on dismissing the portal—on shutting it as quickly as possible. That bastard spellcaster was far too quick for me again, and he managed to slip through just as the portal shut, locking us in Arcadia once more. Only before he could lift his hand to attack us again, Valerian hurled one of his daggers at the Fae’s chest, and this time, it hit the mark.

The spellcaster’s eyes went wide, his body turned suddenly rigid, and a trickle of blood spilled from his lips. He then fell face first into the snow, limp, and dead.

Panting, gasping, wordless, I let the moment roll over me. We weren’t in Lysa anymore, we weren’t on Earth anymore, and Malys’ thug lay dead in the snow. I had never seen someone die in front of me before, had never witnessed another person’s bloody death. But despite the gravity of what I had just seen, there was only one place my mind instantly went to.

“Gullie!”

The word shot out of me like an explosion. The portal was shut, the snow falling listlessly around me. With my eyes closed as they had been, I hadn’t seen where she had gone, hadn’t seen her fly through the portal ahead of us or after us.

Frantic, panicked, I went to throw myself off of Colbolt’s back, calling

out to her like a mad woman... when Gullie replied.

“Would you stop yelling?” she croaked. “I’m here.”

“Oh, my Gods, Gullie,” I breathed, turning around to find her tucked in Valerian’s other hand.

“I caught her as we went through,” he said.

Gullie pulled a thumbs up. “Plucked me right out of the air,” she said, her voice weak, and strained. “I’m impressed... and tired, and hungry as hell. Doing that takes a lot out of me. I’m also surprised I didn’t burn his eyes out.”

“I wasn’t looking. I guessed.”

I threw my arms around Valerian’s back. “Good guess,” I breathed. “And thank you, Colbolt. You’ve saved our lives more times than I can count.”

Colbolt snorted, shook his head, and then padded the snow. He was also breathing heavily, but he wasn’t injured, and neither were we. The only problem now, though, was to figure out how much time had passed since we were on Earth. We had left Lysa during the morning, now it was night, but was it the same night?

“Where did I bring us?” I asked.

“Shouldn’t you know that?” asked Valerian.

“Generally, yes, but I had to guess... I’m not sure where I’ve put us.”

Valerian handed Gullie over to me, then he hopped off Colbolt’s back and walked around the area to get his bearings. Meanwhile, Gullie sat upright. “I’m going to try to reach Melina,” she said, “But that little stunt I pulled has left me a little wiped out. This could take a minute.”

“Do what you can,” I said, although I wanted to tell her to hurry. I wanted Valerian to hurry, too. Fate had given me thirteen days, and we were already... *Gods...* I’d lost count of how many days I had left. Travel between worlds was disorienting, even more so when you left one place in daylight and came back at night.

“Lysa is... that way,” said Valerian, pointing west. He turned north and said, “Windhelm is that way, which puts the witch’s safehouse somewhere over there, and the Frost Giant mountains...” he pointed north west, “Over there.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Certain. I put us at about two days to the mountains.”

“Two days... we don’t have any food or supplies.”

“We’ll hunt,” he said, coming back to us. “We’ll forage, and we’ll take

shelter where we can find it. It'll be rough, but we'll make it."

"With how much time to spare?"

"Going by the moon, it couldn't have been more than a few days."

"Days?! How could it have been days? We weren't on Earth for more than... a little while."

"Looks like the worlds are splitting apart faster than we thought."

"I have her!" Gullie shrieked. "Melina, I can hear her."

"How is she?" I asked.

"Angry as hell. They've been trying to reach us for days."

"Has anything happened?"

"Hold on, I'm listening to her speak in my mind *and* trying to answer you at the same time. It's too much." Gullie paused. "Okay, so, there's good news and bad news."

"What's the bad news?" I asked.

"I'm going to give you the good news first. Your grandmothers think they have a lead on how to reach Dahlia and Cillian."

My heart surged, sending ripples of excitement coursing through me. "That's great!"

"The bad news is, they're going to need to act out a ritual if they want to *actually* reach them, and that ritual is going to take a few days to complete."

"Okay... how long will it take? And how long have we been out, exactly?"

"It's going to take them about two more days to finish the ritual. We've been gone for three."

Valerian's eyes turned grave. "By my count, that gives us about five days to find Radulf and topple Malys before our clock runs out."

"That's really rough math," I said.

"That's my best guess."

"Melina and Tallin are watching over your grandmothers," Gullie said, "They're okay over there—Malys can't seem to be able to get to them, or maybe she doesn't care."

"We should go back to the cottage," I said, "You should be with your wife."

"We've discussed that. I'm going to stay with you."

"Are you sure?"

Gullie nodded. "I'm your godmother. It's my job to protect you, and I'm going to do exactly that."

I took a deep breath, then nodded. “I guess there’s nothing else to it, then.” I patted Colbolt on the rump. “Are you alright to keep going? It’s technically still morning as far as my body is concerned.”

“Travelling at night is dangerous,” said Valerian. “We should find shelter somewhere and gather supplies before we set out for the mountains.”

“That’s going to slow us down even further.”

“I know... but I don’t want to risk running into a Souldirge in the middle of the night. That’s how we get killed, and all of this ends.”

I sighed. “Alright,” I said. “Please tell Melina to stay safe, and to let us know if anything happens.”

“I already have,” said Gullie, as she fluttered up into the air and took her place on my shoulder. “This is it,” she said. “We head for the mountains, find Radulf, and stop Malys.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It is easy... we just have to not die and kick some witch ass.”

Valerian hopped on Colbolt’s back. “I like the way she thinks,” he said.

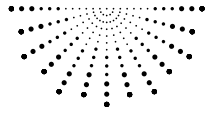
“Yeah...” I paused. “She’s the most badass Pixie I know.”

“Damn right,” said Gullie, and under cover of darkness, we set out toward the frigid mountains, the realm of the Frost Giants of the Winter Kingdom.

Secretly, though, I wasn’t sure we were going to find my brother up there. I had no idea why he would’ve headed for the hills, so to speak, and even though I had to trust that he had a reason, I just couldn’t see it. I couldn’t understand it, and that inner turmoil made me start to feel like we were heading into a trap, especially since that hunter Rolan set us up for Malys to capture us in the first place.

I didn’t want to lose hope, but already I could feel my own resolve starting to break, and I really couldn’t afford to let it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The Winter Kingdom was eerily quiet. Days had passed, and we hadn't spotted a single caravan on the road. I hadn't left the castle much before now, but whenever I had ventured out of its walls—even if only to go slightly past the bridge—the world had been full of songbirds, auroras, and the scent of Maukibou and riders alike.

This world we were travelling through now felt barren, empty, and entirely unrecognizable. Arcadia's Winter Kingdom was more than just snow and ice as far as the eye could see. It was light, and feeling, and *magic*; not some frigid arctic hellscape barely capable of supporting life. We had managed to find food by foraging and tracking down small animals, but it seemed as though most of the big game had just... left.

Still, we ventured onwards toward the mountains, travelling by day and resting at night. We didn't have many supplies with which to set up a camp, but thanks to Colbolt and his fluffy fur, we at least didn't have to worry about freezing to death on the snow while we slept.

Valerian's math had so far been right, however. It took us about two days to reach the snowy foothills of the mountain range my brother had disappeared into; the realm of the Frost Giants. Fingers of snowy air curled over the mountains' quiet, icy peaks, sending a glittery spray across the range. It was a serene sight, mighty and majestic, but about as empty as the rest of the Winter Kingdom.

There wasn't an ounce of movement save for the odd rolling snow, and there were so many paths Radulf could've taken. How in the world were we supposed to find him up there? The mountain range was huge, peaks and valleys as far as the eye could see.

I hopped off Colbolt's back and stood next to him. Valerian look down at me. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said, looking up at the mountains. "I guess I'm trying to figure out if I can catch his scent."

"He passed through here a long, long ago... it would've vanished by now."

"His scent, yes, but there's another thing Moon Children do when they're... marking territory."

"His pee..." Valerian trailed off. "You think you'll be able to catch wind of his pee?"

"It's incredibly strong. If he marked a rock on the way up, maybe to ward off other animals or other Moon Children, I may be able to sniff it out."

"That's gross," said Gullie, "But I don't have any ideas. It's not like there are any signs pointing us to where the Frost Giants live. They don't exactly like visitors."

"What do you know about them?" I asked.

"I know Winter went to war with them long ago. I know they haven't been seen in a while. I know Fae who go up into those mountains often don't come back."

"There are many things in those mountains besides Frost Giants that could kill Fae," Valerian said. "Frost Giants are pretty low on that list."

"Really?" I asked.

"They don't like to be bothered, so they hide. They're almost entirely undetectable. As long as you don't cause any trouble, and they don't consider you a threat, they'll leave you alone. But the mountains are treacherous... anyone without the proper training wouldn't survive up there."

"He survived," I said, nodding to myself. "He's the strongest, smartest person I know. He's up there, somewhere, and I know he's waiting for me."

"Do you really think that?"

I looked up at Valerian. "I have to believe it. Otherwise, what's left?"

He gave me a somber nod after a moment. "Alright," he said, "I can't believe I'm going to say this, but let's try to find your brother's pee."

I shrugged out of my Fae skin and took my wolf form, striding ahead of Colbolt a few paces before turning my head and calling them to follow. Gullie decided to stay with me, so she held onto my neck, nestled in my fur as we made our way into the foothills and began the climb.

It wasn't long before I realized, we had come to a path carved along the

side of the mountain. Looking up and down the mountain range, I couldn't find very many more paths like this one. In fact, this seemed to be the most prominent one. Valerian mentioned there were a few points along the range where someone could cross to get to the other side, but this one had been the closest one to Lysa,

It was also the pass closest to the village of the Moon Children, which meant it was the one my brother was most likely to have headed toward.

Even with my enhanced, wolf-like senses, I hadn't been able to pick up his trail. There were other scents—small animals, bugs, and of course, all that snow and rock. But no Radulf. At least, not until I made it about halfway up the mountain pass.

There was a small outcropping of rock that created a kind of natural alcove which was mostly shielded from the elements. It was there that I first caught wind of what could've been my brother. It was a strong scent, and it was definitely someone's pee, but it had been there for so long it was difficult for me to tell whether it was his or not.

The good thing was, there was enough of it for me to be able to pick up a trail and follow it. With nothing else to go on, I picked up the pace and made sure not to lose the scent. Colbolt, ever the trooper, was able to keep up with me as I hurried up the mountain side, though that wasn't surprising. Wild Maukibou were born in the mountains. It's where they came from.

In many ways, this was his territory more than it was mine.

