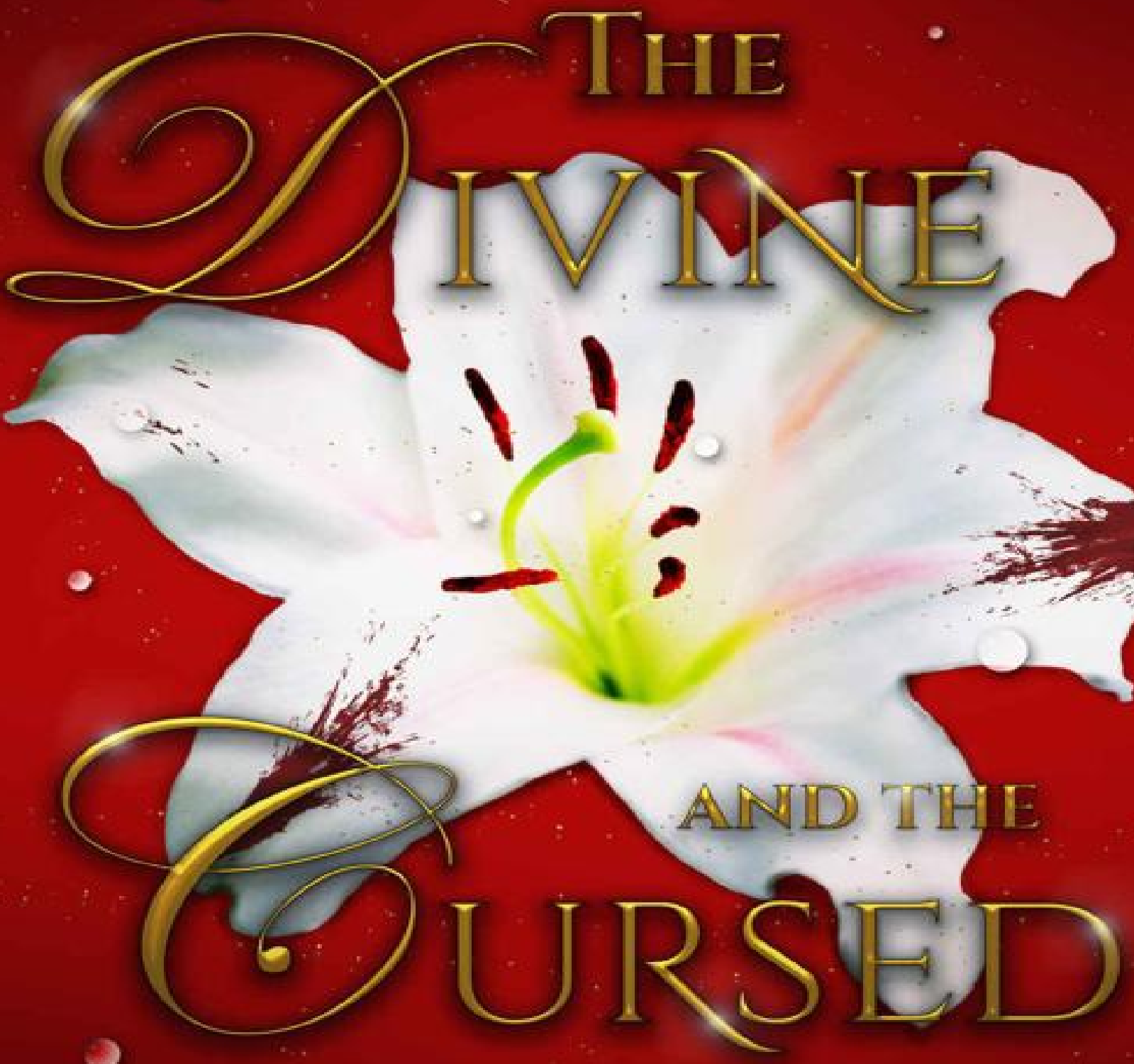


SHE'S ROYALTY.
HE'S UNBELIEVABLY WICKED.



THE
DIVINE
AND THE
CURSED

J.E. REED

The Divine and the Cursed

By J.E. Reed

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THE DIVINE AND THE CURSED

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Name Pronunciation

Characters:

Arianna - ahr-ee-ah-nah

Rion - Ree-on

Alec - AL-uhk

Avalon - AV-uh-lon

Ellie - EL-ee

Eoghan - O-wen

Irial - ir-i-al

Kirian - key-rey-an

Lan - la-on

Lillian - lil-ee-uh-n

Máili - mah-lee

Myrna - mur-nuh

Maher - mar

Saoirse - Sur-sha

Talon - ta-lon

Zylah - z-ih-l-ah

Places:

Alastríona - al-as-tree-na

Ashling - ash-leen

Brónach - bro-nah

Fiadh - fee-ah

Levea - le-V-ah

Móirín - muy-rin

Nàdair - nay-deer

Pádraigín - Pah-druh-geen

Púróg - pure-ah-g

To those who feel forgotten and betrayed. To the lonely hearts who feel love will never find them. To the broken souls who believe they can't be mended.

Chapter One

Arianna

Fate isn't always kind.

Her father's grief-stricken eyes flashed through Arianna's memory as she sloshed through the freezing puddles. Chains rattled and thunder cracked across the dreary sky, rumbling in long, low waves.

She'd understood that at a young age.

Arianna shivered from the rain beating against her back, her teeth chattering so hard she was sure they'd break, but this wasn't the worst thing she'd endured.

Nor would it be the last.

She remembered when those eyes were kind. A time when laughter crinkled the corners, and they sparkled with such vibrance. But they'd turned cold. Distant. Much like the eyes of the slaves marching in single lines, chains swinging between their frozen forms. She walked among them, her wrists long since scarred from the iron shackles that restrained her in more ways than one.

How she yearned to feel her magic again.

That rush in her veins that brought life and strength. The power that divided their race from the humans and dark creatures prowling in the mountain forests.

Arianna glanced at her shackles, watching droplets hit the unrelenting metal before falling to the damp earth.

Iron didn't burn the way humans seemed to think it would. It did far worse, repressing their magic with a thick veil that separated a Fae from the natural force that ran through their blood. Not even the strongest could break

it. And she'd had her shackles for sixteen months.

It felt like drowning.

It was unusual for a half-breed Fae to possess magic, but slavers knew better than to take chances. One wrong move could spell disaster, wrecking their entire business. *If* the slavers survived.

Though not as quick as pure-bloods, half-breeds still possessed strength that exceeded a humans', which was likely another reason they kept the slaves half-starved.

Sixteen long months.

I'll find you.

When? She wanted to scream into the chilling breeze. Maybe it would carry her words to the male who'd made that promise so long ago.

The memory shimmered like a dream. Another distant thought, like that terrible day had happened to someone else entirely and all the luxuries she'd once taken for granted—bodies emerged from the trees like wraiths, tearing Arianna from her reverie. Their battle cries sent chills shooting down her spine as they charged straight for them, the fading sun reflecting off the steel in their grip. It was all Arianna could do to hit the ground fast enough.

Horrific screams echoed across the small clearing, followed by vicious growls and snapping teeth. Bodies fell, voices pleaded for mercy, and though her body had frozen a moment ago, Arianna drew a breath, yanked on the chain connecting her to the other slaves, and forced her small group toward the nearest wagon.

Hide, she told herself. *Keep your head low. Stay*—a warrior plunged his blade into the slave closest to her, spilling his blood across the ground. The warrior twisted, scarcely glancing at his victim, and sliced the throat of the next. Fear coiled in her gut. Arianna slipped and scrambled back, desperate to separate herself from the chaos. The chains tugged, heavy with

the weight of limp bodies.

Her heart seized when the male turned toward her.

Her magic. She needed her magic.

He lifted his sword, but another body crashed into him from the right, knocking the Fae male to the ground. A jagged piece of wood protruded from the male's torso, blood already pooling around the wound. He howled in both pain and fury.

The slave who'd impaled him was older, stronger than most of them. Arianna owed him for all the times he'd come to her aid. He took a shaky breath, glaring at the dying male as if he were the worst piece of scum to walk the earth, then grabbed a spear from the ground.

Arianna recognized the look in his eye. The set of his jaw. A male, half-breed or no, who was ready to kill to defend his own. An arrow flew straight through his throat.

Breath left her. His eyes flew open wide, and the half-breed sank to his knees with a strangled gasp. He reached for the arrow lodged in his windpipe and a single tear rolled down his face before his head struck the ground with a dull thud.

Arianna turned away and clenched her teeth. *Run*, she willed herself. But chains still dangled from her wrists, preventing her escape.

Arianna's gaze darted to the left, then to the right. Too many. Too many eyes to escape, too many bodies to fight. She swallowed the fear seizing her heart and crawled toward the fallen slave, chains rattling in her wake.

He lay motionless, eyes wide and hollow. Arianna's breathing came too fast, and her hands shook uncontrollably. She covered her ears and clenched her eyes. They were dying. Screaming. Roaring. *What should I do?* A strangled sob escaped her lips. *Talon—*

A rattled cough drew her focus back to the warrior sprawled on the ground. He gripped the piece of wood in his side, struggling to pull it free. Arianna stared at him for a long moment, willing her heart to slow, then she crept toward him.

He drew his lips back, hissing and snarling at the female advancing on him. When she didn't stop, he pulled a knife from his belt and Arianna paused to stare at it.

She should loathe him. She should despise all of them. This male would have killed her. If he had the strength, he still would, but—life was a precious thing, no matter who it belonged to. She'd learned that from her mother, and the belief had only solidified when Arianna was forced into this horrid life.

They were at war. Oftentimes, warriors didn't have a choice and though others might consider their actions irredeemable, she couldn't bring herself to feel the same. They were living beings. They had their own lives, family, friends. Just like she did.

Arianna continued crawling toward him and gently lifted the blade from his weakened hand. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes as she watched the dying male.

He stopped growling.

She placed one hand over his wound and his breath came quicker. He gagged on the blood filling his lungs and fear shone brightly in his dark eyes.

They all feared death in the end, no matter how cruel their actions were in life. She held his gloved hand and something like understanding passed between them. Her tears fell freely now. The battle continued. Others were dying, and many would die alone, but she wouldn't let this male suffer that fate. She couldn't.

He drew a strangled breath, then the light faded from his eyes and

Arianna bowed her head over his body. She cursed her shackles as she'd done countless times before. Cursed herself for being so weak.

She'd been born with the natural abilities of her country, able to bend water to her will, but it was the second ability, the one that would have enabled her to save this male, that she longed for now.

She'd always hidden her unique magic as a teen, afraid to accept the responsibilities tied to it, but now... now, all she wanted was the chance to use it freely. To heal those injured in this ridiculous war.

Because they were all her people. It didn't matter if they were from Móirín or Brónach or either of the remaining territories. They were Fae.

The battle quieted, leaving her to stare at the crimson liquid staining her hands. She curled her fingers into fists and summoned the courage to examine the aftermath. Dozens upon dozens of males stalked between bodies, shoving spears and swords through those still moving.

The ringing of steel clashed to her left and Arianna's hair stood on end when a male jerked her to her feet by the end of her now broken chain. She kept her eyes fixated on the ground, even as the male craned her neck back, hissing and snarling before grazing his bloody teeth against her throat.

A territorial display.

Satisfied, the male stepped back and strode across the field, dragging her with him. She stumbled over the bodies of both slavers and slaves, trying her best not to meet their empty gazes. He shoved her alongside four others, each covered in muck and blood.

Arianna swallowed and struggled to even out her breathing before scenting the air. Sandalwood mixed with the sweetness of cinnamon. The scent of those from Brónach.

Slavers were a cruel lot, but those from Brónach were even crueler. They harbored no love for humans or half-breeds. And right now, a half-

breed is exactly what she looked like.

Arianna chewed her lower lip, bowing her head whenever a warrior passed too close. She had to get out of here. She'd known they were traveling too close to the border, but she didn't imagine they'd crossed it. Not this far from the mountain range. It meant Móirín's borders were weakening. Maybe Brónach was finally gaining the upper hand. Would her people lose the war after a decade of fighting?

She tried not to dwell on the possibility. If Brónach's elite broke through the capital city, would they set fire to the guesthouse she used to frequent in the summer months? Would the once sparkling waterfalls of their capital city run with blood? Would her sister—a scream pierced the air and Arianna's head jerked toward the voice.

One male held a young female by the throat. Arianna didn't know the female, not really, but that didn't stop the ache in her chest. It was the same feeling she'd gotten when that Fae male died in her arms. When anyone died...

The male sank his fangs into the female's neck and Arianna shot to her feet, chains rattling, and dashed toward the pair as fast as her feet could carry her.

Someone was screaming. Was it her voice or another's? There was too much around her. Too much noise as the males growled and hissed. Too many smells as they scouted the bodies littering the meadow. Too much—blinding pain shot through the back of her skull and Arianna hit the ground hard, sliding through the mud. Stars floated across her field of vision.

She groaned, struggling to lift herself when strong fingers gripped the front of her shirt and yanked Arianna to her feet. The male before her snarled and curled his lips to reveal razor-sharp fangs.

He was going to kill her. She struggled to free herself, fighting against

the bonds.

Someone. She pleaded. *Talon, please...*

Arianna clenched her eyes, then warmth spread across her front. She waited for the pain, but before she could process it, she was falling. She opened her eyes to catch herself and jolted back with a startled scream at the sight of her assailant's headless body.

Arianna saw his boots first, covered in a thick layer of mud. Her eyes trailed up his frame, and she trembled at the size of the male warrior standing before her. Blood dripped from the blade in his grasp and the icy rain rolled down his rich, umber skin. Thick, twisted locs hung to his shoulders and his dark, scrutinizing eyes pinned her in place. She waited for the others to avenge their fallen comrade, but their voices had fallen silent.

The dark-skinned male clicked his tongue, wiped the blood from his blade, and surveyed the field with a look of disgust. "Does anyone care to explain this mess?"

The male who'd sunk his teeth into the female's shoulder threw her to the ground. "They resisted."

"I'm sure." That penetrative gaze shifted to her, and Arianna curled in on herself. "You were instructed to bring them back alive."

The other male, who carried a deep scar above his upper lip, spit blood from his mouth. "There's a few."

"There are five," the dark-skinned male roared. "What are we supposed to accomplish with five? Perhaps you'd like to explain to our general why you slaughtered dozens of perfectly good slaves."

The other male's face paled, but he gritted his teeth. "It's not like he'd care. Maybe he should think twice before keeping us cooped up in that camp of his. I was trained for war, not guarding a damned post."

The new male tilted his head and smirked. "Very well. I'll arrange a

meeting. You can directly voice your displeasure with him.” He sheathed his sword and turned to face her fully.

The male with the scar, now visibly shaking, stepped forward. “W- Wait, there’s no need for all that.”

He didn’t look away from Arianna. “No?”

“Of course not.” The male let out a nervous laugh. “The blood was just getting to my head. That’s all.”

“I see.” He turned from her, and Arianna released her breath. “In that case, I expect you to get this,” he paused to consider, “group back to camp. You’ll then scout for another caravan, and if you fail, you’ll personally be explaining our lack in labor.” Those dark eyes locked onto her again. “And double-check their shackles.”

The male scoffed. “They’re just half-breeds.”

“That line of thinking is exactly why you’re stationed at a post. We don’t underestimate our enemies. Slaves included.”

The male gave her a final look, then stalked off, leaving the five slaves to stare after him and his company. Brónach warriors surrounded them, but something in her wanted to reach out. *Come back*, she wanted to beg, but he was from Brónach and no one from Brónach would ever help a slave.

ARIANNA DIDN’T struggle when they connected her chain to the four remaining slaves, then fastened one end to a wagon full of supplies. She watched the male who’d previously bitten the youngest female caress the muzzle of a horse.

So barbaric and yet so caring. Did he have a lover back in Brónach or

children to protect? Didn't he understand half-breeds and humans possessed the same things?

The wagon lurched forward, and that same male turned his dark, hateful gaze upon them. She supposed not.