Wordless, I continued my search up the mountain pass. There wasn't much to say, and I needed to conserve my energy and save my breath, which was becoming harder and harder to hold onto the higher we went. Luckily, the scent was also getting stronger and easier to follow. The only problem was, we were deep inside of Frost Giant world by now.

Already I could feel eyes on me, causing my flesh to prickle and my fur to stand up. They were here. They were probably everywhere, but we couldn't see them because they blended perfectly in with the ice and the rock all around us. All the stories I had ever been told about Frost Giants told of their ability to ambush wayward Fae that venture into their land.

No one ever sees them coming until it's too late.

"Colbolt's getting nervous," Valerian called out, "And so am I."

I slowed, then came to a halt. Turning my nose down to the ground, I tried to home in on the trail I had been following all this way. "It's stronger up here," I said. "It may even be fresh."

“Fresh?”

“Not more than a couple of weeks old.”

“He could still be long gone by now.”

“He can’t be long gone,” I said, spinning around slowly and taking in my surroundings. We were in a valley, with icy mountains rising up along either side of us. This was the perfect place for an ambush. If the Frost Giants wanted to, they could cut off our entrance and exit, and we were dead.

Only the giants had no reason to attack us. We hadn’t made any hostile moves, and there were only two of us—three of us with Colbolt. Still, my nerves were all over the place and my alertness was high. I had a scent caught in my nose that could only have been my brother’s, but I couldn’t see him. So, I did the only thing I could do.

The only thing I thought would work.

I tilted my head up, arched my neck, and howled. Only I had never really done this before, so the sound was strained, and choked, and it fell off immediately. I coughed to clear my throat, then turned sheepish eyes up at Valerian.

“*What,*” I said, a little defensively. “I don’t howl often. No one ever taught me.”

He shook his head. “Nope, nothing from me,” he said, popping a thumbs up at me. “Keep going. You’re doing great.”

“You sound like Gullie.”

“And Gullie agrees,” she said, patting the back of my neck. “Try again... you’ve got this.”

Taking in a deep breath and scanning the area around me again, I prepared to howl, only this time I noticed a small handful of rocks and snow slipping down the side of the valley and landing on the path ahead of us. *That* sent my heart into a frantic race because I couldn’t figure out what had caused it. Radulf? Frost Giants? I had no way of knowing.

I swallowed hard, cleared my throat again, and then with a deep breath held in my lungs, I turned my neck up and howled. This time, the sound was smoother, deeper, and more intentional than the first time I had tried it. I concentrated on pitch, and length, on the depth of my voice and the emotions I wanted to express.

Fear.

Hope.

Desperation.

Family.

It was hard to keep them all straight and focus them into a sound that made sense, but the longer I howled, the easier it became. It wasn't that I had never howled before—I had—but howling inside of the castle wasn't allowed, and if I did it on my little escapades out of the city, I would've been easily found. I didn't have much practice, or any practice really, but my throat seemed to figure out what it had to do after a moment or so.

When I was done with the first howl, I paused and scanned the area around me, settling my gaze finally on Valerian. "Anything?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said, "But that was... beautiful."

If I could have blushed, I would have. "Thanks," I said, "I'm not very good at—"

"Amara!" Gullie shrieked, and she tugged on my right ear, making me turn to the right. At first, I wasn't sure what I was looking at, until I realized the ice and the rock were breaking apart. Only that wasn't exactly correct. Something was coming out of the rock, or separating itself from the rock, it was hard to tell, but after a moment or so it became clear that it was a creature, and that creature was at least fifteen feet tall.

I backed up, my hackles raised, as the creature made a lumbering jump out of the natural indentation in the rock it had been hiding in and landed directly in front of me. The ground trembled, Colbolt snorted, and Valerian looked ready to draw one of his blades.

"No!" I yelled, "Don't!"

Valerian's hand went to the pommel of his sword, but he didn't draw it—not that a sword would've done him a lot of good here, in the face of this creature. In the next couple of seconds, more of these creatures emerged from the rock and the ice. Some leapt out of the walls to land around us, while others skidded down the side of the valley.

Looking at the thing standing before me, it became instantly clear that it wasn't made of ice and rock, but fur—glittering, shiny white fur that seemed thick, bristly, and rigid. It was massive, and muscular, with a powerful, bestial jaw and thick, animal facial features. Thick tusks poked out of its lips, while from the tips of its hands and its feet, claws that were at least ten inches long became plainly visible.

We had found the Frost Giants, and they were surrounding us.

"Keep perfectly still," said Valerian, keeping his voice low and non-threatening. "Don't make any hostile moves."

One of the Frost Giants took a step toward me, then another, and another. I backed up, realizing quickly that there was another one behind me. I had nowhere to go. We had nowhere to go. If I didn't do something, we were going to get mauled to death and eaten.

"I'm looking for my brother," I yelled at the creature in front of me. "He looks like me."

The giant stopped, angled its head to the side, and examined me curiously. "Little... wolf..." it gurgled.

"Yes," I said, "I'm a little wolf, and I know you could kill and eat us, but we aren't here to hurt anyone. I'm just looking for my brother. Can you help us?"

"Help?" the giant grumbled. "Why help Fae?"

"Because... well, you have no reason to help me. Our kinds haven't been friends in the past. But something terrible is happening, and I think I'm the only one who can stop it, but I can't do that without my brother."

"Terrible..." the giant seemed consider my words. "Winds change, smell no good, shiny castle dark now."

"Yes! Yes, the castle is dark. I need to make it bright again. Please, help us."

"And I can't stress this enough," Gullie added, "Don't eat us."

"I already said that."

"I know, but I felt like it needed to be reiterated, you know?"

The giant turned its head to the side and looked at its companions. They all had similar appearances, but they all looked like individuals, too. One of them was skinnier than all the others, another had a hunch back, and another one appeared to be missing several fingers. They didn't speak to each other, but merely grunted, and shrugged, and made strange, guttural noises.

Finally, the giant in front of me looked up to the top of the valley, and there, staring down at us, was a wolf, his gunmetal grey fur and tail billowing in the wind.

"Radulf," I breathed.

He disappeared, and for a moment I felt my heart squeeze inside of my chest. He emerged again an instant later, and began expertly picking his way down the side of the mountain, sliding and leaping at just the right moment so as to land behind the giant standing in front of me. The giant turned to my brother, pointed a long, sharpened claw at him, and said, "Little wolf."

"Wait..." I said, "*He's* the little wolf?"

“Around here I am,” Radulf said.

“What does that make me, then?”

“*Tiny* wolf,” said the giant, turning to look at me again. He had a big snaggle-toothed grin on his face.

“*Tiny* wolf? Come on, that’s not fair.”

“I would take it, if I were you,” my brother said as he approached. “It means they like you. Probably because you smell like me.”

I padded toward him. “It’s really you,” I said.

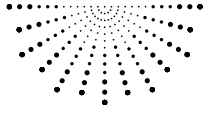
Radulf lowered his head. “I knew you would find me.”

I rushed up to him and pressed my cheek against his. The last time I saw him, he was chasing me out of his village. I had never seen him so angry before, so violent. Now, though, he was my brother again, and that was enough to make my heart soar.

“I have so much to tell you,” I said.

“So do I,” he said. “Come. Let’s head to my camp.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Up in the mountains, in one of the most dangerous areas known to my kind, my brother had made his home for the past year. It was modest, and quaint, but homely. He had built a collection of tents made from the hides of the animals he had hunted down for food. A fire pit, protected from the elements, provided light and warmth for the entire camp. He had even planted a patch of *Claire de Lune*—Fae grapes that grow year-round in the snow.

I couldn't stand that blue alcoholic stuff, but when he offered me a cup, I gladly accepted it and sat with him—Valerian, too. Colbolt seemed a little nervous, which made sense given where we were and in whose company we were in, but he settled when my brother offered him an entire pot of fresh, frozen grapes.

Gullie's reunion with my brother, however, was much more frantic. She fluttered over to him and bombarded him with questions about his wellbeing while she checked his face for signs of damage. *How are you keeping? Are you eating? Why are you up here? Why didn't you come and find me? You had me worried sick! Do you have any idea how many sleepless nights I've had because of you?*

My brother did his best to reassure her that he was okay, that he was sleeping and eating. He also apologized for not going to find her, but he was worried the Moon Children would follow him right to them. He couldn't risk them being discovered and hurt by his former tribe. Gullie seemed to accept this, and then sat down with a thimble full of *Claire de Lune* all for herself.

"To the Winter Kingdom," said my brother, raising his cup. "May it rest in peace."

Valerian and I exchanged glances, raising our cups a moment after, then the four of us took a drink. Claire de Lune was ice cold and incredibly sweet. I couldn't stomach more than a sip or two before I had to set the cup down. It wasn't that I didn't like sweet things, I had just discovered that I preferred my sugar warm, and preferably in a pastry... with cinnamon on it.

"Rest in peace?" I asked, after we drank.

"It's gone to the hells in a hand basket," said Radulf. "At this point, I don't think it's coming back."

I glanced at Valerian again, then looked over at my brother. "Well... that's why I'm here."

"I had a feeling." His eyes moved from me to Valerian. "I don't recognize your scent."

"We've never met," said Valerian. He extended a hand, only his fist was closed and balled up. My brother stared at Valerian's fist, dumbfounded. I was, too. "I saw the humans do this..." Valerian said, awkwardly pausing and examining his hand. "You're supposed to bump your fist to mine."

My brother tapped his fist against Valerian's. "Like... this?" he asked.

"I think so."

"What does it mean that we've done this?"

"As far as I can tell, it's a greeting. Nothing more."

"Good..."

I shook my head and took another drink, hoping the cup would somehow swallow me instead.

"That wasn't awkward at all," said Gullie between sips from her thimble of Fae wine. "It's good wine, Radulf. Well squeezed."

"I'm glad you like it," said Radulf. He looked at me, then. "I don't want to disappoint you."

"Disappoint me?"

"I know why you've come."

"I came here to find you."

"You're here because you need me to help fix whatever's happened to our family, to our world. I'm going to save you the trouble right now and tell you, it's not possible."

"It isn't?"

"I've tried. I've spent this entire year searching, trying to commune with the spirits of this place, searching for answers, for insight. I've even tried speaking with the Frost Giants, hoping they could impart me with some

wisdom I otherwise couldn't see for myself. It turns out they are... quite simple, and happy to stay out of the conflicts of the Fae."

"I'm not surprised. They hate us."

"They don't. The Fae have always hated them, encroached on their lands, kicked them out of their homes, but they put that in the past long ago. They took me in, shielded me from attacks."

"Attacks?"

"I left tracks that you would be able to follow, up the mountain. Some of my former tribespeople followed those tracks and tried to find me. If not for the giants, I would be dead by now."