Arianna fought to keep her eyes forward as she passed the dozens of bodies on the ground. It seemed as though the eyes of the dead followed her, their ghosts envious of her every breath. She couldn't explain how she'd survived. Again. Maybe it was instinct, or the years of training Talon had instilled in her. Or maybe she was just cursed to continue living while everyone around her perished.

A whip snapped and Arianna straightened, her head twisting around to locate the source. No one cried out, thankfully, but the male holding the contraption was the same who'd glared earlier. He gave them all a wicked smile, the scar at the corner of his mouth curling with the movement.

Brónach. She never imagined she'd find herself at their mercy. Or what little mercy they carried. Nor did she think she'd ever find herself this far from home.

Arianna tilted her head toward the heavens and let the icy rain beat upon her face. What had led to so much destruction and chaos? What was worth a decade of stolen lives?

Her gaze settled upon the snow-capped mountains in the distance, then traveled over the pass that led into enemy territory. She shuddered, and the whip snapped again, this time hitting the female to their front. She cried out and the back of her shirt split open, revealing a line of red across her already marred flesh.

Arianna knew now. Knew that no matter how much she hoped, no matter how much she hit her knees in prayer, she'd never see home again.

Chapter Two

Arianna

The slavers pushed them for three days with little rest and no food. The rain never let up and their captors didn't seem to care what happened to those who trudged behind the wagon full of stolen goods.

They'd split off from the primary group, leaving three males to provide escort while the rest likely scouted for other slavers.

Night after night the males built themselves a shelter, erecting a canopy made of worn leather and wooden posts that kept them dry while the slaves suffered. Arianna would have given anything to warm herself by their small fire, to taste the stale bread they'd stolen from her previous owners, or to wrap herself in their warm furs and chase away the icy chill in her bones.

But she wouldn't get that here.

Her gaze drifted to the other slaves, and a familiar ache pressed against her chest again. She was the oldest of the lot. They were practically children, likely kidnapped and traded without remorse from those who thought they were of higher status because of the blood in their veins.

Tears pricked her eyes as she took in their dismal, defeated expressions. How long had they gone without happiness? How long had they suffered?

Compared to them, Arianna had everything. She knew her little sister was safely tucked away at the royal estate and that her father would keep leading their people as he'd done for centuries. She knew those she treasured most slept in warm beds with full stomachs and clean clothes.

Except, maybe, for Talon. If he was in the field, perhaps searching for her. She'd known the male since she was a child. Their bond was something

—Arianna shook her head. She couldn't let herself think about him now. If she did, she might start imagining that desperate look on his face. The last one she'd seen before men had clamped irons around her wrists and changed everything.

The youngest female coughed, the wet sound emitting from deep in her lungs. Arianna fingered the iron shackles and cursed them again. If they were gone, she'd be able to heal the female, fix the open wounds on her back too.

But in her current state, Arianna was just as weak and vulnerable as the rest of them. Through the rain, Arianna tried imagining the girl as she might have been. With her long, blondish hair, suitors would have considered her beautiful. Perhaps even mistaken for a pureblood. And those eyes. Though they'd never spoken, Arianna had glimpsed the pain in those deep, brown eyes.

Thoughts of the female forced Arianna to consider herself. She'd once possessed elegant, dark locks that flowed past her waist. But that was before she'd crudely cut it to shoulder length, leaving the ends shredded and in disarray. Her skin, once smooth and flawless, now carried the scars and calluses expected from her predicament. And her eyes. She wondered if they shone as they once had, or if they'd dimmed like the female's, carrying the last year and a half of pain within their depths.

Status had once separated her from the female slave kneeling in the mud. Now, nothing did. Nothing except the fact that Arianna wasn't a half-breed at all. She was a daughter of Móirín. A pureblood. Royalty.

Her father had ruled their country for centuries and though she'd been born the eldest, her younger sister possessed strength she could never hope to match.

It was for these reasons she feared the mountain pass so much.

Because if those in Brónach discovered she was from Móirín they'd beat her, skin her alive, and hang her on a post to serve as a message to their people. One that, despite her weakness, would be heard loud and clear. It'd breed chaos in the cities, fear would spread, and the very empire her sister was set to inherit could come crashing down.

But she couldn't hide forever. She'd been planning her escape before these males arrived. She was eighteen, too close to adulthood to remain in captivity. Any time now she could shift into her full Fae form, forever losing the half-breed disguise of her youth. She'd gain an animal shift instead, something denied to half-breeds as much as magic was. Well, most half-breeds anyway.

Arianna laced her fingers through her hair, rocking against the cold. She could shift into her Fae form and make a break for the trees. The darkness would give her cover, but her body trembled, and the surrounding males were strong. Without her magic, she wasn't sure how far she'd get before they caught up. Was it better to keep waiting or take action?

The storm continued, as did the worry as Arianna raked her brain for an impossible solution.

THEY WERE moving before dawn. Arianna's body shook, frozen and exhausted. Who was she trying to fool? She didn't possess the strength to run, no matter how much she wanted to.

Her world tottered. Sounds faded and in a wave of dizziness, Arianna's knees hit the ground. She winced from the pain and the male nearest to her hissed. The slaves glanced back, but they didn't dare stop. If Arianna couldn't get to her feet, the warriors would consider her an invalid.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes and the chain stretched, but before it could drag her along, Arianna forced her body up. *Just a little more.* She kept repeating. *Just a little further.*

The four slaves gave her worried looks, but Arianna knew they wouldn't intervene, nor did she expect them to. Not if they wanted to live to see tomorrow.

Mud squelched beneath their feet, then one of the horses fell. The creature squealed in distress while its companion struggled to stay on its feet. The Fae males cursed, rushing toward the back of the wagon faster than her half-breed form could see. They planted their heels in the mud and pushed, hoping to assist the animals as they regained their footing.

But they were still sliding back.

The slave closest to the wagon slammed her frail body against it, shoving with all her might. The next slave did the same. And the next, until Arianna was moving with them. She eyed her chains. If the wagon fell...

Her feet slid in the mud, muscles straining against the exertion. Everything in her screamed, begging for rest. She thought the wagon might never move again, that perhaps the slavers would force their new captives to carry the cargo. But they gained an inch. Then another. And another. And before Arianna knew it, they'd crested the hill.

She leaned against the cargo boxes, sucking in breath, willing her lungs to relax.

"Finally," one of the males said. "I was starting to wonder if we'd ever make it."

"Don't be dramatic, it's just a bit of rain."

"I hate the rain. It smells too much like Móirín and pisses me off."

The one with a scar on his face laughed. "Let's get you under a tent then, princess."

The wagon pulled forward again, forcing Arianna to stand on her aching feet. She turned with the others, ready to examine Brónach's stronghold, only to gasp and almost fall to her knees again.

She'd been imagining a couple of dozen tents roughly scattered across the landscape. Perhaps it might have had a few armed guards at its entrance, coupled with a pitiful attempt at a fence line. She'd seen them all before.

But this... this was something different.

Hundreds upon hundreds of tents and canopies lined the field with trees surrounding three sides. At the front sat a barricade fortified with wooden spikes that jutted from the ground at awkward angles. Guards stood every few feet, some in their animal forms.

Murky water guarded the fence line and Arianna didn't possess the stomach to begin imagining what horrors lay within.

Her gaze roamed the area, trying to count and comprehend the numbers and though her captors eyed her, Arianna couldn't stop the fear that rolled off her in waves. Thankfully, they only snickered and pressed forward. None would guess the real reason for her pounding heart.

She'd received countless lectures from Talon. She'd overheard the warrior's whispers. They spoke of a nightmarish place where Móirín's people were brutalized and beaten. The very place where The Demon was rumored to reside.

He didn't believe in prisoners. He didn't believe in mercy and if he discovered her secret, a quick death would be nothing short of a miracle.

BRÓNACH'S FLAG snapped in the wind, reminding her of the whips she'd seen used on countless slaves. She knew that pain all too well.

The only useful thing she'd ever done was take the bating meant for another. At least, that's what she'd hoped to do. After the man had finished carving up her back, he'd slit the other slave's throat and told her if she tried such a noble act again, he'd kill the lot of them.

Tired. She was so, so tired. Arianna tried not to cringe at the shrill sound of the metal gates opening. The stench of sweat-covered bodies and blood slammed against her senses, and her stomach clenched in response. She couldn't get sick here. They were already watching the newcomers with a level of intent she found discomforting.

Metal pounded, rattling her teeth, and Arianna desperately searched for an escape route. After all, there were only five of them now. Surely, she could get them all out. Flee toward the mountain range and follow along their edge all the way to Móirín.

But the more she looked, the more she realized how futile her attempt would be. There were too many guards, too many Fae in their animal forms to sniff them out. Birds of prey sat on every post, surveying the ground below. Lions and wolves stalked between the tents, their keen eyes soaking in every detail.

Arianna jumped when a female screamed somewhere in the distance and a violent chill ran down her spine. She tried not to think about the reason for that scream or the horrors they might soon encounter.

They passed tent after tent and slave after slave. All shackled in iron.

Despite all the camps she'd seen, Arianna had never felt trapped. Not entirely. But this place...it was like a cage without bars. Each tent stood as if it were metal looming over her. Each piece of fabric promised a host of impenetrable bodies on the other side.

A male to their left rose, surveying the youngest female as if she were the most desirable being he'd ever laid eyes on. Arianna couldn't hide the

disgust on her face.

Disgust and dread.

Because he wasn't the only one.

Their scents hit her, and Arianna couldn't keep herself from gagging this time, though nothing came from her empty stomach. The act seemed to pull them from their vile imaginations at least.

One of their captors led them to the horse stables and threw them inside. He snarled once, a warning, then stormed off. Arianna waited a moment, then crawled toward the other four, pulling them against her for warmth.

The straw beneath their bodies was far from fresh, the stench of manure curdling her stomach again, but despite the leaky roof, it was the first time they'd escaped the rain in days. Given where they were, it was more than she might have hoped for.

The youngest female wrapped her arms around Arianna's middle and Arianna stroked her hair the way she'd once stroked her sisters.

I'll find you. I promise.

Talon. If there was ever a time she needed him to keep that promise, it was now.

Chapter Three

Arianna

Arianna tossed in a fitful sleep riddled with the nightmares of their future. Fire raged around her, blades clawed at her flesh and screams echoed from all sides, some so close she swore she could've reached out and touched them. *So close. So*—Arianna jolted awake at the deep snarl, twisting in the dirty straw to discover a male with his hand around the blond female's neck.

Another in their slave group, a brunette, lunged forward when the male ripped the female's shirt from her torso, but his companion was ready, almost as if he'd expected the attack. His fangs plunged into the brunette's throat, tearing at the tender flesh before Arianna could react. He tossed her to the ground and watched her claw and grasp at the wound with a look of disgust.

"A rare thing, for a half-breed to bare her fangs at me." He spit blood on her writhing body.

The male with the scar sat forward to inspect the female and the crimson liquid gushing from her throat. "If you meant to teach her a lesson, I'm afraid it's a lost cause now."

He spit again. "It'll serve as a reminder for others."

Arianna couldn't look away from the blood or steady her trembling body. She pulled the female into her arms and tucked the hair away from frightened eyes. The brunette no longer struggled, she merely stared at Arianna, as if accepting her fate. Arianna's lips quivered and, though she knew she shouldn't, she tugged at the magic in her core.

Electricity blasted through her body. She doubled over, gasping for air, riding the pain as it passed through her in dissipating waves. The light

from the brunette's eyes dimmed, and Arianna tried to summon her magic again. The pain sharpened and she gagged, trying to draw breath.

Why them? They'd done nothing wrong. They were innocents, and she would have gladly surrendered her life in exchange for theirs. Her shoulders shook. Why was it always them?

The surrounding males laughed.

"Looks like this one possesses a bit of magic. Two abnormalities in one night." He paused as if in thought. "Come to think of it, I'm not sure I've ever seen a half-breed use magic." He stepped forward, reaching for her hair, but before his fingers could grasp a single strand, Arianna whirled, sinking her fangs deep into his wrist.

His blood was foul on her tongue, like decaying earth. She wasn't sure what she expected to accomplish, maybe nothing. The male growled and his fist collided with her cheek, sending a stinging pain radiating across her jaw. Her head rattled and vision blurred, but Arianna lifted herself from the mud to meet his glare. She growled, the sound in her throat a foreign thing, and the male took a retreating step back.

Vines split the earth's surface and circled her, each dancing like snakes in the rain with inch-long thorns protruding from the thickening stems. They rose higher and higher, and the male pulled his lips back from his teeth, snarling at her while he clutched his bloody wrist.

This was it. She'd fought back. She knew what came next.

The remaining two slaves backed as far away from the males as they could without drawing attention.

"It's rare for a half-breed to possess magic. If you plan to kill her anyway, we could put her to use." The one with the scar had his boots propped up on a barrel, picking at his nails with a knife.

The other male shook the hand she'd bitten as if it were nothing more

than a mosquito bite. “What did you have in mind?”

His boots slid off the barrel and he pointed the blade toward her. “If she’s willing to fight, we could drop her off in the general’s cabin.”

The male she’d bitten gave her a wicked grin. “It’d be worth it to hear her scream.”

Another to their left chimed in. “He doesn’t like slaves, and I’d rather not have his blood-thirsty ass parading around camp for those foolish enough to shove a female into his private quarters.”

The one with the scar cocked his head to one side. “Take off her chains. Maybe he’ll see her as an offering instead. She’s easy on the eyes and she’s been fairly docile. I don’t see why he’d kill her right off.” He leaned back again. “Besides, blowing off a little steam might do him some good.”

They all considered then one sniffed the air. “We’ll have to clean her up. What do you think? You’re the one she bit.”

The vines vanished back into the earth with a slurping sound. “As I said, it’ll be worth it to hear her scream.”

The male with a blade stood, stretched, then shoved the small knife through his belt. “All right, do what you will with the others. I’ll see to it she’s taken care of.”

“He comes back tonight, right?”

The male nodded and the way they each smirked at her had Arianna’s blood running cold. Blow off some steam? No, she couldn’t let that happen. She’d rather die than be used as someone’s plaything. It was the one aspect of slavery she’d managed to avoid, the one thing she had that was still her own.

Arianna drew her legs up, ready to flee, but a hand grasped her upper arm with an iron grip. She tried to yank her arm free, but the male punched her in the gut, and she gasped, doubling over in pain.

Arianna screamed, kicked, hissed, and fought with every remaining

ounce of strength she possessed as the male hauled her through their vile camp.

Another male whistled to their right. “Damn Lan, what do you have, a feral cat?”

Lan growled and twisted her around, but Arianna sank her nails deep into his skin and tore at the flesh on his hands. He grabbed her by the throat and slammed her head into the nearest structure. Stars shot across her vision. He did it again and again and again until the only thing she could think about was the pain.

“If you want your friends to live, I suggest calming the fuck down.” Hot blood trickled down the side of her face, but she didn’t growl at him again. “Your choice, princess, what’s it going to be?”

Her choice. What a pitiful lie. It didn’t matter what she chose because those females would suffer either way and she was going to join them. Was a torturous death any better? Would these barbarians peel their skin away bit by bit? Would they break every bone in their bodies, then leave them for the crows and scavengers?

Arianna took a steadying breath, then another. Her body shuddered in pain and defiance and the male before her smirked. “Better.”

He gripped her arm again, hauling her deeper through the camp. They passed row after row of tents full of males huddling near warm fires. The constant banging continued, grating her nerves and noises she would have rather ignored floated from behind drawn flaps.

Survive. It’s what Talon would tell her to do. He’d promised to find her after the battle. He’d just needed her safe.

The male tugging her along, Lan, kicked open a cabin door and threw Arianna inside. She tripped and her palms stung when they skidded across the uneven wooden floor. Her head still spun, and the nausea returned tenfold.

A female, dressed in tattered rags with wild, unkempt hair, leapt from her makeshift bed and scurried to the far corner, pressing her forehead against the floor.

“Clean her up,” Lan commanded. “You have ten minutes.”

The door slammed shut, and the female was on her feet, running into the other room before Arianna could ask questions. Water sloshed and utensils clinked together as the female rushed to follow Lan’s orders. Arianna took a moment to examine the dank space this female lived in.

There were cracks in the walls and cold air swept through, leaving a chill crawling across Arianna’s skin. But it seemed dry enough, comforting even, compared to the leaky overhang she’d occupied last night.

The bed appeared to be made of straw crudely stuffed in various sized sacks. The blankets were worn and moth eaten. And the scent. Arianna couldn’t tell how many males had been here from the way they wove together.

Her stomach sank. Was this to be her fate?

The female returned with a bucket of water dangling to her front, her skinny arms scarcely strong enough to lift it. She grunted and water sloshed from the sides, but before Arianna could consider what to do next, the female yanked Arianna’s shirt from her body and practically shoved Arianna over to do the same with her pants.

She snatched a bar of soap and brush from the bucket and began scrubbing Arianna’s skin so hard Arianna thought it might peel off.

Arianna grabbed the female’s trembling hands and cupped them in her own. Wide, honey eyes locked onto hers.

“Please.” The female trembled, her gaze darting toward the door. “Please, I have to.” Her voice trailed off and Arianna released her hands, letting that rough brush tear through her skin again. The female wasn’t

gentle, nor did she try to be as she dunked Arianna's head into the cold bucket, then poured its contents over her back.

Arianna stared at the water trickling onto the floor and shivered. This is what it'd all amounted to. Her in a dingy cabin with a helpless, terrified female. All the training from Talon, from her father. Wasted.

The girl pulled Arianna to her feet, dried her with towels so stained Arianna didn't want to imagine what might have once been on them, then slipped an off-white dress over her head.

A dress. Or the ghost of one. She cringed, pulling at the short fabric barely stretching to her mid-thigh. As if the males needed any more reasons to let their imaginations run wild.

She chewed her lip. Was it better to allow herself to surrender to one or make a break for the trees and risk Lan changing his mind? He could just throw her to his warriors where they'd likely take turns with her body then leave her in the mud without a shred of dignity left to her name.

Now there wasn't dirt plastered across her skin to hide her fair features. No mud to cake through her dark hair, nor baggy clothes to hide the curves of her body. They'd see every desirable trait of a young, half-breed female.

"Who's the general?" Arianna asked as the female ripped a brush through her tangled hair.

The female's hands froze, and Arianna could have sworn her breath hitched. She turned to see the female's lips part, but Lan slammed the door open.

The female knelt, right in the dirty water puddled at their feet. Lan surveyed her, circling like a predator. Arianna clenched her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering.

"Who would have thought such a pretty thing would be hiding under

all that filth?” He clicked his tongue. “It’s almost a shame.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek and Lan gripped her bare elbow, leading her from the cabin and into the frigid air.

The scent of their desire hit her so hard she recoiled. Damn these filthy, vile males.

The breeze hit her bare legs and another shiver ran down the length of her spine. They’d mentioned a cabin, so at the very least she’d get out of sight, but what then? Would she try to fight? Was she better off just accepting her fate? Would Talon even want her anymore after—Arianna choked back the sob crawling up her throat. She didn’t want this. What had the other slaves told her? To close her eyes and pretend it was someone else? Could she imagine Talon’s fingers across her skin? Could she envision him violently ripping the dress from her body in an act of pleasure rather than pain?

Their only intimate contact had been a quick kiss that’d left them both breathless and unsure. His touch was gentle, hesitant as if he were afraid she’d run. Arianna had never seen him so off-balance.

No, she couldn’t imagine Talon as violent or cruel. It wasn’t in his nature.

They rounded a corner and the line of tents stopped, revealing a sizable empty space with a cottage at its center. The tents surrounding it had distanced themselves by ten meters as if the cottage itself were a plague. Or the one occupying it.

No fires burned near it. No guards patrolled beyond their tent line.

Fear snaked its way up her spine as they drew closer.

A tiny picket fence stood around the perimeter of the cottage, splitting where an old cobblestone path led to a wooden door. The paint was peeling and small figurines that resembled the Fairy Folk sat hidden within the tall

grass, their empty gazes studying the intruders' approach. Arianna thought Lan might be shaking.

She studied the small structure, wondering if it even contained a bedroom. Lan gripped her arm tighter, trampling over the stones and overgrown grass. He twisted the brass knob, swung the door open, and spun her to face him. He clicked his tongue and sighed. "Such a shame indeed."

The iron shackles fell from her wrists and Lan shoved her inside. She lost her footing and winced as she collided with the wooden floor. Lan slammed the door before she had time to protest.

Darkness engulfed her and Arianna froze, holding her breath as she listened for any sound of movement. Then she scented the air.

Nothing. The room was too still for anyone to be within, but it didn't stop her heart from pounding. She rose, legs trembling and mouth dry. For the first time in sixteen months Arianna ran her fingers over her bare wrists and the raised skin that'd formed. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, but it wasn't from the scars she'd carry forever. It was her magic. That magnificent pulse beneath her skin that made her feel alive again.

She let out a shaky breath, trying to pull herself together as it begged for release, to move with her as it once had. But Arianna couldn't let that happen. She might be able to hide her Fae scent in her half-breed form, but if she used even a drop of magic, they'd know she was from Móirín.

Arianna dared a step forward. A single bed sat to her left, the furs on top neat and undisturbed. A cold fireplace stood behind it, the mantle free from trinkets or pictures. A small room, the bathing area if she was to guess, was built oddly into the far-left corner.

Her eyes traced the wooden dresser lining the wall to her front and she wondered if she'd find some proper clothes within. Maybe something to wrap her breasts as well, anything to make her look less like herself. Less

feminine and desirable.

Her gaze kept roaming and paused at the tiny kitchenette to her right.

If a family had once dwelt here, the general had gone out of his way to erase them. At least on the inside.

Arianna wrapped her arms over her chest and shivered. She eyed the flint resting atop the logs in the corner and hesitantly padded toward it, stacking several logs into the fireplace before striking the flint to breathe a small flame to life.

She remained kneeling before the fire, letting the heat warm her chilled body. Rain still pattered against the roof in an endless torrent. *Would it ever stop?*

Maybe not. Maybe the gods had, had enough and would flood the earth, forever ridding Alastríona of the filth within.

A piercing scream had Arianna shooting to her feet. She dashed toward the tiny window beside the door and scraped away the frost to peer outside, heart thundering in her chest.

Another scream followed by shouting males.

The sounds drew closer.

And closer.

Her throat went dry. *The general*. Her skin pricked as she desperately searched for somewhere to hide. She could feel his power radiating from here and the rage that accompanied his scent.

She darted from the window and sank to her knees in the corner opposite the bathroom. Arianna turned her wrists up and bowed her head, exposing the base of her neck.

Moments later, the door burst open and slammed shut hard enough to rattle the dusty vase sitting upon the dresser. She froze, scarcely risking a breath.

Blood. Spice and blood and flame.

Arianna raised her head just enough to risk a glance and wished she hadn't. Her throat clenched at the sight of flaming red hair and fear snaked down her spine when those emerald eyes caught the firelight, dancing as if they hadn't had enough blood to sate an unquenchable thirst.

Without ever meeting him, Arianna knew exactly who stood before her and whose floor she knelt upon.

She should have known. She knew who resided in this camp, but she'd never thought him to be a general. Arianna hadn't once guessed who the warriors had offered her to as a sacrificial lamb.

His magic shifted across the floor, tiny particles of sand and earth swirling with each breath. The stories didn't do him justice, even the ones her mother had told her as a little girl. She'd always been told to avoid The Demon at all costs, to flee as fast as her legs could carry her and pray he didn't give chase.

But there was no fleeing now. Nowhere to hide as his piercing gaze rooted her to the floor.

Beautiful and deadly, he entered the room like a blade poised to strike. Honed muscles rippled with lethal promise, his steps measured and sure. He scented the air, then knelt, clasping his hands together as he studied the female invading his territory.

Arianna pressed her forehead to the floor, her hands splayed out before her, and tried not to cry out when his magic crawled up her arms, wrapping around her fingers and wrists.

Her body trembled and she couldn't breathe. Even with magic, she knew enough from Talon to understand she didn't stand a chance against him. His magic was a rare sort, one even those from Brónach tried to eliminate at an early age.

He couldn't bend life, not like the rest of his people. The Demon was cursed to pull from the earth itself, wielding sand and chunks of rock to slaughter his enemies. Rumor claimed he favored the former. A curse from a cruel god no one remembered.

Her heart continued to pound as she sat there counting the seconds, listening to his deep breathing as he took in her scent and essence. He knew his enemy. He'd slaughtered countless Fae from her country, and Arianna knew deep in her bones that he'd see past her half-breed camouflage.

His magic wrapped around her torso, grating into her skin and Arianna pressed her forehead into the floor harder, willing him to let her live. Let her live long enough to see Talon again. *Let her live, let her live, let her live.*

Chapter Four

Arianna

Her breathing fell in short, rapid gasps. Arianna kept her eyes clenched and prayed to anyone who would listen. Anyone who might spare her for one more day.

His drowning scent filled the cabin, and a low, animalistic growl rumbled from his throat. The particles of earth moved beneath her dress now, wrapping around her neck, and a strangled sob escaped her before Arianna could stop it.

Everything froze.

Please, please, please.

She never imagined she'd spend her last moments on a dirty floor kneeling before the most feared male in Alastriona. Nor did she think it would happen when she was the mere age of eighteen.

His magic lingered another moment, then slithered away from her skin. He rose and she could feel his eyes boring into her back like a hot iron. Arianna almost cried when he turned toward the bathing room and slammed the door in his wake.

She refused to move, rooting herself to the wooden floorboards as if they were her lifeline. She took a breath, willing her heart to slow. Then she took another. And another. She was alive. The Demon hadn't killed her. But that didn't mean he wouldn't. She had to get herself under control.

Arianna had never found the smell of fear pleasant. It left a strange, metallic tang in the air, like blood. She hated the scent and the way it burned her nose and constricted her throat. Arianna wondered if The Demon hated it too, or perhaps it fed his urges. She shivered. Either way, she needed to keep

that scent to herself and prevent it from invading his space.

Cold sweat rolled down her back by the time he emerged. He didn't slam the door this time. Instead, he padded across the room on near-silent feet.

Arianna remained still for several moments, concentrating on keeping herself calm in his presence. *Just don't disturb him and everything will be fine.* But what was he doing? She couldn't hear so in what Arianna considered the bravest act of her life, she tilted her head to the side.

Arianna half expected to see weapons strapped across his torso and blood still staining his clothes, but The Demon wore a plain pair of black, baggy pants that hung low around his waist. He knelt, tossing logs onto the dying fire. She tried to ignore the way his muscles flexed with the motion.

Deadly. Monster.

If she attacked him, it'd be like a child attacking a seasoned warrior.

He shifted, tilting his head back to glance at her, and Arianna's body stiffened when she met his cold, unyielding gaze. He didn't waver and the intensity of those eyes forced Arianna to close hers and press her forehead back to the floor.

Keep calm. Breathe. In, out. In, out.

The Demon rose, the old floor hardly creaking beneath his weight, as if he knew the location of every weakened floorboard. Arianna could sense his gaze burning into her as he stood there in silence.

He was a ruthless killer. Brónach's greatest weapon. History claimed he could tackle over a hundred Fae warriors alone and live to tell the tale. He was brutal and commanding, never took prisoners, and loved what he did so much that he searched for every opportunity with the most bloodshed.

The Demon growled and the sound shattered what little control Arianna had gained over her fear. Her body began trembling again, but

instead of wrapping his magic around her, the creature turned toward his bed. It creaked as he climbed in, but Arianna didn't risk looking at him again, not when she knew he still stared at her, debating if he should let her live.

She scented the air, ready to be assaulted by blood, but that particular aspect of his scent had vanished. Now he smelled of sandalwood and something, spicy? No, that wasn't right. Warmth perhaps. It smelled like a soul rooted in who they were yet wild enough to shift like flame.

She counted her breathes and studied his, waiting for them to turn long and even before curling onto her side.

ARIANNA TRIED to sleep despite the chills sweeping through her body. She shivered, curling tighter into herself, but the cracks in the cabin let in too much brisk air. If only she'd chosen the corner closest to the fire. Or had more clothes on.

Her bladder begged for release halfway through the night, but Arianna remained where she was. One wrong move and she'd be another forgotten casualty in this god's forsaken war.

She stopped trying to drift off when the outside birds stirred. The beginnings of dawn illuminated the tiny window beside the door, and she tried imagining what it might look like beyond that dirty windowpane. She'd seen plenty of sunrises and sunsets, but seeing the sun rise when one thought they'd never see it again was another experience entirely.

She'd slept beneath the same roof as The Demon and lived to see another day.

The bed creaked and Arianna's heart jolted. Her skin prickled when she scented his magic stir, like an ancient creature woken from its long

slumber.

His bare feet settled on the wooden planks, and she swallowed her fear, still praying for a miracle. He sat there for several moments, but Arianna didn't look at him again.

The Demon didn't growl, nor did his magic reach out to her. He merely stood, a movement that had her shuddering, and padded into the bathroom.

She still didn't smell blood, aside from the faint scent that drifted from the bathroom when he closed the door. His clothes, she realized.

It surprised her. After all the stories she'd been told, Arianna half expected his scent to be soaked in it, or for blood to be part of his scent altogether. He was said to be an abomination. An unnatural thing that should have been eradicated at an early age.

She chewed her lip. What would Talon tell her to do? Run, of course, but she didn't have that option right now. But if Talon came to save her, would he stand a chance against this creature?

Despite his young age, her father recognized Talon as a gifted warrior with promise. It wasn't simply his physicality or aptitude with magic. He was a brilliant strategist, and he'd proven himself time and time again while studying beneath the older generals. Her father claimed he possessed an uncanny ability to track and predict his enemies, making him a valuable asset in the war.

Talon had shifted into his animal form two years ago at eighteen. It was for that very reason she feared she might not be able to hide much longer. The Demon hadn't killed her yet, but he undoubtedly would when he discovered where she came from.

Though she feared it in her current situation, the shift was usually a joyous moment in a Fae's life. A celebration of transitioning into adulthood.

Talon had earned a set of wings and with it, freedom. He'd soared the skies as a bird of prey and she'd never forgotten the way the morning sun glinted from his feathers, giving them a golden hue that matched his eyes.

A glorious eagle. Ellie, her younger sister, had laughed at him endlessly, claiming his name made him seem like a pet.

The Demon exited the bathroom and she jolted away from the memory. His pants hit the floor a second later. Arianna kept her head down, her knees suddenly the most interesting thing she'd ever laid eyes on. She tried to keep her breathing even so he wouldn't scent her discomfort though knew it was likely impossible to hide much of anything.

Drawers opened, belts and blades clinked together, then he entered the kitchen. More rustling ensued before he returned to his bed, slid on his boots, buckled the latches, and left without a word.

She had to be imagining this. He'd just... ignored her entirely. No threats. No posturing. As if she wasn't worth a second of his time. It was almost relieving. Better to be perceived as inconsequential where he was concerned.

Arianna remained on the floor, waiting. Listening. She didn't know if he'd come back right away, but something told her he wouldn't. He was their general and if she'd learned anything from Talon's busy schedule, The Demon would be gone for most of the day.

She stretched her stiff body, knees and back cracking in protest, but her bladder held priority. Arianna limped toward the bathroom, moving as fast as her muscles would allow. She wasn't sure which brought more relief, standing or relieving herself.

The tiny room was simple enough. A small washbasin sat upon a thin table to her front with a used pan in the right corner, her only source of a toilet. She shifted her gaze, trying to ignore the contents, and focused on the

empty vanity where she imagined a family's keepsakes might once have been.

A lump formed in her throat as she tried not to think about that family. Maybe they'd evacuated in time or maybe The Demon had buried their bones in the garden, left as a reminder to those who doubted his resolve.

Arianna sighed and went back into the main room. Morning light filtered through the small window, but the room remained dimly lit. Candles lined the dresser and bed stand. The Demon hadn't lit them last night, so she wouldn't light them now. Perhaps he preferred the dark.

She threw a few more logs into the fire and pressed her hands toward the flames, letting her cold fingertips soak in the heat. She needed warmer clothes if she hoped to survive the winter.