"They look like formidable fighters," Valerian said. "They have impressive natural weaponry."

"They are strong and powerful, but they aren't warriors. They're a gentle, spiritual people. Moon Children have a lot in common with them."

"I'm glad they didn't hurt you," I said, "But I didn't come all this way just to talk with you. I'm here to tell you how this all happened, and how I can fix it."

"Fix it? I told you, it's not possible."

"But it is."

"How do you know?"

"Because..." I paused, bit my lower lip, and shut my eyes. "I'm the one who caused all this."

"I know you are."

I looked up at him, frowning. "How do you know?"

"I woke up one day knowing that the woman who was then Princess of the Winter Kingdom was an impostor, knowing that my real sister was out there, somewhere, and that I had run her out of my village instead of keeping her safe. I knew two things in that instant. One, that you were at the center of all this, and two, that I was a fool for what I did."

"It wasn't your fault. You were under a spell."

"That doesn't matter. I'm your brother. I'm supposed to protect you, and instead I sent you out there, into the cold and the dark, alone."

I took a deep breath and reached for his hand. "That was *not* your fault, Radulf," I said. "I will never hold it against you. Ever."

He shook his head. "I still don't know exactly what happened, or how it happened. I only know that Malys should not be here."

"I'll tell you everything. I will. But first, I need your help."

“Help?”

“I have a plan, but we don’t have much time. Malys probably already knows where I am.”

Radulf stood upright. “She does?”

“She knows so many things,” I said, standing up with him. “Malys is a witch, a human witch, who has somehow stolen powers that don’t belong to her. She can shapeshift, she can kill people with a flick of her finger; she’s powerful, Radulf.”

“And she knows where you are—you led her here.”

“I did, and I know that. I don’t know what she’s planning, but she’s planning something, and we need to prepare while I bring you up to speed.”

“Amara... this isn’t a fortress. We don’t have soldiers, or an army to prepare. It’s just us.”

“I know, but you know this area better than she does, and maybe the Frost Giants—”

“—I can’t ask them to get involved in our conflicts, not after the hospitality they’ve shown me.”

“Okay... okay. How about I just tell you everything that’s happened to me? Then we can figure out a next step.”

“Windhelm is lost, Amara. It died long ago, along with my hope. The best thing we can do is get away from here, go far away, to a place where Malys can’t reach us.”

“It’s not lost. Mum and dad...” I paused, my eyes watering. “They’re not lost. Not unless we stop fighting. And Malys will never stop trying to find us... but Malys isn’t even the worst of our troubles.”

Radulf frowned. “She’s not?”

“I told you I had a lot to tell you. Sit down, and let me tell you. It may just change your mind about... everything.”

My brother seemed hesitant, but he had been searching for answers all this time, and I had some for him. I could see it in his eyes, on his face, and he had said it a moment ago. He had lost hope, and I couldn’t blame him. Gullie had Melina. I had Valerian. My grandmothers had each other. Radulf was alone, all alone, and had been all this time.

Even though I had been chased, hunted down, and attacked, I felt like my brother had suffered far worse than I had.

He needed a moment to think after I explained everything to him. He wasn’t angry, or upset. Despite everything, he still didn’t blame me for what I

had done, and for that I was grateful. He had every right to blame me, to hate me for what happened. He didn't. He also couldn't believe I had been through... well, all of it.

Run out of his village, transported to Earth and back, then my grandmothers, Lysa and the hunters. It was a lot for him to process, considering he had spent the better part of a year in solitude, growing Fae wine on top of a mountain, surrounded by Frost Giants and endless snow. My brother was strong, the strongest person I knew, but he thrived in the company of others.

Wolves were not meant to live alone. This had hurt him, maybe more than he cared to admit. I knew I had to be delicate with him, coax him back into the fray, re-ignite his hope. I had no idea how I was going to do that, but I figured telling him everything was a good place to start.

Radulf took to the edge of the mountain to think after he and I were done talking. Gullie had decided to take a nap in a bundle of furs. I, meanwhile, went over to Valerian who stood overlooking the Winter Kingdom. From up here, we could see Windhelm, its once brilliant, shimmering walls now turned dark and dull, sucking the light in from around them instead of reflecting it outward like a beacon.

"He seems... nice," said Valerian.

"He is nice," I said. I shook my head. "He also may be right."

"Right?" Valerian turned to me, strands of his silvery hair whipping around the back of his head. "About what?"

"We have so little time left... we still haven't heard from my grandmothers, and Windhelm... I mean, look at it."

"It's sad to see it like this."

"For us. For everyone else, it's normal. We're the only ones who care, the only ones who can care."

"And we should, because it's the right thing to do."

"It's also going to get us killed."

"We are headed towards that inevitability regardless. You know that, right?"

"Death?" I shook my head. "It's not inevitable. Malys put a deal on the table, remember?"

"Malys is lying. She's lying now just as she lied to you the first time. Whatever she told you she can do for you, she won't."

"I don't want anyone else to get hurt for my sakes. I don't want anyone to

die for me. I would rather just let her do whatever she wants to me if it means the people I care about won't be hunted down anymore. If it means they can just live their lives."

"What makes you think they will have that luxury even if you did give Malys what she wanted from you?"

"I don't know. But it's better than this, isn't it? It has to be."

Valerian took a deep breath, then he reached for my hand, and my heart started instantly racing.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I know you hate yourself for what you did," he said. "I know you blame yourself for all of this, for putting everyone through this torment. You made a choice, long ago, that you thought was right for you. In your position, I would have done the same. We all would have. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, no one I have come across in our travels has once said they hate you or wish you hadn't done what you did. Least of all me."

"Maybe not outwardly."

"No. At all." He took my other hand in his. "When I first met you, I wanted nothing to do with you."

"I wish I could say that's news to me, but it really isn't."

He shook his head. "I didn't want to be in the Royal Selection. I didn't want to have to marry some Princess I didn't care about. I didn't want any of it... but perhaps, if I had known you better..."

I angled my head to the side. "Valerian..."

"We have been through life and death together. We have crossed the barrier between worlds, tangled with Fate itself, travelled to the very edges of the Winter Kingdom... I would not trade this experience for the world, and it would not have been possible if not for what you did."

"You realize we're probably going to die at the end of all this, right?"

"Better to have lived a short life knowing love than to live a long life alone."

My heart stopped. Skipped. Stopped again. A ball wedged itself in my throat that I had to swallow down. "Love?" I asked.

He gently tugged me closer to him. "I have never met another person like you before, and I never will. You are frustrating, you are reckless, you are stubborn—"

“—wait, where is this going?”

“But you are also kind, and brave, and strong. I will go with you to the ends of this world and the next, if it means I can remain by your side. I didn’t know we were each other’s soulmates before I fell in love with you. Now that I do, I know, it was simply meant to be.”

“You’re... in love with me...” I breathed. “Valerian, I... I...”

“You’re just as stubborn as I am,” I said, “You know that, right?”

“No, I’m sure you win that contest.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“And I’m yours. Now, tomorrow, and always.”

“He’s going to run off if you don’t say it back,” came Gullie’s voice from the bundle of furs she was wrapped up in.

My cheeks flushed, and I couldn’t help but smile. Tears began to well up in my eyes, but I couldn’t stop smiling. I took Valerian’s cheeks in my hands and pulled myself toward him, pressing my lips gently against his. “I love you,” I whispered against his mouth. “I never wanted love until I found you. Maybe I should’ve just waited and gone through the Selection. We could’ve avoided all of this.”

“That was never Fate’s plan,” he said. “Everything happened exactly as it was supposed to. Besides, you would have ended up marrying Cyr. He was always going to win.”

“You were better than he was at everything.”

Valerian shrugged. “You know that doesn’t matter when it comes to the Selection.”

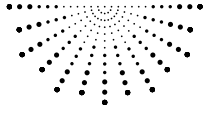
A cold breeze moved between us, then—snaking its way past my ears, along the nape of my neck, and the tips of my antlers. When it didn’t slow down but instead grew stronger, and more forceful, I knew, something was wrong. Turning my eyes up at the sky, I saw the clouds were churning, and turning, the wind picking up speed and intensity.

Then I saw my brother rushing toward me, his eyes dark and as sharp as the edge of a blade.

“What is it?” Gullie asked, sitting upright in her bundle of furs. “What’s happening?”

“She’s coming,” said Radulf. “Malys is coming.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



I knew she would come. We all did. I just hadn't expected her to have arrived so quickly, or so dramatically. The skies darkened, the clouds churned, and on the back of it all came a cackling laughter that made my blood run cold. It wasn't funny, it wasn't ridiculous, it was a chilling sound that I felt all the way in my bones.

"We need to leave," I said, "Is there a quick way down the mountain?"

"It's too late," Radulf said. "She's already here. If we start heading down the mountain now, she'll catch us on our way down, and it'll be much worse."

"We mount a defense here, then," said Valerian. "We give her everything we have."

Radulf nodded. "I like the way he thinks," he said.

"You're both insane," I said.

Gullie rushed over to me and landed on my shoulder. "I think we're going to need a bit of insane, right now," she said.

"This way," Radulf called out, as he rushed over to the overlook I had first seen him standing on. "And get your Maukibou."

"You get Colbolt," I said to Valerian. "I'm going with my brother."

Valerian nodded, kissed me on the cheek, and started running to fetch Colbolt. Meanwhile, I gave my brother chase, catching up to him at the valley's peak. Here, it felt like we were standing directly beneath the eye of the storm as it brewed above us. I couldn't spot Malys, she wasn't walking up the mountain path, but I could sense her.

She wasn't just coming—she was already here.

"Where are her soldiers?" I asked. "I can't see them down the path."

“I don’t know,” said Radulf. “We would’ve seen them by now, unless she’s using magic to hide them.”

“If she’s bringing an army, it’s coming from Windhelm, which means the only way we can go is down the other side of the mountain. I don’t know where it goes.”

“Away from Winter. There are a few settlements out there, but they have no allegiance to any court. Go far enough in that direction, though, and you’ll find the Kingdom of Autumn.”

“Autumn...”

Lightning crackled across the heavens above. Thunder grumbled shortly thereafter. I was about to speak again, when a bolt of lightning struck the plateau at the top of the valley directly across from us. Bits of ice and rock exploded in all directions, showering the valley below. When the dust settled, a figure remained clad in a dark outfit with a billowing cloak.

Her head was lowered, but when she turned it up to look at me, it was as if she had reached out from across the way and pulled my senses toward her. My breath held in my lungs, my chest tightened, and even though lightning continued to crackle and whip around us, I could only see her.

“*Hello again,*” she purred, and while her voice was only a whisper, I heard it clearly in the space between my ears.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” I yelled.

“Oh, but I do want to speak with you. I’ve come to tell you... your time is up.”