Once she'd warmed herself enough, Arianna crept toward the window and peeked through the dirty glass. Even disguised as a half-breed, she could still hear those beyond the wall. All five of them. It would be impossible and reckless to escape now. She needed to watch, bide her time, and formulate a plan. It would take time, but if she could appease The Demon, then maybe she'd get it.

Arianna sighed, longing for her Fae form. It'd give her the advantages she needed, but it'd also alert every warrior in the vicinity to her identity, and she'd be back in irons before she could blink. Remaining disguised as a half-breed was her only option.

She chewed her lip. How long would it take The Demon to figure her out? Could she outsmart him? Would he suspect her plans?

Without the irons, could she finally reveal herself?

Arianna leaned her back against the wall. Her short life had been a whirlwind. She'd always planned to serve as one of her sister's advisers. Ellie would rule as Móirín's High Lady and Arianna would function as her eyes

and ears, resolving grievances before they developed into more troublesome problems. But if anyone discovered her ability to heal, she wouldn't be serving at all.

She'd be queen.

And not just of those within Móirín. She'd be the queen of every Fae and half-breed on the entire continent of Alastríona.

She'd never wanted the title. Her father had ensured she knew her place. She was too weak to lead. Too meek to stand up for herself, let alone an entire race. Which was why her father had chosen Ellie as his successor. Her thoughts drifted back to the slave that'd died yesterday. But if she stood up and united the four countries, would that end the war?

Legend claimed every Fae would rush forward to worship her, but with everything she'd heard and seen from the Fae of Brónach, she wasn't so sure. Maybe she'd reveal herself and they'd laugh, utterly revolted by the thought of a Móirín queen. Then there was The Demon himself to consider. Maybe he'd kill her just to prove nothing could stop him.

Fiadh and Pádraigín were another story. It wasn't a secret that Fiadh desired more land, they just lacked the military power to take it, thus they'd struck up an alliance with their neighboring country rather than risk war. They traded in jewels, which didn't seem practical to her, but her father found it acceptable.

And Pádraigín was so far north it wouldn't make any sense to consider them a threat. Unless of course Pádraigín and Fiadh joined forces but the two smaller countries had been at each other's throats for decades.

Peace was a laughable concept.

Arianna shook away the thoughts and took in the state of the cabin. It was tidy, sure, but far from clean. Dust lined everything, coating the shelves so thick she wasn't sure anyone had ever wiped them down. The floor carried

stains, and she knew from sleeping on it just how many particles littered the area. Or were those particles from his magic?

Arianna threw another log on the fire and a thousand thoughts flew through her head at once. Where would she get wood? What about food? Was she allowed outside the cabin or expected to remain within? Hopefully, he'd tell her, or perhaps someone else would. The only thing she could do now was clean.

She padded toward the kitchen and fumbled through the cabinets and drawers in search of supplies. There wasn't much, an old brush and bucket, so she improvised, pumped cold water into a bucket, and set to scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees.

A mantra developed in her head.

Earn his favor, plot, escape. Earn his favor, plot, escape. Earn his favor, plot, escape.

If only it'd turn out so easy.

Arianna scrubbed the floors and dusted the nightstand. She pulled cobwebs from the candle holders and wiped away the grime that'd settled on the bronze doorknobs.

Her stomach growled around lunchtime and clenched painfully at dusk. She eyed the dry goods in the corner cabinet but didn't dare touch them. With the amount of dust on the lids, she doubted The Demon even knew they existed, but she wasn't taking chances. Not with him.

Arianna eyed the dresser. She'd been working up the courage to shuffle through the contents all day. She didn't want to risk angering the general, but her body hadn't stopped shivering.

Arianna finally pulled open the top drawer. His shirts and pants all sat neatly folded and in perfect order. She noted the attention to detail, then opened the second to find an arsenal of weapons and a variety of belts to

secure them in place. She hadn't held a weapon in ages, though now probably wasn't the best time. He'd notice one missing and the thought of killing him was laughable anyway.

She had to tug at the bottom drawer to get it open and found various sized garments tossed inside. Arianna pulled out a pair of dark pants and slid them on, relishing in the feel of fabric against her skin. They were baggy, too big on her slight frame, but they'd keep her warm and hopefully keep The Demon from looking too closely at her feminine form.

Arianna pulled out a long-sleeved shirt next, tossed her horridly short dress to the side, and yanked it over her head. The warmth was instantaneous. She just prayed The Demon wouldn't make her take it off upon his return. If she died over clothes, well, then she guessed that was to be her end.

Arianna added another log to the fire and settled in the far corner to await his arrival.

Night descended, the camp quieted, and nocturnal insects and animals called to one another beyond the cabin walls. She waited, shivering in her corner.

But he never came.

She didn't know when she'd fallen asleep, but her ears perked when a loud knock sounded at the front door with dawn. Arianna's heart skipped a beat, her throat went dry, and she refused to move until the knock happened again. Quick and loud.

Arianna's magic surged, trying to wrestle free from her grasp, but she slammed it back down. *Breathe*, she told herself. It'd been so long since she'd experienced the sensation that it almost seemed foreign. Hesitantly, Arianna crept toward the door and opened it with a shaking hand. A slave stood on the other side. A slave with a scowl on her face.

"Don't take so long next time." She grabbed Arianna's wrist, yanked

her from the cabin, and huffed when Arianna didn't close the door behind her. The female did it for her then pulled Arianna down the short, cobblestone path, past the invisible line created by the warriors and into the fray of tents and scattered houses.

“Where are—”

“Shhh.” The female glared at her as if she'd violated the most basic rule then continued dragging Arianna down a well-trodden path. The warriors didn't stare so much this time. Even this early, the warriors were busy stoking fires, the embers shooting out of hot kilns while others pounded on weapons and armor, mending the broken pieces.

Arianna tried peering down a different path, but the female grabbed Arianna's shirt and threw them both against the wooden wall to a small cottage. Arianna was about to protest when she scented a group of males headed their way. Arianna eyed the female, waiting for her instruction. She feared the warriors might question the pair, and her heart raced with each heavy step of their boots, but the male's conversation didn't falter, and they walked by as if the two females didn't exist.

The female grabbed her wrist again and continued tugging her along the path, passing slave after slave and tent after tent until they were outside a long hall. Stones crumbled from its base and lay scattered in the tall grass. The roof had rotted on one side, but the female kept pulling Arianna forward.

Arianna scented something akin to onions and rice and her stomach clenched in response. The building didn't have a door and inside there was only a single table stacked with breads and cheese. A large, black cauldron stood along the back wall with a line of bodies waiting before it.

“Sit,” the female commanded. Arianna did, right on the dirty floor where so many others were already eating. The female cut to the front of the line, but no one protested. Arianna could have cried when she returned,

handing her a chunk of bread, a block of cheese, and a bowl filled with white, chunky gruel. “Eat, it’s all you’ll get.”

Arianna didn’t need to be told twice nor did she complain about the staleness of the bread. She couldn’t remember the last time she had a full meal. While she chewed, Arianna examined the female wolfing down her food. It was difficult to tell a Fae’s age, even half-breeds sometimes, but Arianna guessed her to be in her twenties from demeanor alone. Her oddly gentle brown eyes darted between the slaves seated in the hall, watching to ensure they finished their meals quickly. Light brown hair hung down to her shoulders, hiding the bruising around her neck. Arianna averted her gaze at the sight of the iron shackles around the female’s wrists.

“Leave your bowl here and follow me. Don’t linger.” Arianna did as she was told, unwilling to upset the female who’d ensured her stomach was full. She led Arianna back out into the camp full of smoke and noise and Arianna tried to make sense of her surroundings. Everything looked the same, with tan colored tents and fires lining row after row. Dirt paths zigzagged between the tents in no particular pattern and left Arianna dizzy with confusion. It was only the scattered houses that offered any concrete detail to her location but even they were similar in structure and crumbling appearance.

The female paused before a set of tents and Arianna peered inside. “This is where you’ll get firewood. The slaves won’t question how much you take so be sure you have enough.” She continued before Arianna could respond. “Over there is the wash area.” The female pointed and Arianna squinted to see several bodies running back and forth with baskets and armfuls of linen. “You’ll be expected to take care of those things as needed. Don’t make him wait, none of the warriors here have a tolerance for excuses or delays.”

She spun Arianna around. “And that is the supply house.” She pointed to another crumbling structure, though this one appeared to have its roof intact. “Use the goods inside sparingly. We don’t get shipments from Brónach often and if we run out, we all get beat.” The female continued moving along and Arianna tried to commit each thing to memory. “And here’s where you can pick up food, but don’t eat any of it. You’ll be punished if you do and treating broken bones around here isn’t pleasant.” The female turned on her with an expectant gaze. “Any questions?”

A million but, “When will he return?”

Something in the female’s gaze softened. “A week. They went out on another raid.” Her gaze flickered to a warrior stalking the perimeter. “And don’t linger. They beat those who dawdle.”

“How—” Arianna started her sentence and stopped.

“Be quick about your questions.”

“How many slaves has he had?”

Sadness shadowed the female’s face before she could hide it. “It’s hard to say. They all vanish in a few days. Just keep your head low and stay out of his way.”

Chapter Five

Arianna

The female escorted Arianna back to the cabin and pointed out landmarks that would make finding the mess hall easier. Turn right at the first house. Left at the second, then right again. Walk past the next three houses to avoid some male with a nasty attitude, then shift left to stay on the correct path. She was instructed to arrive early tomorrow morning. *Right. If I don't get lost.*

Arianna sighed. *They all vanish in a few days.*

The female's words lingered like a foul taste in her mouth. Where did the slaves go when they disappeared? What kind of torment did they endure? Then she remembered Lan's last comment.

Such a shame.

Arianna's skin crawled. But the female had also said The Demon wouldn't return for a week. Maybe that gave her time. Determination flooded through her. He hadn't disposed of her yet. All she needed to do was make her mark. Convince him she was a convenience to have around, instead of a nuisance.

She had time to plan if she stayed in his good graces. Prepare. She could focus on getting her body back in shape, so she'd be strong enough for the journey home. *Earn his favor, plot, escape.*

Arianna had access outside. She could observe the guard's rotations and scout the best possible path to the mountains.

Something deep inside her flickered to life. The mountains were dangerous, sure, but she didn't need to venture inside them to escape. No one traveled too close to their base for fear of the Dark Fae, but with the Fairy

Folk aiding her, Arianna knew she could make it.

She could do this. She could go home.

WITH MORNING, Arianna ran to the mess hall, stepping out of the path of warriors just as the female had done. Some eyed her, but just like yesterday, most ignored her entirely. She ate, relishing in the plain, warm gruel, then trotted back to the cabin.

She started by stripping the bed and pulled all the clothes from their drawers, plopping them in a basket she'd taken from the wash area. Arianna hauled the load back, only getting turned around once, and plopped the heavy container onto the drenched grass.

She crinkled her nose at the dirty water. The Demon's linens didn't reek of unknown scents and if she washed them here, they'd smell like every other foul male in the camp. Arianna chewed her lip, but before she could fret too much, the female from yesterday rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Use a clean one for his stuff. He gets angry otherwise." She pointed to a basin at the end of the line and Arianna hauled her load toward it, happy to find clear water within.

"I didn't catch your name yesterday," Arianna said before the female could walk away.

"Because I didn't give it." Arianna snapped her mouth shut but the female's gaze softened. "It's Zylah. Names stop meaning much when the faces to them disappear so often."

"I'm Arianna."

She gave her a faint nod before stalking off. Arianna rolled up her sleeves and went to work. She scrubbed and scrubbed until the sheets were

spotless and hauled them back to the Demon's cabin, hanging the damp material in various places to dry. She'd taken a hard brush from the supply house along with a small cup of soap and spent the rest of the evening going over the floor again, digging into the dirt between the boards.

Arianna dusted, washed herself in a bucket, and even discovered a hidden spare blanket she was certain The Demon wouldn't miss.

With everything tidy, she stood in the center of the small room, took a deep breath and dropped into a stance. Memories surfaced and retracted like the ocean. She eased through the movements Talon had taught her, movements she'd studied with him for years. She imagined herself at the base of the waterfalls back home, cool mist spraying on her face. The fresh scent drifting through the air. Arianna lifted her arms and let them flow back down then shifted her weight from one leg to another. Her muscles strained, and soon sweat rolled down her back, but the memories restored something in her she thought lost upon entering this camp.

Hope.

Arianna jolted when Zylah plopped down beside her the following morning at breakfast. "He's returning tonight. I overheard the guards."

"Oh." Arianna thought she'd be ready for it. She'd certainly prepared enough. The cabin was spotless, but what if he grew angry because she'd gotten in his drawers? What if he wanted to keep the dirt on the floor for his personal use? What if she'd misplaced something—Zylah placed a hand on her shoulder and gave her a weak smile. "Go to the storehouse. Request enough for a hearty stew and get it over a fire. With any luck he'll be happy to have a warm meal."

Arianna swirled the remaining contents in her bowl, her stomach suddenly queasy. “Does he have a name, or does everyone just call him The Demon?”

“You have a thing with names?”

“Not really, I just—”

“Rion,” Zylah whispered. A few slaves around them paused to stare. “No one calls him that. We don’t know if it’s because they’re afraid to or if he’s specifically instructed them otherwise.”

“How do you know it?”

“The same way a slave learns anything. We listen.”

ARIANNA STIRRED the stew and tried to keep herself calm. Any moment now, The Demon would come bursting through the door. She’d done as Zylah instructed and the slaves responsible for handing out rations gave her a hunk of meat and a tray full of potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables without question. She’d found a kettle in a lower cabinet and braved using the herbs stored above the sink.

Rion.

So normal. A strong name, yes, but somehow she’d been expecting something more...sinister.

Arianna wondered if Zylah would escape with her. She’d be welcome in Móirín, as all half-breeds were, and the female could go back to living a relatively normal life. She’d have people who understood her situation, other half-breeds she could talk to if she wished.

But the way Zylah watched over the slaves told Arianna she wouldn’t leave them behind.

Rain started outside, the breeze blowing the misty scent through the cracks in the cabin walls. She pulled the thin blanket over her shoulders, shivering with the fire so low. She listened to the wind stirring outside and thunder rolled overhead. The gentle pattern shifted, growing stronger and though she'd been expecting him, Arianna couldn't stop herself from jumping when the door burst open.

It closed a moment later and the scent of blood hit her like a punch to the gut. She parted her lips to breathe through her mouth instead.

The Demon paused in the doorway, eyes scanning and magic swarming around him like the storm itself. His gaze seemed to run over every inch, taking in the missing dust, the mopped floors, the washed sheets. Then those menacing eyes landed on her.

His lips pulled back in a snarl and Arianna lowered her head to the floor, suddenly wishing she'd moved back to her corner. Maybe this was too much too soon. She should have thought things through.

They all vanish.

Her skin crawled when his magic inched closer, dancing around her as if daring her to challenge him. He almost seemed to want it and the thought reminded her of his warriors. They'd thrown her in here because she had magic. They wanted her to fight.

Arianna might have laughed if not for the fear coursing through her. She'd never felt someone's magic so palpable before. Like his power could shatter the entire cabin into a million shards with a simple flick of his wrist.

And it likely could.

After another moment, The Demon kicked his boots off and left them in a muddy pile by the door before storming into the bathroom. He slammed the door in his wake and Arianna remained still until she heard the water in the small washbasin slosh. She'd filled it earlier, hoping it'd stay warm. If

she could use her magic, she'd have ensured it did.

She knew he'd hear her, so she didn't bother trying to tiptoe around. Arianna scurried toward his boots and set them by the door, grabbing a towel to dry up the water. She all but ran back to her place beside the fire and grabbed the bowl and spoon she'd retrieved from the kitchen earlier.

A clean home, water waiting, and now food. She hoped these things were enough. Talon had always complimented her cooking, as had most others. She prayed they hadn't simply been flattering her.

When The Demon emerged, Arianna kept perfectly still. She had her head dipped low, but not enough that she couldn't see him. He paused briefly then walked around her as if repulsed by her presence and seated himself on the corner of his bed.

He wore the same black pants from last week and nothing else. Water dripped from red hair that hung at eye level as if he hadn't bothered to dry it and his scent was the same as last time. Sandalwood with a hint of something else.