“Time? What time?”

“My offer is about to expire. I trust you have come to the right decision?”

I glanced over at my brother, but he wasn’t looking at me. His eyes were fixed on Malys, on the woman who had taken everything from him. The woman who had caused him to be run out of his own tribe, his friends, his family, even his homeland. He wanted to kill her, and if given the chance, he would in a heartbeat.

“I’m not interested in your offer,” I called out. “I know who you are, and I know you’re a liar.”

“Oh? And who am I?” she asked.

“Lydia Whitmore, the witch who tried to take advantage of my family.”

Malys’ expression darkened, even if only for a moment. Her reaction was enough to tell me she wasn’t happy that I knew who she was, and that filled me with nothing but joy. “So,” she said, “Those old witches told you.”

“Those old witches are my grandmothers, and right now they’re working on a way to send you back to where you came.”

“Are they? Or are they locked away in my dungeon right now?”

My heart surged into my throat and wedged itself there. “What did you say?”

“I *found* them, wolfling. They thought they could hide from me, but their magic is stale, and weak. It didn’t take me long to break through their defenses. I can assure you, they are safe and sound—I have not hurt them.”

“You’re lying.”

“Go ahead, find out. I know you have a direct line to one of your friends thanks to that Pixie on your shoulder.”

Gullie.

“How does she know so much?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” Gullie said.

“Can you reach Melina?”

“I... I *can’t*.”

“Fuck. What does that mean? Is she telling the truth?”

“Don’t listen to her,” said Radulf. “She’s lying. Even from here I can smell it.”

“How can you be so sure?” I asked.

“I just am. You have to trust me.”

A gust of cold air tore through the valley, almost knocking me off my feet. After I straightened out, I turned my head to the side. “Gullie... anything?”

“No,” she groaned. “Why can’t I reach her?!”

“Because they’re with me,” Malys said. “I can give them back to you, though. Safe. Unharmmed. I can even promise your friends a charmed life in my new kingdom. All you have to do is come with me, Amara. Let’s finish what you started.”

Even though Gullie was small, she was standing so close to my ear I could hear her frantic little heartbeat racing like it was going places. She was nervous, and worried; scared that her wife was locked in some dungeon, waiting to be rescued. If Malys wasn’t lying, then my grandmothers were there, too, and so was Tallin.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” I yelled.

“You don’t,” said Malys, “But my offer is about to expire. If you and your brother don’t come with me, I’ll tell my men to execute one of your

friends. It'll be slow... they'll suffer.”

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding against the sides of my neck. The air was getting thicker, lightning crackling above us, thunder rolling closely behind. Malys stood across from me, waiting for my answer, but I knew she wouldn't wait long. If she was lying, then this was a trick to get me to surrender. If she wasn't, then I had to believe she would hurt my friends, my family, if I refused.

I had no reason to believe she was lying, because so far, she hadn't—not once. I had been tricked, manipulated, and used, but not lied to, and the look on her face was the look of a person who was serious about her threats. Her mistake, though, had been to come out here alone... and my mistake was taking too long to answer.

“Time's up,” Malys said.

“No wait, wait!” I yelled, but Malys raised her hand toward the sky and sent a crackling bolt of lightning hurtling toward the clouds. The sky churned and darkened further, the gust of wind encircling suddenly became like a hurricane, roaring as it tried to push us around.

Then lightning struck the ground next to Malys, kicking up another hail of rocks and ice, and where it struck and the dust settled, a figure remained. Where Malys herself was slight and draped in black clothing, this figure was tall—easily twice her size—and white all over. It had long, gangly arms that almost reached the floor, its body was covered in thick fur, and it had these two huge, darkened eyes that looked absolutely monstrous.

“Wenlow...” I breathed. “She has Wenlow with her!”

Just as I managed to say the words, more lightning struck, delivering another one of these wretched creatures to Malys' side, and depositing two more on our side of the valley. The spray of rock and ice, and the force of the impact, was strong enough to send me flat on my ass. When the dust settled, I found myself staring up at one of these creatures up close, and my entire body froze.

I had never laid eyes on a single Wenlow, let alone *four* of them. Any one of them had the power to maim us, but with this many around us, our chances of survival had just dropped through the floor. My brother didn't seem to care for the odds, because in an instant, he was in his wolf form and hurling himself at one of the beasts.

I tried to scream for him to stop, to retreat, but he didn't listen. He clamped his powerful jaws around the arm of one of these creatures and

dragged it to the ground, despite it being much larger than he was. When the first creature fell, the second one surged into action, racing toward my brother with supernatural speed. Across the way, Malys was already heading toward us, levitating gently through the air with the other two Wenlow in tow.

“Valerian!” I yelled, and Colbolt reared, stamped the ground, and charged. Valerian raked his sword across the back of the Wenlow charging toward my brother, but he only managed to make it angry and goad it into attacking him instead doing any actual damage.

I rose to my feet and scanned the battlefield. We were outnumbered, outmatched, and we had nowhere to go, but I had to do *something*.

“Gullie,” I said, “Go with Valerian—I’m going to try to draw Malys away; it’s me she wants.”

“How are you going to do that?!”

“I don’t know! Just go!”

Gullie buzzed out of my hair and shot over to Valerian, who still had one of these wretched creatures on his tail. I turned around to face Malys, who was already almost over to our side of the valley. “Hey!” I screamed, “Leave them out of this—it’s me you want!”

“Your time is up,” she said. “I believe I promised to kill one of your friends—I intend to do so, slowly.”

“I’m not going to let you do that.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

I pulled one of the daggers Valerian had given me back in Lysa out from its sheath. “I’m sick of people saying that to me.”

“And what are you going to do with that?” Malys asked.

“Ruin you,” I said, and I turned the dagger against my own neck.

Malys halted in midair, as did the two Wenlow she was carrying with her. The other two were still engaged with Radulf and Valerian. From behind me, I heard Colbolt shriek, I heard a thud, and a grunt. Valerian had fallen, and so had Colbolt, but I wasn’t able to look over at them—I had to keep all of my focus on Malys.

“You wouldn’t,” she hissed.

“You don’t know me well enough to say that,” I said.

“I know everything about you, you spoiled little girl.”

“Then move one more inch toward me, and let’s find out.”

My hand was trembling, my heart hammering, but my conviction held firm. If this was what it took to spoil every last one of Malys’ plans, then this

was what I was prepared to do. Without me, Malys couldn't cement her hold on Arcadia, her spell would fail, and maybe—just maybe—everything would go back to the way it was.

I would be dead, but so would she, because there wasn't a world in all of existence in which Malys escaped Fate's wrath once her protections were torn down.

"I'm going to kill your Pixie, your friend, and even that Maukibou," she said, "And when this is all done, I'm going to find the rest of your family, and I'll kill them as well."

"So, you *don't* have them," I said.

Malys' eyes darkened, her jaw tightened, and her lips pressed together. "Give me the dagger, and I'll spare one of them."

"Let them all go."

"No!" she shrieked, and the mountain trembled beneath my feet. "No more games, no more offers, no more negotiations. You and your brother are coming with me."

Radulf stepped up beside me. He had taken his Fae form, but his chin and neck were covered in blue, Wenlow blood. "I already killed one of your pets," he snarled.

"There are many, many more where that came from," said Malys. "Now, be a good dog and tell your sister to drop the dagger and come with me, otherwise no one leaves this mountain alive."

"You need to kill Valerian anyway," I said, "Otherwise whatever spell you cast won't work. We're bound together—you know that."

"Trust me, once we're behind the castle's walls, his link to you won't interfere with my magic. I've had an entire year to plan for this."

"So, you won't kill him?"

"Not if you come with me."

I turned my head and glanced at Valerian. He was back on his feet, and so was Colbolt, but the Wenlow they were fighting with was also standing, and it looked entirely unscathed. The two other Wenlow Malys had brought with her landed softly near him, which made my stomach muscles tighten. They were going to kill him if I didn't give her what she wanted.

Valerian shook his head, his eyes wide.

I nodded at him, offering a slight smile. "I'll see you on the other side," I said.

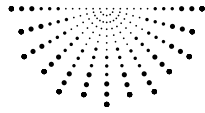
"Amara, don't do it!" he yelled.

I sighed, looked up at Malys, and threw the dagger to the ground. “Alright,” I said. “I’ll go with you.”

“No!” Valerian screamed.

Malys grinned, turned her hand up, and prepared to click her fingers. “It’s done, then,” she said, and in a flash of light, I was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY



I came to in a cell. I didn't recognize it, but judging by the biting cold of the dark, stone walls I could only have been in the palace. There were solid iron manacles around my hands and feet. The chain attached to them ran along the ground to a solid, metal platform that looked like it was bolted down. I tried to tug on the chains, but there wasn't much give.

The sound made my brother stir. He was also chained to the ground, like I was, but he was on the opposite side of the room. There wasn't anything else in here besides us, our chains, and the only door leading into or out of this place.

Radulf blinked hard as he awoke, then he tried the chains, but they wouldn't budge. There just wasn't enough room for him to be able to get a decent pull at them.

"It's no use," I said.

He suddenly grimaced as if in pain. Runes that had been invisible a moment ago flashed around the manacles keeping him chained to the ground. He breathed through the pain, then stared at the iron shackles around his hands. "I can't shapeshift," he said.

"I've never seen this kind of magic before. We have to assume she's thought of everything."

"How did we get here so fast?"

"Also magic. I told you, she's powerful."

Radulf scanned the cell. "We have to get out of here."

I shook my head. "Don't you get it? It's useless. Malys is never letting us get away... and I don't think I want to, anyway."

My brother's eyes narrowed. "What?"

“I’m sick of running, Radulf. I got us all into this, I got mother and father exiled, and then I led her right to you. I keep trying to do the right thing, but I’m only messing things up further.”

“So, what, you’re going to give up?”

I shook my head. “I don’t see another way out of this. Maybe I can convince her to leave you and the others alone if I give myself up.”

“You know she won’t.”

“What’s the alternative, then? We keep fighting, and running, and fighting, and running... we don’t have time, Radulf.”

“Fate’s hunter doesn’t scare me.”

“Well, it should. It chased me across worlds, it has the power to manipulate its surroundings to make you feel like you’re running around inside of a labyrinth. It can probably do so much more I haven’t seen yet. It would be pointless to try to keep running from something that knows where you are at all times. I can’t keep doing this.”

“Giving yourself up is worse. Far, far worse. Think of all the people of Arcadia... do you really think Malys will stop at the Winter Kingdom?”

I looked up at him, the question bouncing around in my head. “Someone will stop her.”

“Yes. *You.*”

“Radulf—”

“—listen to me. You would not have come all the way out to the mountains to find me if you didn’t want to fight her. You would’ve given up long ago, but you didn’t. You came to me, and now I’m here.”

“In a cell, bound to the floor.”

“Fine, but I would rather be here, fighting against her with you than out there on some mountain, alone for the rest of my long life.” He paused. “Were you really going to do it?”

I looked down at the ground. “It seemed like the only card I had left to play,” I said, remembering the weight of the dagger in my hand. “Malys wants her reign. I’m the one who can give it to her... or take it away for good.”

“I wouldn’t have let you do it. I’m faster than you. I would’ve stopped you.”

“I know. I didn’t want to do it either, but if it means life here goes back to the way it was, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Radulf settled against the wall and looked over at the door to our cell. “I

should never have left.”

“Left?”

“To lead the Moon Children.”

“They needed an Alpha.”

“Moon Children have selected an Alpha on their own since time began. They never needed or wanted the crown to intervene. I know my people only run me out because they forgot who I was, to them I was an outsider, an impostor, but part of me felt like they had secretly been waiting to do that for a long time.”

I shook my head. “They loved you. They still love you. I’m sure there are many of them out there right now who remember you, who remember how things are supposed to be.”

“And they’re probably killing each other as we speak.” He paused. “Mother and father didn’t give me a choice, either.”

“They didn’t?”

“The people of the Court were starting to ask questions about the Royal Selection. I was coming of age, and no plans had been set. Our parents had no intention of putting me through it... I was too young to understand why, so I didn’t question it. In any case, the wolf had only recently awakened inside of me, so I was too busy experiencing the world to care.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“It’s alluring, the first change. The wildest ride you’ll ever go on, and it only gets better from there. One day, mother told me it was my duty to lead her people. Our people. She told me who she was, the White Wolf. Told me the tribe needed an Alpha, and that I was to be that Alpha. I didn’t have to challenge anyone; I didn’t have to fight anyone. I just showed up one day, and the wolves accepted me.”

“Doesn’t that seem incredibly suspicious?”

“It does now, but back then, I was on top of the world. It wasn’t until much later, until I heard a Royal Selection was being prepared for you, that I started to ask questions. Father told me to keep my nose clean of it. Mother knew I wouldn’t put it down, so she let me in on a secret and forbade me from ever repeating the words—least of all to you.”

I couldn’t help but fidget on the spot in which I was sitting. I sat upright and gave Radulf my full attention. “What did she say to you?” I asked.

He took a deep breath. “She told me that one day, something terrible was going to happen to you, and that the only way to stop it was to make sure you

were soul-bound to someone before your twenty first birthday.”

“I’ve lost total track of time, but isn’t that my next birthday?”

“It is.”

“Wait... are you telling me she knew about Malys?”

“She told me there was someone out there who had vowed to take you away forever, and that if I went through the Royal Selection, it meant that you couldn’t. I had to leave so that you could be the one to have a bond... that a bond would protect you from the evil waiting to snatch you up.”

My little Snowdrop.

I heard my mother’s voice echo in the back of my mind, and it made my heart squeeze. I felt pain. Sadness. I missed her, and I missed my father, but I was angry as well as sad and in pain. They didn’t trust me to be mature enough to handle the situation properly. The worst part was, they were right.

I did everything I could to avoid taking part in the Selection. I skipped meetings, I ran out of the castle on days when I was supposed to be overseeing trials. I actively disliked each and every pampered Lord that came out to see me.

I made my parents lives difficult because I didn’t want to sit there and have a bunch of idiots fight over me. I wanted to run freely in the wilderness and explore my newly discovered wolf side. Instead, I was told to be a good girl, sit down, and blindly marry some random person just because they had won a contest.

I wasn’t some prized pig to be won.

I wasn’t some show pony to be paraded around the court.

I was the Princess of the Winter Kingdom, a Moon Child, and boy if I threw enough tantrums worthy of the titles.

I liked to think I had moved away from all that, now. If I had listened to my parents and done as they had told me to do, I would’ve been married off to Lord Cyr and... then what? Been made to play happy family with someone I didn’t know and didn’t care for? I would’ve driven him mad and eaten him alive—*metaphorically speaking*.

To say I would’ve inevitably ended up disappointing my parents was an understatement.

If not for Malys, I never would’ve met Valerian. I never would’ve gone to Earth and truly gotten to know my grandmothers. I never would have experienced all the wonderful and terrible things I had gotten to experience in the time since I gave away that memory. It was a stretch to say that I was

thankful for what had happened to me, for the choice I had made, but it was another step towards owning that choice and accepting that it was now my turn to pay the price.

“Why didn’t they tell me?” I asked.

Radulf shrugged. “The burden of knowledge,” he said. “They must have thought it was too much for you to know.”

“They treated me like a child, like I wasn’t capable of making my own decisions. If they had told me, if they had explained everything to me, I would’ve done things differently.”

“Really? You would’ve married Cyr knowing that the only reason was because some witch was going to come for you one day and try to steal your place on the throne?”

I sighed. “No,” I conceded. “But I would’ve tried to stop it, somehow. I was protected so long as I was in the palace, right? So, maybe all I had to do was wait until after my twenty first birthday.”

“It didn’t sound that simple to me when mother explained it.”

“Well, *I* don’t know how prophecies and ancient spells work. What I do know is that I had a bond already, with Valerian.”

“I know,” he said, nodding. “I could smell it on both of you the moment I saw you.” He took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Is he good to you?”

“I think so... I certainly feel like I’ve changed thanks to him. I can’t believe I just left him there...”

“You did the best thing for him. He’s out of danger because of you.”

“Is he? I don’t know if Malys called off her Wenlow.”

“Malys has no interest in Valerian now that she has you.”

“How do you know that? It’s my bond with Valerian that made her spell start falling apart. For all I know, he’s dead, and she’s already won.”

Radulf shook his head. “She needs *you*, not him, and she already has you. Valerian is safe. All we have to do is figure out a way to get out of here.”

“There is no getting out of here, Radulf.”

“What?” he frowned, “Yes, there is.”

“Haven’t you been listening? I’m not going anywhere. This conversation hasn’t changed my mind to the fact that I am exactly where I have to be right now, ready to pay for the consequences of my own actions.”

“You can’t give her what she wants, Amara.”

“I love you, Radulf. I do. But I’m sick of being told what I can and can’t do. This time, I want to do what’s right for everyone else, instead of what’s

right for me.”

“Do you really think everyone else will be better off with Malys as their Queen?”

“No. But maybe I can convince her to bring mother and father out of their exile... they may not be Royals anymore, but they’ll be here, and you can be a family again.”

“I’m not going to let you throw your life away like this. I won’t.”

“I’m tired of running... I’m tired of fighting... but more than anything, I’m sorry. I’m just *sorry*. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, I just wanted to be given a choice. Now I have that power, and I’m making that choice for you, for mum, for dad... for Valerian. I can convince her to make all of this right by you.”

“This can’t be what you want.”

“It’s not what I want, but it’s the choice I’m making.”

Radulf exhaled. It was a frustrated sound that conveyed exactly how he was feeling. I couldn’t blame him for not approving of what I was going to do, but even if there was another way out of this, that way out was wrought with peril, and possibly death. I wasn’t about to put anyone else in danger because of me.

“That has to be the most grown-up thing I’ve ever heard you say,” he said.

“Thanks?”

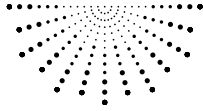
“I mean it. But I’d sooner die than let you throw your life away like this.”

“Radulf—”

“—you made your choice, I’ve made mine.”

“*You may well get the chance, Wolf Lord,*” came Malys’ voice, breathed into the room like a cold specter, suddenly and unexpectedly. “*But now is not your time. It’s hers.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The door to our cell opened while Malys' voice still lingered in the air. She stood by the door, resplendent in her dark attire, a vision of evil, ambition, and desire laced with a touch of desperation. Time was growing short for her as well. I knew it, and so did she.

Malys angled her head to the side, then pointed a finger at me from the door. "Time to go," she said.

"Go where?" I asked.

"To negotiate your terms, and then fulfil your part of the agreement in short order. We don't have all day."

"I won't let you get away with this," Radulf said, a low growl in his throat. He tried to stand, but the chains he was attached to made it impossible.

"You should conserve your strength. I wouldn't want you hurting yourself."

"You don't care what happens to any of us."

"That's not true. I let her little boyfriend live, didn't I?"

"We have no way of knowing that."

She tilted her chin up. "That's right, you don't... I suppose you'll just have to take me at my word."

"Why would I believe you?"

"Because as your sister has already discovered, I am many things, but a liar isn't one of them. Now, if you'll excuse us, time grows short." She waved her hand, and my shackles undid themselves, the manacles around my wrists and ankles falling to the floor with a metallic thud.

"Don't do this," Radulf pleaded.

"I love you," I said to him. "I know we'll see each other again."

“Amara!” he yelled, struggling against his chains.

It broke my heart to see him like this, but there was nothing I could do for him right now. This part I needed to do on my own. Radulf’s part in all of this was yet to come up, but it would. I just had to hope Malys hadn’t caught on yet, and that my grandmothers had returned from... wherever they were.

I stopped at the door to the cell and looked at Malys, the woman who wanted to take my life from me and make real her version of Arcadia. “Don’t hurt him,” I said.

“We will discuss all of that on the way to the Frost Stone,” she said. “After you.”

“Will there also be tea and biscuits? Because I could go for a nice cup right about now.”

Malys seemed not to understand me, she narrowed her eyes. “Are you asking for a last meal?”

“If you’ll allow it.”

She gestured with her hand into the corridor immediately outside of the cell I had been kept in. “After you,” she said, “And we’ll see.”

I left Radulf in his cell, as much as it pained me, and walked ahead of Malys. I was immediately joined by two armed soldiers wearing clunky, full plate armor that looked almost impenetrable. The guards escorted me up a spiral staircase, through the keep, and toward the palace proper.

I had never seen the dungeons before, had never visited them in my lifetime, but I had been to the palace before. Of course, I had. I remembered the walk well, the cold stone walkway leading up to the palace, the palace grounds with its lush topiary and its beautiful, manicured hedges.

The palace itself was—at least, before Malys got her hands on it—a wonderful sight. Resplendent. A gorgeous mansion made of the lightest marble, each stone inlaid with delicate blue filigree that seemed at times to glow, and even hum. Sitting atop the palace like a crowning jewel was the Frost Stone, a floating crystal infused with light that shone high into the sky at day and night.

People referred to Windhelm as the Beacon of Civilization in the Winter Kingdom, and because of the Frost Stone, Windhelm lived up to that name. The crystal’s light, and the beam it shot into the sky could be seen for miles, and miles, and miles. That was true, at least, for the Frost Stone I remembered. This one, though, was the opposite.