Though her hands shook, Arianna spooned the stew into a bowl, bowed her head, and raised the meal toward him.

He didn't move.

Her heart rate spiked, and she risked glancing up at those hard, unyielding eyes. Flames danced within the emerald and his nostrils flared.

Arianna's throat went dry.

"You first." His voice was rough. Deep. Demanding. A leader who kept his warriors in line with no tolerance for mistakes.

Arianna lowered the bowl back to her lap and stared at it, trying to piece together why he—poison. Her heart jolted. He thought she'd used poison.

She tried to keep her hands steady, but the attempt was in vain as she

picked up the spoon and dipped it into the broth. His anger spiked and the grains of sand that'd been quiet a moment ago sparked to life like wind to a flame.

It slammed into her hand, knocking both bowl and spoon from her grasp. The stew went flying, splattering across the clean wooden floor. She winced, grabbing at her hand where blood now ran down her arm. In one quick movement, he'd sliced the skin open. Her heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline coursing through her anew and the magic in her blood raged against the cage she'd clamped around it.

She looked at him in horror, finding the monster everyone feared staring back. His lips pulled back, revealing those razor-sharp fangs and Arianna couldn't reign in her fear this time.

They sat like that. Frozen. Prey caught in the predator's deadly stare. Arianna opened her mouth to speak, but words wouldn't come out. She tried again.

“It—I—”

“Pick it up.” She'd never moved so fast in her life. Arianna grabbed the bowl, ignoring the cut on her hand, and scurried back to the fire. She didn't know how she kept hold of the ladle as she scooped a second helping, but at his tone, it was as though her body had no choice but to obey.

“Eat it.” Arianna raised the bowl to her lips and took a sip. “All of it.” She couldn't look at him again, but she felt his eyes burning through her as she tried to down the hot liquid as fast as possible. It seared her throat, but she drank every last drop and lowered the bowl to show him.

Again, both sat in silence for a long while. The blood on her hand stopped dripping. His earth grew still. Once her heart slowed a little, Arianna spooned another serving into the bowl and offered it to him again. This time he took it and seemed to study the contents within.

She couldn't look him in the eye, but The Demon kept his gaze fixated upon her as he took a sip. She could have sworn something like a moan escaped his lips. The tiniest bit of relief flooded through her at that small sound. If cleaning didn't earn his favor, then maybe her cooking would.

Arianna refilled his bowl twice and she kept her eyes on the floor while he ate. He was careful with every movement, and she took note that their fingers never touched. It gave her some hope that perhaps The Demon wasn't as interested in her body as much as he was in her ability to fulfill her duties.

Once he'd finished, The Demon set his bowl on the floor and laid back, folding one hand behind his head and the other over his bare chest. He let out a long sigh and Arianna finally looked at him. Her eyes traced over his body, pausing at the pulse in his neck before drifting toward the chiseled muscles of his arms and abdomen.

He was a warrior in every sense, one that, unlike Talon, had, had decades to hone his skills. Even without his magic, he'd obliterate her.

The Fae from Brónach were nothing like those from Móirín. They were ruthless and military oriented. Training was their way of life, so much so that even their children weren't to be underestimated. They carried a hardness like the earth, which, given their abilities, made sense.

Móirín's Fae utilized water and their lifestyle reflected it. She'd trained as a child, but it didn't carry harsh punishments. They focused on teaching. Bonding. The most important thing centered on protecting your comrades and the willingness to die for them if necessary.

Arianna lifted the pot from the fire and placed it atop a hot mat. Rion didn't stir, but she wasn't foolish enough to think him oblivious to her movements. She curled up on the floor and used the old dress she'd hidden within the blanket to wrap her hand before staring at the fire.

He was as dangerous and unpredictable as the flames and if she wanted to survive, Arianna needed to keep him from burning.

Chapter Six

Talon

One year, four months, and sixteen days. That's how long she'd been out there on her own. Lost, likely hurt and calling for him.

Talon clenched his fists, pressed his forehead against her bedroom door, and stood in silence. His heart ached for her. Ached in a way he'd never experienced.

I'll find you. I promise.

Those had been his last words to Arianna before he'd shoved her canoe upstream, pushing against the current with his magic. He'd never forgotten the tears streaming down her face, nor the fear coating her scent like a thick blanket. Even now, it made his blood rage.

Talon had blamed himself ever since. He should have been more alert. He should have stationed the guards himself instead of assigning the task to another.

Their assailants had outnumbered them. Too many of their enemies knew the royal family would be present. Too many wanted them dead. At least, in her half-human form, she'd be safe for a while. She could run until he finished the battle.

Talon ground his teeth together.

He'd found the canoe the next morning, along with the heavy cloak he'd draped over her shoulders. It floated in the water, along with the corpses of her attendants. But Arianna was nowhere to be seen.

He'd tried to track her. To sort through the footprints and scents in the town nearby. And he'd kept at it for a month, following every lead. Every whisper.

All to no avail.

Arianna, his closest friend, was gone and he only had himself to blame.

The months had dragged on as he continued his search from one small village to another, inquiring about a female who might be obscuring herself as a half-breed. He'd cornered slavers, broke up illegal trading rings, and beat them for information until his hands bled.

All for nothing.

His shoulders shook. They'd beat her, rape her, break her down until she was little more than an empty shell.

And it'd been more than a year.

He'd failed her for more than a year.

Talon worked blood back into his fingertips. It didn't matter what they did to her. He'd kill those responsible and bring her home. He'd stand by her no matter what darkness might have burrowed its way into her kind heart. Even if she returned broken, he'd stay by her side, waiting and watching and hoping for her to be whole again.

Talon lifted from her doorway, stared at it another moment, then padded down the hall until he reached the outside porch that wrapped around the High Lord's mansion.

The night air hit him first, brisk and welcoming after the nightmares that had roused him from bed. Trickling water beckoned him toward Arianna's favorite spot, and he followed the soft lullaby. Crickets chirped and fireflies skidded across the water's surface.

Though her father had never understood Arianna's need for solitude, he had, or at least hoped he had.

The pool he stood before was as still as a sheet of glass, the bright, full moon glinting from the water's crystalline surface. A ripple from the far

corner drew his attention and his Fae eyes focused on the darkness.

The Fairy Folk.

They'd always favored Arianna, bringing her little flowers and forgotten trinkets. Though they didn't run from his presence, they were still as cautious as the other creatures in the forest. Arianna was the only one he'd ever seen physically interact with them, something she'd demanded he keep a secret.

She'd never explained herself and he'd never pushed. If she had secrets, they were hers to keep until she was ready.

Talon walked to the water's edge and sat down, folding his legs beneath him. The Fairy Folk studied the new male in their presence, peering around rocks and other plant life to see who had settled amongst them.

They floated nearer, their flowered heads camouflaging them among the foliage. To a human's eye, they'd appear as nothing more than pieces of the landscape.

He knew they were waiting, just as he was, for the day Arianna returned.

Talon let out a long sigh, the anger, and grief from the day pouring from his shoulders. The leader of Móirín, Arianna's father, had finally declared his eldest daughter lost.

Naturally, Talon had raged against the idea, spoken out of turn even, but Avalon hadn't reprimanded him. He'd listened patiently knowing full well what it was to lose a lover and accept such devastating news. If that's what he could call Arianna. Neither had gotten the chance to explore their feelings beyond a single kiss, but he'd like to think they could have been more.

Maybe even mates if they were lucky. Some bonds showed up instantly. Others took time to form. But if he didn't get her back, he'd never

know.

He'd have to break the news to Ellie in the morning, though knowing Arianna's little sister, their father was in for the argument of his life. Perhaps Ellie could convince their leader to change his mind, even for another month.

Avalon gave him orders and Talon had always followed them, but when it came to Arianna, he wasn't sure even his High Lord would be enough to stop him.

Chapter Seven

Arianna

The Demon remained at the cabin for five days before disappearing. Arianna studied him and though she treaded with utmost caution, she found herself falling into a repetitious routine. She remained glued to the floor in the mornings, opting for her small corner as a means for safety, and stayed out of his way as Zylah had instructed.

When he returned for the evenings, she cleaned up the mess left by his boots and sat by the fire to serve him. Always tasting it first, of course. The Demon didn't speak, and she didn't ask questions. It was better that way, easier. The easiest she'd ever experienced.

At other encampments she'd suffered through beatings, hard labor, freezing nights, and males with ill tempers. In the cabin, she only dealt with The Demon and despite the fear that his presence instilled, she found herself thankful.

He was predictable, if nothing else. At least inside the cabin. She knew when she could approach and when to sit in the corner and let him serve himself. He'd only growled at her once since the first night and she'd plastered herself to the floor faster than she knew she was capable.

It seemed there was always someone challenging him and, as a result, his scent reeked of their blood.

He was a predator, an alpha tried and true. Why others couldn't accept that, she didn't understand. It was useless to defy him. He didn't take demands or prisoners.

She'd come to realize from that first night that it was only fear that kept his warriors in line. That was the reason for the constant power struggles

among them.

Arianna sighed. It was exhausting to even think about. She couldn't fathom how he never seemed to grow tired of it. Maybe he really was a monster.

The people of Brónach were a harsh lot. She'd been taught that since she was a child. They kept order as the Fae did centuries ago, with brute force and displays of power. But how much stronger would they be if they added loyalty to the mix? Or was that something her teachers didn't mention in order to make Brónach appear more hostile?

Arianna tended to the fire. She flexed her neck, sore muscles pulling, and stretched to the side. Since The Demon had left yesterday and not returned, she assumed she had a few days to herself. That would let her visit the mess hall and study the guard's rotation in passing. She never tried to leave with The Demon roaming the camp for fear of angering him and ending up as one of the vanished.

The food in the kettle was low, so Arianna scrapped what remained into a bowl and covered it with a towel before hauling it toward the sink. She cleaned it out, scrubbing the interior and exterior before morning light filtered through the window.

Arianna shivered when she left the cabin, cupping her hands together for warmth. She needed thicker clothes before the snow started and wondered if they granted the slaves such things. Likely not, but it didn't hurt to ask.

The frosted grass melted beneath her feet, leaving her thin shoes damp as she crept her way along the zigzagged path. Arianna never deviated from Zylah's instructions, fearing whatever or whoever lay waiting down the unknown trails.

She arrived later than usual and patiently waited in the line that'd formed outside the mess hall doorway. None of the slaves spoke, at least, not

outside, but once she entered, their whispers voices drifted, and she found Zylah already seated with a small group in quiet discussion.

Arianna watched the female, wondering if she'd always been so strong or if the cruel life of a slave had made her this way.

One of Zylah's companions caught Arianna's gaze and her eyes widened. She shook Zylah's arm, whispered something in her ear, and Zylah's head whipped around, searching the line until she saw her. Arianna gave her an uncertain wave.

The female shot to her feet and marched over, her mouth gaping as she took in Arianna's form, eyes searching for any sign of injury. "You're alive."

Arianna looked down at herself and shrugged, a bit uncomfortable at being the center of attention. "I guess he liked my cooking."

Zylah gaped, seemingly at a loss for words then her gaze traveled down to Arianna's bandaged hand. It'd all but healed, but she clutched the wound all the same. Zylah gave her a small smile. "Don't worry, we have an unspoken rule about asking questions." Arianna tried not to stare at the bruises around Zylah's neck. They were new, as were the ones along her arms.

Zylah took Arianna's hand and steered her toward the far corner. She disappeared toward the front of the line and brought Arianna a bowl of the steaming white gruel that seemed to be a staple.

Arianna tried to ignore the other slaves still staring as if she was a walking miracle.

"Is he as intense as they say?" a brunette female blurted.

Zylah shot the female a hard glare that had her shoulders hunching, but Arianna answered anyway. "Very." She stared at her hand. "But he's not difficult to be around as long as I stay out of his way."

“It must be scary,” another chimed in.

Zylah huffed. “The irony is that he’s the reason we get to eat like this.”

“How do you mean?”

“Apparently, he claims a hungry slave isn’t as efficient. We’re to get two meals a day at minimum without disruption. The last slaver who tried to turn this place upside down had his skin ripped off right outside that door.”

“You saw it?”

Zylah grimaced. “Unfortunately.”

“Have you been here a while?”

“One of the few to survive a year. Some disappear, most die.” Her face turned somber. “I honestly never expected to see you again.” She lifted her cup of water. “Welcome to the club of survivors.”

Arianna clinked her cup with Zylah’s and some of the others and smiled until she realized they were entirely serious. It was a big deal to survive a year? Arianna found herself eyeing Zylah’s bruises again.

“Don’t worry about them. The male who claims ownership over me gets rough sometimes, but I’ve had worse.” Arianna nodded and ate her meal, but with each spoonful her stomach soured. She could help Zylah. She could help all the slaves in this camp, but if she did that, she’d not only be revealing herself to the slaves, but the guards would scent her magic as well.

Defeat settled over her. Her shackles were gone, yet she still wasn’t free to use her abilities.

“I’d get another stew ready before you head back.” Zylah stood. “I haven’t heard anything, so I don’t know how long he’ll be gone and if your cooking is the only thing keeping you alive, then you better make sure you have it ready.”

ARIANNA LEFT the mess hall, stopped to grab another small cup of soap, and ended her trip at the storehouse. The slaves within gave her pitying looks, and she wondered if everyone knew whose cabin she resisted within.

The sun had crested the trees, melting the frozen grass from early that morning. She needed to clean the floors again while he was out and empty the pan from the bathroom. Beyond that and getting another stew underway, she had most of the evening free to train.

Arianna stepped beyond the line of tents and paused halfway to his cabin when three familiar male scents washed over her. Each turned toward her slowly, their gazes full of murderous intent. Arianna took a hesitant step back, but there were already warriors blocking her escape.

Was this how the slaves disappeared? Had she done something The Demon found unsatisfactory? Had he ordered her removal?

Or—Or was he dead?

The males prowled forward, and Arianna took another retreating step back.

“You’re coming with us,” Lan said, the scar at the corner of his lip pulling when he grimaced. He grabbed her wrist, dumping the contents of her tray onto the grass, and yanked her forward. Arianna stumbled and fell before his comrades, scrambling in the dirt to right herself. She spun to face Lan’s stalking form. “We knew you had magic, we just didn’t realize what kind.” He spit on the ground. “I should have killed you.”

Her blood iced over. They knew. Somehow these males had figured out where she came from. Was it during her training sessions? Had her magic flared too much and given her away?

But what about The Demon? What would he think about a group of

warriors barging into his territory and ripping her away? Or did he know?

Arianna's head pivoted as she studied each male circling her. They growled, snapped their teeth, and drew their weapons. She lowered into a stance, eyes darting past them to the crowd of slaves and warriors who'd all gathered to watch. Her breathing came too quick. There was nowhere to run.

She needed to think. Stall for time. But—what did it matter now? She was behind enemy lines. Trapped. Alone.

Arianna took a shaky breath, her gaze returning to the males. They were smirking. They knew she didn't have anywhere to go. She was a single drop of water trapped within a raging inferno and just like that drop, she'd vanish into oblivion.

Arianna wasn't going to see Talon again. She wasn't going to embrace her sister. She'd never again gaze upon the beautiful city of Levea or run through its dozens of sparkling pools.

"Lan." The male shifted his gaze slightly toward his comrade. "What are we going to tell the general?"

Lan gave her a wicked grin. "What's another runaway slave?"

"Won't he know you're lying?"

His smile faded. "I'd rather lie than get my neck snapped for letting an enemy roam our camp."

He didn't know. Arianna's gaze wandered over the onlookers faces. Some were fearful, others waited for a show with blades resting in their laps as if they expected her to run. Then she saw Zylah's tearful expression in the crowd. A female forced to grow up too soon. An innocent who'd seen too much death. Arianna didn't expect her help, not when it only meant Zylah would die too. Fear gripped Arianna at the prospect of death. Would her family ever find her body?

A single tear rolled down her cheek. The males stalked closer, and

one spun his blade through the air, taunting her.

Survive.

I'm sorry, Talon.