Instead of the clear blue of a sunny sky, this stone was the deepest blue of

a dark lake. Instead of reflecting the sunlight that touched it, the stone caught the light and sucked it in jealously, greedily. The palace, too, was different. It was a dark building of deep blue stone and silver latticework. It was no less beautiful, but it wasn't my home.

"Do you like what I've done with the place?" asked Malys. "It was simply too bright in here for my liking before."

"I didn't come here to make small talk," I said. "Let's just get this over with."

"You're eager to run off into your inevitable demise, aren't you?"

"The sooner we finish this, the sooner everyone else can go back to living their lives."

Malys pouted. "But not you. So grown up, so brave."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not interested in your sarcasm, either."

"My, my. You're a bit of a wet blanket, aren't you?" She sighed. "Alright, well, here we are, in the presence of the Frost Stone. Are you ready to discuss terms?"

I could feel the stone's magic thrumming. It was like a soft, deep chord being played in the background, never skipping, never beating, relentless and ever present.

"I want you to do what you have to do to me and leave my friends and my family out of it. I want you to bring my parents back from their exile, and let them, Radulf, Valerian, and everyone else live good lives, unbothered by you."

"You realize that means they'll need to forget you ever existed entirely, right?"

I swallowed hard. "I do."

"And you're truly prepared to make that commitment?"

I took a deep breath. "I am. I'm done running from my mistakes. I'm done running from you."

"I am not a mistake, my dear. You realize, I am as much as an inevitability as your decision to come here today... ever since your father humiliated me in front of my peers and made me lose everything that was ever mine."

"You did that to yourself the moment you snubbed my mother. You thought you were better than her, better than my family. You didn't like to be put in your place."

"Your father didn't put me in my place," she hissed. "Your father

eviscerated me, took everything from me.” She composed herself. “So, I vowed to take that which was most important to him, and here I am.”

“Like a wart that no one can get rid of.”

Malys chuckled. “Sticks and stones, Amara. But we’re getting off track, aren’t we? You were about to give me... well, everything.”

“Only if we have a deal.”

Malys gave me her eyes, as beautiful as they were terrifying. “I’ll bring your parents back, and they and your family shall live charmed lives under my rule. I give you my word.”

I stuck out my hand. “Then take it,” I said, hoping to all the gods that any moment now, everything was going to turn around and Malys was going to get what she deserved. But as I stood there, before Malys, before the Frost Stone, with a deal sealing my fate and that of the rest of Arcadia on the table, I started to worry.

Where was Gullie?

Where was Valerian?

Where were my grandmothers?

From the moment Malys had appeared on that mountaintop, I had been lying to her. I had asked Gullie, loudly, if she was able to reach my grandmothers telepathically, and she had said no. She had made it look like we were alone, as if no one was coming to help us. Because the moment Malys brought us to the castle and put us on the other side of Windhelm’s defensive spells, she knew, she would have us in our clutches.

But there was a wrinkle in those defenses, and it sat around my neck.

Before leaving for Lysa, my grandmother had given me a necklace to wear; a jade crystal tied to a piece of leather. To the casual observer, it was an innocuous bit of jewelry, but in reality, it was a magical artifact. All I had to do was say the words, and the artifact would activate, allowing my grandmothers to pinpoint my location and burrow their way through the castle’s defenses to get to me.

I had already spoken the words down in the dungeons, but my grandmothers were nowhere to be found.

I pulled my hand back just as Malys went to touch it. “Wait,” I said, “What about that tea and biscuits I asked for?”

Malys frowned. “You were serious...”

“I was. I am. I could really go for some *tea and biscuits* right now.”

“You are about to be forgotten, not killed. You can have tea later, now,

give me your hand and let's finish this."

Why isn't it working?!

With every second that passed, Malys grew more and more aggravated. She reached for me, grabbed my hand, and pulled it toward her. "Now," she purred, and her eyes flashed cruelly, the violet within them shining brightly, and Frost Stone hummed with power as if it had been awoken from a deep slumber. "This time, I want *all* of your happy memories."

My insides shifted, my stomach suddenly feeling lighter than the rest of me did. It occurred to me in a moment of sudden panic that this scheme we had hatched away from Malys' prying eyes hadn't worked. Maybe the trinket's magic wasn't strong enough to get a signal out to my grandmothers. Maybe they were still searching for my parents, and unable to answer my call.

Maybe Valerian... *oh no...* maybe he was dead.

He had to be.

He was my soulmate, my before. Malys' spell hadn't worked the first time because he existed, because he lived. Though she claimed so long as I was behind the castle's walls her spell would work, I had no doubt in my mind that Malys hadn't recalled all of her Wenlow and let Valerian live as she had claimed. She would have made sure there were enough of them on that mountaintop to finish him off while she returned to the castle to prepare for this.

Without my grandmothers' help, Valerian stood no chance.

My stomach sank again, a disorienting experience considering how it had lightened and lifted only a moment ago. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be forgotten. I wanted to live, I wanted to be with Valerian—I wanted my world to go back to the way it was, not plunge further into Malys' hands. If Valerian was dead... *if he was dead...* then I had just given Arcadia to her on a plate.

Panic took hold of me as I realized that the plan, our plan, may not have gone off as I had hoped it would. What if Valerian was dead in the snow right now, and Gullie along with him? What if my grandmothers were still off searching for my parents, out of our reach and entirely unaware of what was going on here?

What help would Melina have been able to offer from the cabin she was in? Either my grandmothers were about to burrow their way into the castle with the help of the emerald around my neck, or I was about to give Malys

everything she had ever wanted.

As Malys' magic began to flare and rise around me, the panic gripped my throat in a way I had never experienced before. Physically, I lost the ability to take a breath. My chest muscles refused to work, my lungs refused to take in air. As a wave of violet light encircled me, I saw my entire life flash before my eyes.

Memories of my parents came unbidden, and though I tried to fight them away, they came regardless.

The earliest image I had of my mother's smiling face came up. I saw my father there as well, and he looked so proud, so happy to see me. I remembered falling out of my bed one night, and my father rushing in to tend to my skinned knee and help me get back to sleep. I remembered my mother, the first time she called me Snowdrop. She had plucked a snowflake out of the very air, held it in one finger, and I had watched it transform into a drop of water that then froze over again.

It was magic.

Real magic.

The first time I ever saw anything like it.

Dread filled me as I felt those memories begin to fall away from me. The images took physical form, becoming strands of light that began to fall upwards out of my body. Each of these strands floated up and into the air, where they tightened and became taut. Malys reached for one, and with a snipping gesture with her fingers, she cut them, making the memory disappear and fade to black.

With each memory she took, I felt more and more pieces of me fall away. Faces, places, voices, all of my connections, the very thing that tied me not only to the people in my life, but to my life itself, were being cut before my very eyes. All this time I thought she had wanted them for herself. She didn't care for them, nor did she need them.

She only wanted to destroy them.

That's what made this whole thing worse.

I saw Valerian's face in my mind, and I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I saw him as I had the first time I laid eyes on him, marching down the palace halls on the way to a trial. He hadn't wanted to speak to me or to my mother, and I hadn't wanted to speak to him either, but I couldn't deny he wasn't nice to look at.

This memory, like the others, became a thread that emerged from my

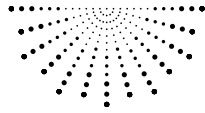
chest and began to rise into the air. This thread, though, was golden, and it sparkled as it trailed its way up toward the sky, falling up and out of my body, reaching toward the sky until it tightened... and was ready for Malys to cut.

Tears filled my eyes.

I couldn't speak. I could barely think. I was sorry for what I had done, for the pain I had caused. It was right that I should pay the price if it meant no one else would suffer. But they were going to suffer. Malys wasn't going to let anyone resist her. I saw the venom in Malys' eyes, her excitement was palpable... but something happened that she wasn't expecting.

When she went to cut Valerian's thread, it resisted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



*M*alys' eyes moved rapidly from gleeful ecstasy to deathly concern as if in slow motion. She tried once more to snip Valerian's golden thread. So many other memories had fallen so easily, but his... his seemed impervious to even her most determined efforts to slice it clean away from me.

I stared at the thread, bathed in its golden glow, Valerian's face staring back at me from across the span of memory. He was smiling at me. He hadn't smiled at me that day, not in the way he was now. I hadn't even been aware of his presence before that day, and he hadn't wanted to be fifty feet from me or any other royal at that time.

This smile was... a loved one's smile. Charming, warm, and perhaps a little cheeky, as if he knew a secret I didn't. How was it resisting? If my grandmothers weren't here by now, it meant Valerian was dead, and if he was dead, then the tie that bound us together was already broken.

Unless.

Malys pulled me up by the scruff of my neck. "What have you done, *girl?*" she hissed.

"I haven't done anything," I said, fighting more tears that threatened to spill. "I gave you what you wanted. Do what you brought me here to do."

"If you haven't noticed, I can't. That means you've tricked me somehow, and if you've tricked me..." her eyes darkened. "I am going to murder every single person you care about right in front of your eyes. Do you understand me?"

I blinked at her, suddenly feeling a weight... lifting off my shoulders. "I'm sorry for you," I said.

“Sorry? You aren’t sorry yet, but you will be.”

“No, I mean it.” I shook my head. “To be so insecure, so wrapped up in your own image, so incapable of letting something go that you would go to these lengths to make yourself feel better... didn’t you have family on Earth? Didn’t you have any loved ones you could’ve turned to when my father confronted you about the way you treated my family?”

“He didn’t confront me; he *destroyed* me. In no world did the punishment fit the crime, but that’s what you Fae do, isn’t it? *The Coldest Fae*. Never have I seen a namesake more deserving than that one. You and all your wretched, selfish kind care for nothing and no one.”

“I really wish you could see the irony in your words. All this started because you were selfish and unkind, but you’re condemning my family—and my people—for being exactly that.”

“This conversation is irrelevant. I want to know what you’ve done, and how you’ve tricked me. Maybe, if you’re forthcoming, I’ll go easy on some of your relatives.”

“I’m telling you the truth, Malys. Whatever plan I had, it failed as far as I know.”

“And what was your plan?”

“My Queen!” yelled one of the guards posted near the stairs leading up to the balcony. “It’s the wolf—” his voice turned to a gargle as a huge, grey wolf leapt toward him and sank its teeth into his neck. Blood sprayed into the air, some of it splattered against the floor. The wolf didn’t skip a beat, though.

Just as quickly as it had bitten the guard in the neck, it released the guard as it landed on the ground, coming to a skidding halt a few feet away. It stared at Malys, fangs barred, chin covered in Fae blood. “Release my sister,” Radulf growled. “There’s time for you to save your hide yet.”

“Radulf!” I shrieked.

“How did you get out of your cell?” Malys snarled.

“Did you really think a couple of magic runes and iron shackles would keep me chained down forever? Did you so quickly underestimate Winter’s Son?”

Malys spun me around and held me in a vice-grip, positioning me between herself and my brother. “Take one step toward me,” she said, “And she dies on the spot.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Malys brought her left hand up to my cheek. I saw an eerie green light begin to radiate from it, a green light that made me instantly feel sick to my stomach. I tried to hold onto my composure, but I wanted to gag, to hurl. Whatever spell she was cooking up, I had no doubt it could do exactly what she needed it to.

My only saving grace so far, though, was that she needed me alive. But what if she decided to give up on her goal of Arcadian domination and just... *went nuclear*? Not only was this woman unhinged, she also had incredible powers at her disposal, and she may have just run into the final road block that would stop her from getting what she wanted.

“Let her go,” said Radulf, “And you can still walk away from this.”

“And go where? There’s nowhere left for me to go.”

“Exile. You can leave and never come back. If it was good enough for my parents, it’s good enough for you.”

“I will never submit myself to that.”

“Well, you’re going to have to do *something* if you want to make it out of here with your skin... because I’m not the only problem you’ve got to deal with right now.”

“And what does that mean?”

As if they had been summoned, several people came rushing up the stairs Radulf had just fought his way through. First came Grandmother Evie, then Grandmother Pepper, then came Melina, with Gullie flying beside her. Grandmother Helen was next, her green cloak billowing in the wind, and behind her... Valerian.

Grandmother Helen took her place in front of the pack she had brought with her to the rooftop, lowered her eyes, and extended her right hand toward Malys. “Get away from her, you *witch!*” she yelled.

“*You,*” Malys hissed. “I should’ve known you would find a way to become a thorn in my side yet again. And *you*—how are you still alive?! I watched you bleed to death out there on the snow, how have you come back?”

“Even a half-competent witch would’ve been able to spot the Sigil of False Death etched into the gemstone hanging around his neck,” said Helen. “Just like they would’ve been able to spot the Tunnelling Sigil that lives inside the gemstone my granddaughter has been carrying with her. But you’re not even half-competent, are you Whitmore?”

“It’s *Malys Wolfsbane* now, and if you think you’ve gotten the upper

hand by coming here, you're wrong. All you've done is trap yourself in here with me, my guards, and my Wenlow."

"Perhaps. I know they're on their way. But will they be fast enough to stop my sisters and me from dissolving every single spell you have in place right now?"

As Helen spoke, Pepper and Evie fanned out, one to the left, and one to the right. Both of them had their hands outstretched, and both of them were muttering under their breaths. Valerian stepped up to stand by my grandmother's side.

"It's over, Malys," he said. "You've lost. Give up while you still can... we won't ask again."

"None of you have the power to stop me from snuffing her life force out in an instant," Malys said. "If you want her to live through this, you are going to have to stand down."

"There are three of us, Whitmore," said Helen, "And only one of you. Any one of us can counter your magic before you say the words. Try it, and you'll see."

"Should we really be antagonizing her?" Gullie asked.

"Not now," said Melina, "Let them handle this."

"I would listen to the Pixie," said Malys. "She's the only one here who seems to be making any sense."

"No," I said.

"No?" asked Malys.

"I'm not letting them decide my fate. I'm not letting you decide it, either."

"You should stop talking," Malys purred against my ear. "Especially when you're *this* close to death."

I shook my head. "I've made peace with death. I made peace with being forgotten. Now I'm going to make peace with you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're so lonely and hurt, you felt like you had to lash out at an entire world just to make yourself feel better."

"Shut up."

"I'm sorry my father came down on you with the entire weight of Winter and made you feel insignificant. He's done that to me before. It's how he is, and while that doesn't make it right, he can't help himself... because many of the Fae here are like that. Cold. Selfish. Even cruel." I shook my head again.

“I wish he were here so that I could tell him that I accept him for who he is, and I’ll always love him regardless.”

“I’m growing more and more tired of you,” said Malys, and she pressed her hand against my cheek. The moment she did, a wave of cold moved through me that was unlike anything I had ever felt before. It was an internal cold that pushed into me like a wave and went searching for my nerve endings, one by one shutting them down, numbing them so that I couldn’t feel anything.

I saw Valerian scream, his mouth opening into a wide O of sudden fear and alarm. My grandmothers raced into action, magic flinging from their fingertips. My brother leapt toward Malys, but a pair of Wenlow appeared in his path, delivered by lightning itself. He had no choice but to throw himself at them and keep them occupied, because if he didn’t, they would’ve torn through my grandmothers who were way too busy trying to reverse Malys’ magic and counter her spell like they had promised.

I was too numb to realize that I was dying, and too at peace with it to have cared if I’d known. I felt like my entire life had led me to this moment, but not just my life—my mother’s, too. I remembered her stories, the way she had struggled as a budding seamstress in London, having to deal with witches and mages who looked down on her because she wasn’t strong like they were, or beautiful as they were, or pure as they were.

Had she wanted to, she could’ve come back to Earth after it was revealed to her that she was Fae, and she could’ve made all those witches and mages fall at her feet. Because as much as they snubbed their noses as the *lesser* of their own kind, and the simple humans that existed a rung beneath everyone else, witches and mages revered the Fae as little Gods who walked among them from time to time.

But she didn’t do that. She was content in her life here, with my father, with my brother... with me. All my life she had tried to instill as much humility in me as she could. She taught me grace, fortitude, the value of kindness. My father taught me how to be immovable in my convictions, as hard as ice, and as formidable as a snowstorm.

I had been graceful, I had been resilient, and I had been kind. I was also unmovable once I’d made up my mind about something, I was tough as nails, and if I wanted to, I could wreak unimaginable havoc on a place or another person’s state of mind.

Be the storm, Snowdrop, I heard my father say into my mind.

Dad? I asked, in my head.

Be the storm.

I tightened my right fist, and launched my elbow into Malys' gut, breaking her spell and releasing myself from her grip. "Fool!" she hissed, "You'll die for that."

I turned around to face her, and even though I was weakened, I was still standing. I threw myself onto my hands and feet and shrugged into my wolf form. "That's the thing," I said, "I've already died and come back—every one of us here has been there and back from the moment you took over. You can't get rid of us. You can't change fate."

Malys lowered herself onto all fours and took on her panther form, her sharp claws digging into the stone beneath her paws. "There's no going back for me now," she said. "You're going to have to kill me."

I nodded, bared my fangs, and leapt toward her. Malys was quick enough to dodge out of my way and lash out at me with her claws, digging them into my hide and drawing blood. Valerian yelled and rushed toward us, but there were guards racing up the stairs. He, Gullie, and Melina had no choice but to try to hold them off, just as my brother had to deal with the Wenlow.

Malys turned to strike me again, but my grandmother Pepper lashed out at her with a whip of red-violet light that struck the panther across the face. Malys growled and tried to attack her, but I charged at her and grabbed hold of one of her back legs with my jaws, forcing her down to the ground. She tried to kick me with her other leg, and succeeded in digging her claws into my face, but I refused to let go.

Instead, I shook my head, rending and tearing at her flesh with my jaws. Malys roared, thunder rumbled overhead. She tried to get up again, but I wouldn't let her go. Instead, I dragged her across the ground, pulling her toward the edge of the rooftop.

"You'll never see your mother and father again if you kill me!" she roared.

"Don't listen to her, Amara," yelled Helen. "She's lying!"

"Kill me and find out."

Nothing I can do today will bring my parents back, I thought to myself, as my mouth was too full for me to reply. But killing you won't make things any worse than they already are. Not for anyone else, anyway.

Malys tried once more to free herself, but my grip was vice-like. Though she struck at me so quickly, and so viciously, that I lost sight in one eye—I

was sure that it was gone—nothing she did could shake me. As the battle raged around me, I dragged Malys kicking and roaring toward the closest ledge I could find. When I reached it, I dug my paws into the ground, then vaulted Malys up and over the edge.

Only she didn't quite go over; she struck it instead, and managed to keep from going arse over tits over it.

She was bleeding, her leg was mangled, and she was surrounded. I had lost an eye, but Malys wasn't going anywhere because as my grandmothers converged, even she could see that she was cornered. She scanned my grandmothers, then me, her eyes low and dangerous, her lips curling to reveal those powerful panther teeth.

"What now then, witches?" asked Malys. "Will you kill me? Is this where the Crowe legacy becomes one of cold-blooded murder?"

Grandmother Helen approached the wounded panther. "We are not murderers," she said, "Though you have plainly displayed that affinity for all to see. The worst part is, even now, all I have for you is pity and sadness."

"I spit at your pity. I reject your sadness."

"Do with them what you will. They are yours nonetheless." Helen shook her head, then she lowered her voice. "Lydia... what happened to you? I had such respect for you, for your institution... I never thought you would do something like this."

"People change, Helen. Circumstances change, and they force a person to adopt new ideologies in order to survive."

"This was about more than just survival. This was about ego, about greed, about vengeance. You didn't just want to reclaim what you thought you'd lost... you wanted to wound my family like they had wounded you," she paused. "If only you had paid for the dress my granddaughter made for you."

Malys' eyes softened then, even if only for an instant. It was as if in that moment, she had realized what she had done was stupid, and reckless, and selfish. As she looked at me, I saw myself in her. The way I had been, all I had done, I had done it to suit my own needs and desires, and so had she.

We were more alike than I cared to admit. But Malys... well, she had adopted that name for herself for a reason, and when her eyes hardened again, I knew what was about to happen.

"There's nothing left for me," she hissed.

"That's not true," said Pepper. "You have a life in London... let all of this go back to the way it was, and we can help you deal with Fate."

“No one escape’s Fate’s hand. Least of all those who have tried to force it.” She lowered her head, arched her back, and stared at my grandmother. “I’ll see you in hell, *Crowe*.”

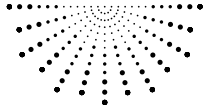
“Lydia, *don’t!*” Helen yelled, but it was too late. Malys had pounced, leaping through the air like a boulder about to slam into my grandmother.

I surged into action, throwing myself into Malys with all the strength my legs could’ve possibly given me. I caught her in mid-air, burying my shoulder into her midsection and diverting her away from my grandmother. When Malys hit the ground, Evie was there to send an arc of purple lightning directly into her back.

Malys roared, but with her mangled leg, it took her a moment too long to get up. By that time, I was already there, charging headlong into her from the side, my jaws opened wide, and aimed directly at her neck. I clamped down on it hard, Malys screamed, rolled, and tried to kick me off her by digging her hind paws into my stomach. I felt my own flesh tear and my own blood spill out of the wound, but I didn’t let go of her neck.