Arianna exploded in a ray of light. Her fangs elongated, her ears sharpened, and magic strummed through her veins stronger than ever before. Her senses took in the world around her, pinpointing everything in crystal clear detail. She could see the sweat rolling down their necks, spot the scars along their bodies and the way Lan seemed to favor one leg over the other.

Arianna rallied the water particles hanging in the air and solidified them to encircle her form. The males stopped smiling. They dropped into their stances, dragging their own magic from the earth. Greenery of every variety burst from the ground, leaves unfolding and stems circling those who'd conjured them forth.

Arianna's heart pounded in her ears and her heart seized when the plant life raced across the ground. She surged her magic forward and drained the water from their stems, robbing the vines of life. They withered before her, but more were coming.

She jumped back, too close to the crowd and another male lunged at her with a dagger. It cut her elbow and she yelped, losing her focus. The vines wrapped around her legs, thorns growing into her flesh as they squeezed tighter and tighter and tighter.

Arianna fell, her chin hit the hard earth, and she tasted the metallic tang of blood.

No. No, this couldn't be it.

Tears rolled down her face. Tears of fear and frustration. She yanked at her magic again and tore the liquid from every plant around her. The foliage broke easily then, left as nothing more than a dry husk. She shifted the water to ice with a flick of her wrist then growled at the males before

charging.

Lan stepped back when she shot her magic toward him and Arianna planted her fist in his jaw, knocking the Fae male into the dirt. Another vine shot from her left and skimmed the skin along her ribs. She stumbled back, grabbing at the area.

“Well, isn’t this interesting?”

The world froze at the sound of his menacing voice. Lan paled and his magic fell limp. He took a step back and his comrades did the same, glancing at Lan as if the male might save them.

Arianna knew she shouldn’t, but she risked looking back and found his emerald eyes glued to her. His nostrils flared as he scented the air and particles of earth and sand floated around his body, dancing as if they were excited for events to come.

She watched his gaze roam over her, taking in her pointed ears, her fangs, and finally the magic floating around her body.

Arianna let the particles fall.

“She was trying to escape,” Lan explained. Arianna’s throat went dry.

The Demon’s lips curved into a feral smile. “Was she now?” He tilted his head as if considering the idea. “In the middle of the day?” His gaze roamed first over Lan, then his two companions. “And just as you happened to pass through. How convenient.”

She couldn’t breathe, not when she saw his magic moving toward her and the others. It shifted the ground, tumbling around them in a large circle like billowing clouds.

She could taste Lan’s fear now.

“Sir she’s—”

“I know exactly what she is,” The Demon snapped. His magic rose around him, towering over his head like a magnificent beast. “I knew the

moment I saw her.” He tilted his head. “Curious that her shackles were removed. Did you secretly hope I’d fall for a female from Móirín? Did you believe she’d catch me off guard? Kill me?”

Lan lowered his head and his voice trembled. “Of course not.”

The Demon scoffed, and he glanced toward the spilled tray of food before turning that cold anger back toward them. His magic swirled, lifting like fine mist from a pond. Lan turned to flee, but the particles were faster, wrapping around his ankle and dragging him back. He reached for the grains, trying in vain to free himself.

Arianna couldn’t look away. Lan started screaming and blood coated the bottom of his pant leg. He tore at the fabric, and she saw the sand ripping through his flesh, spiraling around and around until Lan’s foot fell from his leg.

The other males screamed when The Demon’s particles grabbed their bodies. An arm detached. Then another leg. Blood was everywhere, coating the ground that continued to move. Then the males stopped screaming.

Arianna’s heart skipped when those same particles grazed her skin. She clenched her eyes, blood pounding, and prayed her death would be faster than theirs. But the particles didn’t cut into her like they had the males. Instead, they explored her, as if they were teasing the fear from her body. She could smell their blood, along with the blood of others.

“Look at me.”

Arianna obeyed, even as her knees weakened at the sight of those blood thirsty eyes. So much darkness resided there, as if shadows had chased the light away long ago.

“Are you here to kill me?” She shook her head. “Are you a spy?” Again, Arianna shook her head, unable to use her voice. She couldn’t look away from him now. She couldn’t move.

The Demon's gaze roamed over the bodies of his warriors then returned to her. He jerked his chin toward the cabin and somehow, she forced her frozen body toward it. Arianna ran through the door and straight to her corner, then turned to face whatever wrath he was about to unleash. Would he pull her apart like he had Lan and the others? Would he stake her to a post? Throw her to his men and laugh while he watched?

The door slammed and she flinched, another tear rolling down her face. His eyes burned through her, but she couldn't look at him again. Not when she could smell the rage pouring from his body.

"You're from Móirín, but not a spy. Explain."

Her entire body trembled. "I-It's a long story."

"Make it short."

She risked a tentative glance up. The Demon stood with his arms crossed and feet wide. His gaze roamed over her body, deciphering every movement, every breath.

"I was sent off for my protection. Slave traders captured me and sold me at the nearest auction. I've been hiding as a half-breed ever since."

"How long?"

"Over a year."

He snickered. "You're Fae, yet remained a slave?"

"They kept me shackled." His gaze drifted to her scarred wrists. "I didn't have a choice."

He snorted but sat at the end of his bed and started unlatching his boots. "What's your name?"

"Arianna."

"And how close are you to the royal family?"

Her heart continued to pound, and she opened her mouth to speak, but his sharp gaze pierced through her. He'd sensed the lie before she'd even

formed it on her lips. "Close." Not a lie, but she was playing a dangerous game.

The Demon smirked. "You fight like them." He set his boots neatly next to the bed. "Tell me, Arianna," he said her name with enough malice to kill, "do you know who I am?"

"We call you The Demon."

His smile faded. "And yet you haven't tried to kill me. Why?"

She cradled one elbow. "You haven't done anything to me. Hurt me, I mean."

"I've killed hundreds of your people. Don't you want to avenge them?"

"Vengeance doesn't get us much."

He gave her an exasperated look and clasped his hands together over his knees. "What do you want then?"

She chewed her lip. "To go home. To see the male I'm promised to and reunite with my family." She risked another glance at him. "I think you and I both know I could never beat you. I'm not one for suicide."

"Smart girl." That smile crept back to his face, and he walked into the bathroom without another word.

Chapter Eight

Arianna

Arianna stood before a warm, blazing fire in her Fae body. Her beautiful, strong, captivating Fae body. She hadn't realized how much she missed it until now. She could hear everything, identify most of the guards stationed outside by scent alone, and knew exactly when The Demon would arrive without having to monitor the window.

Arianna pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. It'd been three days since the incident with Lan, and she could still smell the blood outside. Someone had cleaned up the bodies, and she'd remained in the cabin ever since, unsure if traveling outside the front door was wise or if she'd even be welcome among the slaves.

But she needed supplies. Food. Wood. Soap. Without those things, she was useless, and she was already treading a fine line.

Snow fell outside, the window long since frozen over. Drifts blew through cracks in the wall, making her shiver, but it wasn't the cold that caused the bleakness in her now.

Their winter solstice festival was right around the corner. A holiday each nation celebrated collectively with the Fairy Folk. The small creatures were the only reason she knew it hadn't passed, and how she kept track of time. Not even Brónach's warriors would dare harm them. They were sacred, connected to the earth in ways even the Fae didn't fully understand.

And on the solstices they danced. Danced and danced and danced. They'd make their own music, so quiet a human could never hear. An ethereal tune with reeds and leaves and flowers.

Her people would celebrate too, watching the folk while they held

their own festival. Back home, the rivers and lakes would be frozen over, the waterfalls would have a thin layer of ice covering the roaring waters beneath and they would lay crowns of ice upon the heads of the royals.

She sighed, reaching frozen fingertips toward the fire. Talon would have given her a rose. A beautiful frozen flower that would be in so much likeliness to the real thing she could have traced the veins of each petal. She would have given him a shy smile and treasured it until spring came to melt such things away.

She wondered what Talon would do now. What her whole family would do? Her father was easy. He had his duties to the people. He'd sit in his usual chair, accepting various gifts from those who sought his favor.

Her sister would likely run from stall to stall, examining new trinkets and buying far more than she should. Ellie would cry for her, but if she knew her sister well enough, she'd imagine Arianna alive and well, enjoying the solstice as best she could. Her sister had always been hopefully optimistic.

But Talon. She didn't know what he'd do. Maybe he'd sulk in a corner, blaming himself for her disappearance. Maybe he wouldn't go to the festival at all and lock himself in his room to plan for their next battle. Or maybe he'd gift a rose to another female. Maybe he'd given up, maybe—

Arianna clenched her jaw. No. Never. Talon would search until the end of his days. Until he brought her back alive or delivered her bones to her father.

But part of her wished he would. She wished he'd find his own happiness and live life as he pleased. But they were Fae and eternity was a very, very long time.

Arianna touched her lips. A kiss. That's all they'd shared. The very night slavers had taken her away. They weren't mates, no bond had formed in the years they'd known one another, but his feelings for her weren't a secret.

She wrapped her arms around her torso. It scared her. To think she could develop feelings for someone and have them torn away once their mate showed up. It was always a possibility. Maybe they'd get a hundred years together, two hundred. The love wouldn't vanish, but the pull of the mating bond would always call, beckoning their partner. And the relationship would never be the same.

A silent tear rolled down her cheek. She hadn't scented him in over a year and his was one she'd known from birth. She hadn't seen her father, her sister, anyone. And she missed them so much her heart felt like it might split right down its center. She should be grateful really. The Demon hadn't tied her down or tortured her, but that didn't mean he wouldn't.

This Rion knew she was a member of the royal family, but that bloodline stretched wide. Some only carried a drop, but her father still housed those individuals at the royal estate. Even the half-breeds.

But if he learned the truth. Her hands shook. If he learned she was a direct descendant and the first healer in millennia. Would he kill her?

A knock sounded at the door. Quick and loud. Arianna didn't hesitate this time. She ran across the wooden floor, letting the blanket fall from her shoulders and pulled open the door before the female could knock again.

Zylah stared at her, lips parting as she took in Arianna's changed form. She scented the air but Arianna's fears dissipated when the female gave her a faint smile and handed her a large basket. "I wasn't certain if you could leave so I brought you these." Zylah stepped back, glancing at the surrounding tents. "Come when you can. I'll drop off firewood tonight." And with that Zylah bounded from the front of the cabin and disappeared into the throng of tents.

Zylah didn't hate her. Arianna thought the female might think differently of her in her Fae form, but malice hadn't shone in Zylah's warm

eyes, nor was there suspicion. Arianna couldn't help the small smile that crept to her face as she hauled the basket into the kitchen and knelt to sort through its contents.

Gratitude welled up in her throat. Inside were three cups of soap and new rags, more than enough to get her through two weeks of cleaning. There was also a thicker sweater and pants, along with socks that were certain to keep her warm if she needed to venture into the harsh snow. But it was the assorted feast that brought tears to her eyes. It ensured Arianna could still serve The Demon a warm meal and thus ensure her survival.

Raised voices outside drew her attention and she shot to her feet at the scent of blood. A lot of blood. Heart pounding, Arianna raced toward the small window and used her sleeve to scrub away the frost.

It's not Zylah. It's not Zylah. It's not Zylah.

Snow flurried past, carried by a harsh wind. Blood splattered against the pure, white snow. A body flew, broken and bleeding, hitting the ground with a sickening twist. Another body joined its predecessor and Arianna's blood shifted to ice when a male roared. His scent hit her first, rage layering it like a thick coat, and she stepped back when he emerged from behind the line of tents.

His magic raged around his body like a violent storm, billowing in thick clouds that cast shadows over his body. They snaked out, striking anything close to him and she took several steps back. Panic swept through her as she searched for a place to hide.

Instead of running to her corner, Arianna retreated to the kitchen, pressing her back against the far wall before the door burst open. The frame splintered and wood flew across the room. His magic spilled in like raging water, covering the floor in inches of earth and sand. It shot toward the corners and crawled up the walls as if it had a mind of its own and she

jumped again when the door slammed shut.

Thankfully, the magic didn't reach too far into the kitchen. She stood frozen, a fawn at the mercy of the lion. His scent seemed to spark through the air and his magic danced like a snake, tiny particles still circling his body as if someone might strike. He was death incarnate, a serpent ready to squeeze the life from her as he'd done to so many others.

The Demon's knees hit the floor and a chill ran down Arianna's spine when he coughed, the sound wet and rattled. Blood splattered against the wooden planks she'd mopped just hours before.

Not his enemy's blood. His blood.

The Demon pulled his hand away from his abdomen, examined his palm, and cursed, curling into himself. Her lips parted as she watched him clenching his pain-wracked body. She thought she might have heard a sob but couldn't be sure.

A Demon? Or just another injured male in this unnecessary war?

She swallowed. He was the most feared warrior in Brónach. He'd killed without mercy or hesitation. The Demon torched villages and ripped mothers from their children. He'd murdered people close to her family. And yet...and yet the muffled cry that escaped his lips, the way he clung to his body as if he could cling to life itself. It tugged at her instincts.

Let him die, a voice whispered. *Let it be done*.

Another cry. Arianna's throat went dry, but she took a step toward the most feared male on the continent.

Earth swirled around her ankles, grazing her skin, but she didn't stop. Rion cried out again, gripping his stomach tighter, but when she touched his shoulder, his sharp gaze snapped to hers.

Faster than she could see, his bloody hand gripped her throat and slammed her into the nearest wall, knocking the breath from her lungs. His

nails dug into her flesh and a wild, twisted gaze told her he was only half aware of his surroundings. The blood loss was taking its toll, instinct drove him now.

His grip tightened and blood ran down her neck. Maybe it was hers, maybe it was his. But this response, it wasn't anger. It was fear.

He growled, snapping his teeth. Black spots lined her vision but she fought to remain conscious. It was now or never, her options had run out.

Arianna lifted her hands and placed them on the bloody wound across his forearm. She focused on the gash, hoping beyond hope he was alert enough to notice.

The skin around the wound began knitting itself together seemingly of its own accord and his eyes widened in response. The Demon's grip went slack, but before he could speak, his body convulsed and Rion fell to his knees again.

Arianna spluttered and coughed, desperately sucking in air. She could save him if he let her.

Sweat rolled down his face and his skin had already turned an ashy color. Arianna reached for him, but that voice returned sounding strangely like Talon's. *Let it happen. Be done with it.*

She looked at Rion again and a familiar ache pulled Arianna to her knees.

I'm sorry, Talon.

She reached one hand forward and earth wrapped around her body, the particles digging painfully into her wrists. His lips drew back in a fierce snarl, but his eyes shone with pain and desperation.

He didn't stop her when she reached for his wound.

Rion groaned when her magic bled into his core, and he gripped her wrist so hard she was sure it'd snap. His magic danced across her skin,

rubbing it raw in some places, but she ignored it, concentrating on the damaged tissue beneath his blood-soaked clothes.

Arianna shifted a muscle and Rion gasped, his other palm hitting the floor. He clenched his eyes in both pain and relief. The Demon panted, grunted, but didn't complain. She shifted another muscle and patched the edges of a tendon.

No one ever said healing was pleasant.

When the outside bleeding stopped, Arianna withdrew her bloody hand and glanced toward the bed. She needed him there, to assess the deeper damage. She chewed her bottom lip. Arianna had never healed something so extensive, and she honestly wasn't sure he'd live. She should have studied more, but it wasn't as if there were books available that detailed her kind of magic. They stored those texts somewhere within the royal city.

Her body trembled, but Arianna took a steadying breath and reached for him again. His grip on her wrist tightened, and she winced when the bones ground together. The sand grazing her skin dug deeper into her flesh until blood trickled down both her arms. His gaze was like a raging inferno of instinct and survival.

“Let me help you.”

The flame in that gaze wavered and his body with it. The magic fell away from her skin and Arianna saw something like fear cross his face. He couldn't overpower her, not as he was, and The Demon knew it. His magic had reached its limit, but Arianna didn't waste time letting him dwell upon it.

She took the arm still gripping her wrist and pulled it over and around her neck. To her surprise, Rion let her. Arianna positioned herself at his side, wrapping her other arm around his waist. His entire body went rigid. Arianna counted to three, clenched her teeth, and lifted them both from the floor.

His scream rattled the cabin and her heart ached when he leaned into

her, panting and gritting his teeth. The massive bulk of him almost swallowed her whole.