I tore, and pulled, and sawed against her neck until I felt her own flesh come apart beneath the force of my jaws. The fight fell out of us both quickly, but it left her first. I felt her heart, beat for the last time... and as Malys died, I followed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I've just had the weirdest dream.

I woke up that day feeling like it was the first time I had ever roused from sleep. My bones ached, my muscles were sore, and my mind was foggy. I could've sworn I had been dreaming, but I couldn't remember the dream, the people in it, or even what it was about. Bizarre.

Sitting upright, I realized I was in my bed... *my* bed.

Wait.

I hadn't been in my own room at the palace for a long time, but I hadn't forgotten what it looked like. I hadn't forgotten the size of my bed, the feel of my sheets, or the scent in the air. A soft, pale morning light broke beyond the windows, outside I could hear birds chirping, and frantic footsteps marching down the hallway... toward my bedroom.

An equally frantic knocking followed the footsteps. My heart surged into my throat from the sudden sound, but also because something like *memory* was starting to bubble up. Not just one memory, but many memories. My grandmothers. Earth, Tallin, Gullie, Melina—Valerian.

Valerian.

"Valerian?!" I called out.

The knocking stopped. "Who?" came a muffled voice from the other side.

"Valerian, is that you?"

A pause. "Valerian... the contestant? Your grace, please, you must open the door."

"Wait, is that *Tellren*?" I recognized his nasally voice, then.

"Who else would it be?" Another pause. "I apologize for the intrusion, your grace, but will you be coming down to greet contestants today, or is her

majesty... unwell,” and yet another pause, “*Again?*”

I could hear the desperation in his voice just as clearly as I had heard that sigh. I wasn’t entirely sure what was happening, or why any of this was happening, but I wasn’t going to get any answers from my bed. I got up and planted my feet on the cold ground. The first thing I realized was, I wasn’t hurt. I remembered being mauled, scratched, clawed—I remembered losing so much blood I lost hold of my own consciousness.

But I was entirely unharmed right now, and as I checked myself in the mirror, I was relieved to find I had *both* my eyes.

“Your grace?” Tellren asked from the door.

I rushed over to the door and gently opened it enough that I could see him. “Your grace?” I asked. “That’s my mother’s title, isn’t it?”

Tellren was a tall, gaunt Fae with a long, pointed chin and even longer, pointier ears. He was the Fae responsible for my training, for most of my studies, and for organizing the Royal Selection and corralling its contestants. The Selection was over, wasn’t it? None of this made sense, but what he said next made even less sense.

“Your mother...” Tellren softened. “Yes, your mother was Queen of Windhelm, and her title was Your Grace, but that title is yours and has been for some time. Are you truly unwell?”

“She *was* Queen... I’m Queen...” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I think I slept badly.”

“I shall have the nurse check on you at once.”

“No, no. No, that’s okay. Just... can you tell me where Radulf is?”

“Your brother is waiting for you downstairs, as are your grandmothers and your... pet.”

“Tallin! Oh, no, don’t let him hear you calling him a pet. He gets really touchy.”

“Right.” Tellren eyed me up and down. “Will you be greeting contestants wearing... ahem... that?”

I was wearing blue pajamas. They were comfortable, and warm, but not at all royal attire.

I opened the door fully. “Actually, yes,” I said, and I rushed past him.

“*Your grace,*” he yelled, “I really must insist you change!”

I couldn’t hear him. Or... I *could*, but I didn’t want to stop running. Everywhere I went faces swam past me like ghosts. There were people here, people I recognized—and more importantly—people who recognized *me*. No

one was trying to run me out of the castle, no one looked at me like someone who shouldn't exist.

When they looked at me, they saw Amara Wolfsbane, not some impostor. They also seemed to see a Queen, because they would all stop whatever they were doing, stand aside, and let me pass. My mind was racing. How was I Queen? Where were my mother and father? What in the world happened on that rooftop in front of the Frost Stone?

Questions! So many *fucking* questions!

I didn't exactly know where I was running except *downstairs*. That was where Tellren had told me the contestants were waiting for me or *would* be waiting for me. I wasn't sure. I hadn't exactly let him finish before I came rushing out of my room like a bat out of hell.

I hit the central stairway hard and fast, leaping down them three at a time, before emerging at the main, sprawling landing that gave way to the palace's main hall. As soon as I rounded the corner, a fanfare erupted for me. Trumpets blared, magic lights burst into the air and exploded like silent fireworks that burst into snowflakes, and even though some of the trumpeters were looking at me in my blue pajamas with awkward expressions in their eyes, the fanfare didn't stop even for a second.

Not until it was finished.

"Introducing!" came a loud, booming voice, "Your Regent, Queen Amara Wolfsbane the First!"

I was met with a round of applause by the horde of people that had been waiting for me downstairs in the grand hall. Never in my life had I felt more out of place. I didn't know what to do with my hands, where to look, how to stand. But then I saw my grandmothers—they were coming down the opposite staircase to join me on the landing.

I raised my hand to the people on the lower level and smiled, awkwardly at them. "Take a... loose five?" I asked, as I made my way toward my grandmothers. "Heh... *sorry*."

I left a sea of confused faces in my wake, but I had to speak to them before I did anything else. Grandmother Helen noticed my alarm and quickly extended her hands for me to come into her embrace. I hugged her, and my other two grandmothers joined until I was surrounded by witches.

"What in all the worlds just happened?" I asked.

"It's over," said Grandmother Helen, "It's finally over."

"Over?" I asked, looking at her, "How can it be over?"

“Malys is gone, Fate is rewritten, and all is right in the world.”

I stared at her, for a moment silent, unable to get the words out. “Not all...” I ventured.

Helen nodded. “Your mother and father...” she said, then she smiled at me. “They are out there,” she said. “We reached them.”

“You did?!”

“But bringing them back is proving more difficult than we anticipated.”

“I... I can’t do this without them. I’m not meant to be Queen.”

“It’s okay. I promise. We are going to keep trying to get them back. One day, I know we’ll succeed, and we’ll be a family again. But until then, we will be right here, at your side.”

“You’re not going back to Earth?”

“Absolutely not,” said Pepper. “Who else can make a Royal meal like me?”

“And maybe there’s some cute Fae out there for me,” said Evie.

“Sister!” Helen hissed, “This is not the place to go dating.”

“Why not? Dahlia found love in the depths of winter. I could too.”

I smiled at them all. “Where are Gullie and Melina? What about Tallin?”

“Safe,” said Helen. “Waiting for you to finish... well, *this*.”

“Right... the Selection. I can’t believe this is where Fate decided to put us, but it beats being dead.”

Helen’s eyes unfocused from me. She glanced across my shoulder and smiled. “I think there’s someone who wants to speak to you,” she said.

Turning around and removing myself from the witch’s huddle I had been brought into, I saw Valerian standing at the base of the stairs. Two soldiers stood before him, one of them with his hand on the pommel of his sword. Valerian was trying to explain to them that he had to speak to the Princess, but the guards maintained that Windhelm didn’t have a Princess—only a Queen.

It was Radulf who intervened. “Let him through,” he barked at the two guards. They seemed confused at first. Radulf was Winter’s Son, but he wasn’t a Royal. After a moment, though, they let Valerian through. My brother waved from the bottom of the stairs as Valerian made his way up.

I smiled at Radulf, and mouthed something along the lines of *this is insane, isn’t it?*

My brother only rolled his eyes and rejoined the crowd. My grandmothers, meanwhile, gave me some space to allow me to speak to

Valerian.

“No funny business,” said Helen as Valerian approached.

He put his hands up. “None,” he said.

My grandmother’s eyes narrowed. “*Good*. Otherwise... toad.”

“Understood,” he said, then he looked at me from where he stood. He wanted to get close to me, and so did I. I could feel his energy, his eagerness, but we were in full view of the court, and if I was reading the situation correctly, he was—once more—a contestant in the Royal Selection, which was about to begin.

Again.

“You’re alive,” he said.

“So are you...” I said. “I thought she’d killed you.”

“Your grandmothers are crafty... even if they were a little late.”

I shook my head. “I have so much I want to say.”

“Me too. This is... not what I thought was going to happen.”

“No, me either. What are we supposed to do?”

“It looks like we’re supposed to go through the selection.”

“Can’t we stop this?”

“You may be Queen, but there’s an entire court down there you’d be disappointing if you dissolved this whole thing.”

I took a deep breath. “That could take weeks. I’m not sure I want to wait weeks to be with you.”

“Me either... but we have an opportunity, here.”

“Opportunity?”

Valerian paused, then smiled. “How about I do it right this time?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know... I could actually try to win this thing?”

“You think you can? I’ve already spotted Lord Cyr down there—he’s shaking hands and pleasing nobles while you’re talking to me.”

Valerian glanced at the Winter Court downstairs. “I can beat Cyr.”

“You had better... otherwise I’m going to be really annoyed at you.”

The corner of Valerian’s lips curled. “I’ll see you on the other side, my Queen.”

Valerian bowed. I returned the gesture, and a moment later, he moved away from me to join the rest of the contestants and the court of Winter Fae waiting for the selection to begin. I was still wearing my pajamas, I hadn’t brushed my hair, I didn’t look cute. But I had told myself I would stand

through a hundred Royal Selections if it meant I could get my life back... and get Valerian all to myself.

I was going to have to make good on that promise, and then I was going to have to find my parents.

One thing at a time, Snowdrop.

THE END.

A FINAL WORD

It's weird, saying goodbye to the Winter Kingdom. This world has given me so much. It changed my life, and I hope I've been able to do this series justice in your eyes.

But like all good things, it has to come to an end. The Winter Kingdom will always have a special place in my heart, but I'm afraid I don't have any more stories to tell in this world.

Will Amara be able to find her parents and bring them back home? Does Valerian win the Royal Selection and get the right to marry Amara? Do they even get married? I know I'm not answering these questions, but I feel like that's the best gift I can give you considering without you, this series can't exist. Without you, I don't get to do what I love to do every single day and support my family at the same time.

I hope you don't feel like the ending is cheap, or only half an ending. That isn't my intention. I could've tied everything up in a pretty bow, and if you wanted me to tell you how I would do it, or what I imagine happens next, feel free to reach out to me and ask!

But I'm going to ask you first... what do you think happens next? How does the story of the Winter Kingdom end in your eyes?

Anyway, that's enough from me. I'm excited to move onto something else, and I hope you'll stick with me. Your support means the world <3

Speak soon,
Katerina

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katerina Martinez is an emerging author of fantasy and paranormal romance novels. Follow her wherever you like to interact!



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