Arianna gave him a moment to catch his breath then they took a step. She waited a second before taking another. And another.

His breath turned shallower with every step. She thought he might collapse at one point, but little by little they made it to the bedside, and she lowered him onto the mattress.

Without looking at him, Arianna's hands reached for his abdomen again. He winced, hissing at the pain, but she closed her eyes, sinking her magic into his body like water. Arianna gradually became one with it, pushing and pulling at broken muscles and shattered ligaments. She didn't understand it all, only knew the injuries were wrong somehow. Some things were too hot, others too cold. She focused on those and her magic did the rest.

Rion gritted his teeth and gripped the sheets so hard his knuckles turned white, but never once did he complain or threaten her.

Someone had finally done it. They'd brought down The Demon though whether they'd survived the encounter was a mystery. She should want the same thing. After everything he'd done to her people, Arianna should want to still the strong pulse of his blood. She should want to stop the heart beating in his chest. It'd be so easy, but—she'd never taken a life.

Arianna looked at the blood covering her hands. She'd scented his fear and hated it. Her stomach clenched at the thought of anyone fearing her.

When his hisses of pain stopped and she couldn't feel anything more, Arianna eased her magic from his body, letting it flow out of muscles and tissues the same way it'd gone in. Sweat rolled down the back of her neck, but Arianna forced herself to meet his gaze.

Her breath hitched. She didn't meet with anger or violence. Instead, a

sort of childlike wonderment filled his eyes and in that moment he appeared more Fae than demon.

She shifted her gaze back to the wound. “Some healing the body has to do on its own, but you shouldn’t bleed to death at least.” She hoped. It could still be too late.

Rion remained silent so Arianna stood and padded toward the kitchen. She reached for the jars with shaking hands and struggled to spoon the herbs she needed into a kettle. He knew now. Knew who and what she was. Would a demon bow to his would-be queen or would he seek to destroy her?

She carried the kettle toward the fireplace and hung it above the flames, keeping her eyes averted while the tea steeped. A breathe, then Arianna turned toward his bedside and poured the brew into a cup and set it on the little, wooden nightstand.

He remained silent and Arianna risked another glance his way. Rion’s lips had parted and his eyes were wide with disbelief. She grabbed the blanket at the foot of his bed and draped it over his shivering body.

“Why?” His voice was barely a whisper.

Arianna backed away from the edge of the bed. “Why what?”

“Why would you—why did you do that?”

She averted her gaze again, Talon’s voice screaming in her head. “I couldn’t just watch you die.”

“Anyone else would have.”

“I’m not anyone else.” She cradled her elbow. “Besides, you’ve never really done anything to me.” At least not compared to what others likely suffered.

A mocking chuckle rumbled through his chest and he winced. “A kindness for a kindness?”

“Isn’t that how the world is supposed to work?”

“If only.” Pain flashed across his face though she wasn’t sure it had anything to do with his wound.

“You should rest.” She withdrew into the bathroom to wash her bloody hands. It coated everything. Her clothes, the floorboards, the sheets, but with his gaze following her, Arianna left the mess alone and curled up next to the fireplace.

They had a long night ahead. If Rion didn’t survive, she’d have to take action and risk capture as she made a break toward the base of the mountains.

She threw a log into the fire and paused as a sudden realization hit her. When exactly had she started calling him Rion?

Chapter Nine

Rion

Rion stared at the swirling lines in the ceiling. The night wore on and the roaring fire shifted to glowing embers, but he couldn't sleep. His throat burned, but when he'd reached for the tea, his body had recoiled in a sea of pain. He didn't have the strength to try again.

Rion tilted his head and let his gaze roam over the female curled up beside the dying fire. Her body shivered beneath the thin blanket.

Arianna, she'd called herself. Arianna, a female from Móirín. Arianna, their rightful queen.

He tried to shift his hips, but pain lanced through his body and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out.

Ironic. To be fatally injured by a male from Móirín only to be healed by a female from the same country. He knew how rare healing magic was and the legends surrounding it. But such things were only for children and fanatics. The stories stated their magic could heal any injury, even ones to the soul.

A smirk played on his lips. He'd witnessed the physical aspect of it at least, though his soul was well beyond anyone's saving.

Queen. He tasted the word on his tongue and glanced at her again.

Let me help you.

Her words echoed over and over. A kindness for a kindness.

But surely The Demon of Alastróna didn't deserve such mercy.

A HARSH knock jolted Rion awake, his senses taking a quick examination of the surrounding area. He heard Arianna rise and pad toward the door and smelled the fire crackling in the hearth. Rion tried flexing his hands and his magic responded, spiraling in small circles beneath the bed.

Despite his tired state and what the female might think, he wasn't completely helpless.

The door creaked open. "Is he alive?" a male voice whispered. Rion smirked at the scent of their fear. Two males, both young, though their visit came as no surprise. The knowledge of his injury was sure to bring them running.

"He's resting," she replied. Silence. Too much silence. Rion knew they were plotting, giving her instructions because they were too cowardly to finish the job themselves. He tested his magic again.

Seconds ticked by and the door finally closed. His jaw flexed. She knew his weakness, but as long as he didn't allow her to touch him, he could dispatch her easily enough. Móirín's most dangerous ability relied upon touch. They could steal the water from any living thing with ease and render an entire limb useless.

He cursed himself for allowing her to touch him last night. She could have easily ended him then.

But she hadn't. He tried to swallow despite his parched throat. What made him think she'd do so now? *Don't rely on others*, a harsh memory whispered. He'd made a promise to himself long ago, yet when he'd been on the verge of death, Rion had drunk up her aid as if she were the last speck of water on the planet.

Arianna slowly walked back into the room. He could feel her eyes upon him and readied himself. But right as he thought she'd strike, the floorboard creaked, and she turned toward the far corner. He slit his eyes

open and watched her place a dagger within the folds of her thin blanket.

Rion's body relaxed a fraction. Did she mean to do it later or maybe, just maybe, she didn't intend to do it at all? *Don't hope for it.*

His memory floated back to the male who'd inflicted the injury. He'd moved just like Arianna, twisting and pulling at his magic like those from the royal family. Rion wondered if this female would be so willing to spare him if she knew that male was dead.

That male. Rion might have growled if not for the pain pulsing through his core. That damned male had plagued him for well over a year. A young male that fought as if he possessed a century of experience. Rion had relished their first encounter on the battlefield. Now, he wished he'd killed him back then.

Rion gritted his teeth against another wave of pain and his ears perked when the female passed through the living area again. She moved on near-silent feet and his body became pensive and ready. But she still didn't lunge for him.

Rion slit his eyes open again and watched her clean the blood and dirt from the floor. She looked female enough, desirable even with long hair that cascaded over her shoulders in a sea of darkness. He swallowed when his gaze shifted lower, examining her delicate, sun-kissed skin. It'd been the softest thing he'd ever felt, and he couldn't deny wanting to feel it again.

But it was her eyes that'd captured him. A deep cerulean that somehow reached through to touch some long-forgotten place in his soul. They'd brought forth emotions he'd caged decades ago. For some reason, Rion wanted to erase the emptiness in those eyes. He wanted to make them shine. He wanted to know what they might look like if—

Rion bit the inside of his cheek so hard he tasted blood. He wouldn't let her scent such things from him, and he certainly wouldn't succumb to the

desires of his body. He hadn't craved touch since he was a teenager and he'd taught himself to hate it. Because with touch came trust and with trust, betrayal. He'd never forget their sweet lies.

Rion sighed inwardly. He hadn't killed her and she'd saved him. As he'd already said, it was a kindness for a kindness and that was as far as things would go.

His gaze followed her movements as she walked back into the kitchen then he closed his eyes and let sleep take over.

Chapter Ten

Talon

Talon's eyes fluttered open in a dimly lit room. He took a painful breath. Then another.

Alive.

He was alive.

He flexed one hand and hissed when a stinging sensation radiated all the way to his fingertips. A quick glance there, then to his abdomen. A broken arm, likely broken ribs, and who knew what else.

But he was alive.

And that Demon was finally dead.

“Took you long enough.”

His blurry vision roamed around the dim room until he found Ellie in the corner, her thin fingers moving swiftly with a pair of needles. She only ever knitted when she was nervous. It was a skill Arianna had taught her when they were children.

“How long?” His voice cracked, throat dry, and she was on her feet instantly, pouring water from a crystal pitcher at his bedside.

“Three days. You haven't missed the festival.”

He glared at her for bringing up something so trivial, but her red-rimmed eyes stopped the retort on his lips. He sat up, barking at the pain, and Ellie put an arm around his shoulders for support before arranging his pillows.

“You almost died.” His heart cracked the moment her voice did.

Talon let out a long sigh. “I know.”

“Did you find Arianna? Did you catch her scent?”

His brow furrowed. “No.” Then his heart leapt. “Did you?”

She shook her head, but her eyes were misting over. “So, you went after that Demon alone for what? Glory?”

“You know as well as I that he’s a plague to this war. If he dies—”

The slap echoed through his already pounding head and the sting of it made Talon keenly aware of the scraps running across his cheek. He blinked several times, then looked at Ellie with his mouth gaping.

“You could have died,” she repeated. “And for what? To take out an enemy? For one minor victory in a war that could last decades?”

“Ellie—”

“Who would search for her if not you? Do you know what father says? He says we should have a funeral to honor her memory, to lay her to rest instead of searching for a body. Our own father doesn’t even believe she’s alive.” Ellie took several shallow breaths and tears rolled down her face. “If I lose you, what do I have left of her?”

Guilt sank in his gut like a stone. She was right. Ellie was always right, that was why her father, their country’s leader, had declared her next in line despite Arianna being the eldest. She wasn’t afraid to speak her mind. She wasn’t afraid to step up and tell hard truths or make tough decisions. As long as her sister wasn’t involved.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

She wiped her face. “What’s new?”

He gave her a grimaced smile and tried to shift the subject. “So, the festival, have you picked out a dress?”

“Of course, and I have you a nice, new tunic.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I did actually. You didn’t order one before you left.”

He sighed, trying to count the days in his raddled mind. “When is it

again?”

She beamed. “Tomorrow.”

TALON DRESSED with the help of a servant woman. Servant, never a slave. Avalon, their High Lord, had outlawed slavery almost a century ago at the request of his mate. She’d carried a love for humans like no other Fae in history and had somehow managed to pass that love onto her daughters.

The woman, ripe with old age, had married another human in Móirín and raised three children. He knew them all, but while most Fae stopped aging around their twenty-fifth year, the humans continued.

His stomach clenched whenever he thought about their loss and the impact it would have on their community. Fae lived forever; humans barely made it past their eightieth birthdays. Even expecting it didn’t stop the mourning that would ensue, the weeks-long memory rite where friends and family would wear black and place flowers on their graves every morning.

Talon hissed when the woman wrapped his belt.

“Sorry.” She loosened the fabric and patted his shoulder. Myrna had been their caretaker since he, Ellie, and Arianna were children, but she was nearing her seventieth birthday. She was like their second mother, always there, always caring. She never treating them different.

“Not to be a nag, but wouldn’t it be better for you to rest?”

He laughed to himself. “Ellie would have my head.”

Myrna smiled and adjusted the collar of his tunic. Ellie had commissioned the royal designer himself for the intricately made piece. Talon wasn’t sure anyone else had the ability. After six hundred years of practice, Talon supposed it made the tailor a master at his craft.

The fabric was soft and light, flowing like water over his skin. Silver gems lined the stitching that ran over his shoulders and down the front in circling patterns that were meant to represent their element. His also included Móirín's seal, which marked him as a high-ranking officer in the army.

"I doubt it. That girl adores you."

Female, he wanted to correct, but Talon held his tongue. He wouldn't disrespect the woman who'd helped raise them. "I had hoped to wed her sister one day." He'd never said it out loud.

Myrna's fingers stopped moving. She felt the sting of Arianna's disappearance as much as the rest of them and she'd cried with them too, often holding Ellie's weeping form in those first few months.

Myrna simply gave his shoulder a light squeeze. "I'm sure you still might."

TALON WALKED the streets with Ellie's arm in his and his heart swelled at the sight of Ellie's smile as she watched the Fairy Folk. There'd been too much sadness in her eyes the past year.

The mystical creatures danced and spun with the water, bending it to their will as they perched on fountains, houses, and river canoes.

Levea's citizens crowded the cobblestone streets. Stall shops were lined along the buildings and the owners called out to those in passing to sell their festivity wares. Some had even built shelves into their boats and tied them off at the river's edge.

His breath clouded in the frigid air and Talon flexed his fingers, glad Ellie had thought to bring gloves.

A small trio of Fairy Folk glided past, riding the wind on a makeshift

carriage built of leaves and pulled by another of their kind with near translucent wings. Their high-pitched squeals of delight brought a smile to everyone they passed.

Another group had formed a canoe from the water, though it still held a liquid appearance and were propelling themselves down the canal, giggling like small children.

Ancient creatures indeed. If age brought that kind of joy, he welcomed it. Or perhaps it was their lack of worry for the order of the world. Maybe the Fae should take a lesson or two from their smaller friends.

Hundreds of Fairy Folk like the two groups surrounded the area, laughing, singing, playing, and they only appeared like this during the summer and winter solstices.

Though the tiny, ethereal beings emerged in numbers, they never physically interacted with the Fae and the Fae knew better than to interact with them. They were sacred beings, believed to serve the land itself and protect all life. Some even claimed they'd grant wishes, though he knew better than to believe in such childish fantasies.

Arianna had been the only Fae he'd ever known to touch one. And not just once. They came to her regularly, as if they craved being in her presence and though he wanted to know more, he'd made a promise to keep it to himself. He wasn't even sure Ellie knew.

Ellie clutched his sleeve and glared at females who cast long glances their way. He wanted to tell her they were probably more interested in their future High Lady than himself, but Talon knew she wouldn't listen.

Talon didn't plan to gift a rose to anyone, but that didn't stop male suitors from approaching Ellie. They inclined their head toward him for permission and he always stepped back, much to Ellie's dismay.

She growled and shoved him playfully, but Talon saw the way her

cheeks heated. He watched as the normally dominant female turned shy and awkward, especially when a certain half-breed male presented his rose with a swift bow and sideways grin. Ellie had turned to Talon then, seeking permission to leave and he'd happily granted it.

The male, Kieran, bowed to Talon, something he'd told the copper-haired half-breed he didn't have to do a thousand times, before taking Ellie's hand in his own and kissing the back of it.

Talon smiled. Her father would never allow it of course, but that didn't stop them from enjoying this one night. Not even the High Lord could interfere during the solstice.

The Fairy Folk were keenly aware of emotions and negative ones would cause them to flock to the individual and correct the situation with flowers and dancing. Talon knew Avalon would never want to be the center of such a display.

Talon watched Ellie playfully shove Kieran, misjudging her strength in her nervous state. The male fell into a freezing pool of water and Ellie yelped in response, rushing to his aid before the pair burst into a fit of laughter.

Talon's heart tugged as he stood there alone, keenly aware of the empty space in his heart. Someone else should have been there to smile and laugh and comment on her sister's happy future.

He glanced across the canal and bright, brown eyes locked with his. Her hair flowed down to her waist in beautiful, long braids and she wore a crown of flowers on her head, likely gifted from the Fairy Folk. Her dress clung to the curves of her body in a way that should have been alluring, but when the female took a step toward him, Talon turned away.

He walked fast, passing stall after stall, the echo of laughter reminding him of the person he'd lost. He remembered the last festival they'd spent

together and how her soft lips had hesitantly met his. And he remembered the way both their hearts had been pounding.

He passed another booth where a male and female held hands and leaned into one another, and Talon tried not to imagine what that would have been like. How warm would her shoulder have been? Could he have clasped her hand like that? Would she have allowed him to steal a few more kisses beneath the moonlight?

Talon kept going until he entered the housing district, separating himself from the festivities entirely. The music faded along with the crowds, leaving him in the dark stillness of night. He listened to the trickling water nearby, and took in a deep breath to clear his senses.

Everything in him froze.

A scent like freshly blooming lilies and misting waterfalls hit him so hard Talon's knees threatened to buckle. Hesitantly, as if afraid to hope, he took in the scent again. Then he was running.

He sprinted up the estate steps as fast as his Fae body allowed. The guards moved out of his way and though he scented their curiosity and concern, he couldn't stop. His body wouldn't let him. Talon bounded over gardens and skidded in the dirt as he rounded another corner.

It couldn't be. On the solstice?

But the scent was growing stronger. A scent like Ellie's but sweeter. A scent that told him there might be hope after all.

Talon stopped at a familiar pool of water. He smelled her, but somehow the scent was still too faint for his liking. Like she'd passed by and simply disappeared without a trace. He took a small step forward, eyes searching first beneath the bridge and then in the water itself.

But there, resting in the very place where Arianna used to dip her feet in the cool liquid, sat a single frozen rose with a tendril of her dark hair

attached.

Talon's entire body shook and with trembling fingers, he picked up the flower, caressing the attached strands.

Her scent. Her strong, alive scent.

He gazed out onto the water and several little eyes stared back, as if reassuring him it was true.

Arianna was very much alive.

Chapter Eleven

Arianna

Two days passed, and another knock at the door had Arianna scrambling to her feet. She scented Rion's irritation at the disturbance and had no doubt he'd likely kill the males responsible once he was back on his feet.

The thought should have frightened her.

She wrung her hands together. What would she tell them? They'd given her a knife and promised her refuge if she finished The Demon off, but as soon as they'd handed her the blade, Arianna knew she couldn't follow through. She'd hidden it beneath her blanket and prayed Rion hadn't noticed.

Arianna turned the handle and the hinges creaked. She stared into the male's hard gazes, but before she could speak a calloused hand slapped her across the cheek so hard it sent her careening into the nearest wall. Their magic rushed forward, crawling over her skin and wrapping around her throat. She clawed at it, desperately seeking air and freedom.

Her gaze shot toward the bed and fear flooded her body. Rion. If he died—but Rion's magic was already moving. Somehow, in mere seconds, he'd gotten to his feet, the sand a raging storm circling his body. The particles covered the entirety of the room and he snarled so fiercely it altered his features completely.

She scented their fear, but the males lunged anyway, their vines shooting forward to claim their prize. But Rion's magic was faster. He shredded the greenery as if it was a child's plaything, then lifted the two would-be assassins with ease and threw them through the open doorway.

Rion stormed past and she hunkered down, willing herself smaller.

Earth spilled from the cabin in his wake, and she tried not to cringe as those particles roamed over her legs like angry insects rushing to the aid of their queen.

The two scrambled to their feet and took several steps back as they accessed the male they'd hoped to kill. She could see the fear in their eyes, smell it spilling off them. The earth darted toward the pair like a viper and wrapped around their wrists. It yanked them to their knees, and the males screamed in agony and horror.

The sand circled their wrists and blood dripped down their arms, splattering the ground. Rion silenced their screams by sending thousands of particles down their throats until they were suffocating in silent horror. Arianna turned away when their bodies fell.

Those in the vicinity were silent, staring at the creature they'd feared for decades. They'd come to see an end to their nightmares after hearing about the attempt on his life. But he'd killed that hope in one blow.

Rion stared at each of them, his sand rising once again. It reeked of blood now, but he didn't recoil from it. His breath clouded in the frigid air.

"Anyone else?" He screamed, a growl radiating from deep in his chest, reminding her exactly who he was. Arianna didn't bother looking up. She knew no one else would challenge him. Not today.

It felt like he stood there forever, waiting, wanting it even before he stepped back inside and slammed the door.

Arianna kept absolutely still, unsure if she even remembered how to breathe. He pressed his back and head against the door, let out a long breath, then slid to the floor.

Her entire body trembled, frozen by the fear he invoked. Despite the time she'd spent in his presence, Arianna was once again the female slave thrown into his cabin on that first night. Males were aggressive after battle.

Known to kill anyone who crossed their paths and right now, she was the only one here.

Rion's body shook, and he kept his head down, taking in steady breaths. She knew he was in pain, but clearly, that didn't hinder his abilities. His gaze met hers and Arianna flinched at the hardness there. His eyes roamed toward the sting in her cheek and she flinched again when she scented his anger.

Rion's gaze traveled to her neck next, where he'd bruised her a few nights ago then landed on her scared wrists, still raw from his magic. Both stared at one another. Neither moved.

Rion composed himself and braced one hand on his knee. He grunted, trying to rise to his feet, but fell into the nearest wall instead. Arianna shot toward him, arms extended, and her heart skipped a beat when his magic wrapped around her body, trapping her like it had those two males.

She tried to calm her racing heart, tried to place him back into the mold of that injured male from a few nights ago. Her voice was too quiet and she knew fear poured from her in waves, but Arianna still managed to get the words out. "Let me help you."

His lips parted and the hardness to his gaze vanished as if shattered by some unseen force. She reached out a hand and though his heart rate spiked, Rion took it.

Carefully and slowly, Arianna slid her fingers down his wrist and wrapped an arm beneath his shoulder. They stood together, his other arm bracing against the wall for support.

Despite his display moments ago, their movement was slow, and she was certain with the adrenaline dissipating, the pain was unbearable. Fae were quick to heal, but not that quick.

When they reached the bed, Arianna laid her hands over his abdomen

and Rion sucked in a breath at her touch. Her hands still shook.

When she'd finished, Arianna backed away and wrapped herself in her thin blanket before tending to the fireplace. The heat from the flames chased away the cold in her bones and her fear along with it.

"Why don't you heal yourself?" His voice had gone back to that deep whisper. The one she enjoyed, but it didn't stop her heart from picking up again.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"The magic doesn't work that way. I can only heal others."

"That seems counterproductive."

"I think it keeps balance. If I could heal myself endlessly, it would make things a little unfair, don't you think?"

He grunted and Arianna took that as a sign to leave him alone. She walked into the kitchen and returned to heat up some leftover stew from the previous night. Once she'd finished, Arianna placed a bowl beside him and his eyes snapped open.

"Sorry." She backed away, fear running through her body anew. He ignored her reaction and the food at his bedside.

"How long have you been away from home?"

Arianna settled herself beside the fire again. "Just over a year."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen." His brows shot up and before she could stop herself, Arianna asked. "And you?"

"Ninety-three. The oldest cursed with this magic in centuries."

Arianna remembered the stories from her mother and teachers. Brónach's people killed those with Rion's magic at a young age, right when they first showed signs of it. It'd always made her uneasy. How could

someone stomach to kill a child for nothing more than being born different?

“You’re not just close to royalty, are you?”

Her heart pounded. “No.” It wasn’t a secret at this point. Only direct descendants could inherit the powers of The Divine.

“Do your parents know about your gift?”

“No. I didn’t even tell my sister or Talon.”

“Talon?”

Arianna could have sworn he bristled at the name. “He’s my... friend.”

“You mean your mate.”

It was her turn to bristle. “No, at least, I don’t think so, though it would certainly please my father if we were.”

“And your mother?”

Arianna hesitated. “She died a long time ago.”

She saw Rion’s jaw clench from her peripherals. “How?”

She shrugged. “Illness as far as I know, but father never talks about it.”

Silence echoed between them again and just when Arianna thought he might be asleep, he spoke. “Why did you stay a slave? You could have easily run from the humans.”

Arianna held up her scarred wrists and his eyes seemed to harden again. “Not shackled I couldn’t. I tried once and the slavers killed three females right in front of me. They claimed they’d kill the others if I didn’t behave.” Why was she telling him this?

“So, you didn’t have a plan?”

“I—” She couldn’t very well tell him she planned to escape now. That she knew the guards’ rotations well enough to guess their whereabouts. That the mountain pass wasn’t just a fleeting dream anymore. “I guess I’ve just

been waiting for Talon to show up.” She let out a long sigh. It wasn’t as though she were lying. She was always waiting for Talon. “It sounds foolish now that I say it out loud.”

Rion adjusted himself on the pillows. “It does, considering this Talon of yours could die in the process.”

“He’s too strong to die.” Fear seized her again, but when she looked at Rion, he didn’t seem offended by her tone.

“I almost did.” She studied the softness of his features. The relaxed curve of his jaw, the brows without a crease in the center, and the way his auburn hair hung over that emerald gaze. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. You know where the blankets are, no shivering tonight.”

Arianna stared at him for a long while. He was right about one thing, the longer she waited, the more she was putting Talon in danger. But perhaps a little while longer wouldn’t hurt, at least until Rion was back on his feet.

Chapter Twelve

Arianna

Arianna crept from the cabin and hesitantly closed the door, half wondering if Brónach's warriors would make up an excuse to kill her and dump her body in the woods. She pulled the scarf tighter, wishing fabric could hide her newly revealed heritage, but she was beyond hiding now. She just hoped their fear of the Demon would be enough to still their hands.

She chewed her lip as she walked down the familiar path through the throng of tents. She hadn't wanted to leave, but she was running out of supplies, even with Zylah's gifts. Not to mention she missed the female dearly.

In less than a week's time, Rion was back up and commanding his troops with the authority of someone who'd never been injured at all. No one challenged him, at least none that she saw, and Arianna wondered how he'd earned such a reputation among his people. Then again, perhaps it was best she never found out.

Their last conversation had been... interesting. He knew who she was now, knew what he stood to gain with such information, but Arianna had yet to be dragged from the cabin and tied to a post. She had yet to be tortured for information on how to infiltrate Móirín's capital city or the best way to assassinate her father. Rion was a general. A leader of his people.

And he wasn't using his best source of information.

A Fae in their wolf form prowled the camp and his head snapped toward Arianna when she rounded the path. His lips pulled back in a menacing snarl, revealing sharp canines, but she ducked her head and stepped out of his way. Her heart hammered in her chest, wondering if leaving the

cabin was a bad idea after all, but the wolf kept walking.

Maybe the fear of The Demon would be enough after all.

Perhaps Rion was trying to show her a kindness for saving him when everyone else would have let him bleed out. Maybe he wanted to study her and see what she hoped to achieve.

Freedom. Though she knew asking for such a thing would only grant the opposite. With it returned, she wasn't keen on having it stripped away again.

He'd exercised more patience with her and no longer snarled at her presence. In fact, it almost seemed as though he welcomed her approach and in some weird way, she found his company pleasant as well.

Arianna ducked her head, dodging out of the path of another group of snarling warriors. What was she thinking? She was a slave to these people. To her enemy. To a male who had slaughtered hundreds of her kin during the war.

And yet, Talon had also slaughtered hundreds from Brónach. There was bloodshed on both sides. Enough that it couldn't be pinned on a single person.

Arianna ducked around another guard and entered the slave area where more than a dozen half-breeds froze at her presence. She wasn't here for food, she'd missed that by a few hours. She just wanted to see the female she now considered a friend. She just—

“Arianna?” Zylah's breath clouded in the frigid air. She wore thicker clothes now, all the slaves did, and she'd tied her hair back in a loose braid. Arianna gave her a small smile, but the female grabbed Arianna's wrist and dragged her into the nearest building. The storehouse. “Are you out of your mind?” The female looked her over.

“You told me to come when I could.”

Zylah peeked through the open door. “You can’t just walk through camp when everyone knows you’re from Móirín. Gods, I’m surprised they didn’t kill you.”

Both females studied one another, but it was Arianna, who’d noticed the finger marks around Zylah’s throat, that spoke first. “Are you all right?”

Zylah scoffed. “I should be asking you that. Did he hurt you?”

“No, actually he’s been rather...kind.”

“Don’t go getting sentimental for that creature. I assure you, he doesn’t feel the same.” Zylah’s face scrunched then she pressed her hand to Arianna’s forehead. “Are you feeling well?”

“I think so.” Her stomach had been rolling all morning, but Arianna had assumed it was from the stressful events involving Rion.

Zylah raised a brow then turned to rummage through the cabinets and pulled out a small jar. “Take these just in case. Steep them in hot water and drink it once in the morning and once at night.” She pushed the glass bottle of herbs into Arianna’s open palm. “Get your stuff and be quick about it. Don’t rely on their fear of him, they might think to use you in a power struggle.”

“It wouldn’t work.”

Zylah sighed. “That’s not the point. You’d end up dead by his hand or theirs. Just be careful. Don’t get comfortable around the males in this camp. Any of them.”

Arianna stopped Zylah before she exited. “When’s the solstice?”

Zylah’s face shifted and something like sorrow shone in her gaze. “It was three days ago. They let us have a small celebration, since the Fairy Folk basically demand it, but...” Zylah chewed her lip. “I didn’t think he’d allow you to come so—”

“I understand.” She’d missed it? Arianna thought she’d have heard something. The Fairy Folk’s music or the warriors singing along with them.

But it'd been like any other day. Dismal and dreary.

Her heart hurt, but Arianna raced back to the cabin at Zylah's insistence. Arianna had spent the winter solstice cooped up inside with The Demon and hadn't even noticed its passing. She remembered all the solstices from her childhood. The festivals. The people. But most of all, the Fairy Folk and the way they crowded around her at night when she was alone. She missed it, longed for it even.

Arianna closed the cabin door and got to work. She set the cooking pot beside the fire then cut vegetables and meat into bite-sized pieces. Cold sweat rolled down the back of her neck. Arianna wiped her forehead with a rag and started steeping a spoonful of the leaves Zylah had given her.

She licked her dry lips and lifted the cooking pot onto the hook above the flames. Chills ran down her spine and she leaned against the mantle as dizziness brought her to her knees.

This can't be happening.

Arianna took a few minutes to steady herself then crawled to her blankets and pulled them close to the fire before wrapping them around her shoulders.

She couldn't afford to be sick. A sick slave was a useless slave at best or a contaminant at worst. She wondered if an illness was spreading through the ranks and that was how Zylah knew.

She still had things to get done. A floor to mop, dishes and utensils to clean, but her body was too heavy. Her muscles too weak. Instead, Arianna curled up on her side and let sleep claim her.

The door opened and Arianna jolted at Rion's heavy footsteps. She sat up, grabbing the ladle to stir their dinner. Night had fallen, but her body still shivered. She tried to adjust her shirt, but it clung to her body from the sweat. She just prayed Rion wouldn't notice.

Rion removed his boots, set them by the door, and walked past her without a glance. At least she'd remembered to put clean water in the washbasin that morning.

She let her mind fade in and out until he finished, emerging in those same black pants he wore every night. Still no shirt, which revealed a thin scar that ran along the length of his abdomen from his previous injury. It wasn't the only one, but she didn't possess the strength to study him tonight.

Rion sat on the edge of his bed, his hair wet and dripping.

Her hands shook, but Arianna fought to keep her body under control. If she could keep it together long enough to serve him, she could go back to sleep and recover before he ever knew anything was amiss. The herbs would help. They'd take the fever down and once it was gone, she could resume her normal duties.

She used a different spoon to taste than the one she handed to Rion, and his perplexed gaze worried her. He was always studying, always evaluating. Of course, he'd notice something was off. She just hoped he didn't think she was trying to poison him again. They didn't speak most nights, and she prayed this would be one of them.

Just eat and sleep, she kept repeating to herself.

She needed to escape soon. Honestly, she should have done it days ago. Rion was better. He could take care of himself. She'd marked a route the guards seemed to ignore that would lead her to the mountains. Once inside, she was certain no one would follow. She hoped. Perhaps the Demon didn't fear the creatures within the forest, but she had to take the chance. If she died, at least she'd die trying.

Rion sat his bowl on the floor beside him, as he always did, but today the dish looked so far away. If she didn't get up, he'd know something was amiss. All she had to do was pick up his bowl and set it next to the fireplace.

She could wash it tomorrow after he'd gone for the day, that wouldn't seem too out of place.

Arianna took a breath, placed her feet beneath her, and stood.

Dizziness overtook her balance and she placed one foot back to steady herself to no avail. The world was spinning too much, her body already spiraling out of control. She reached for the mantle, but it wasn't there, then she was falling.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist and slowly lowered her to the floor, but Arianna kept her eyes shut, willing the spell and accompanying nausea to pass. She really didn't want to vomit in front of him.

"What's wrong?" His usually rough voice was soft, yet still commanding.

"I'm fine." She tried to pull back from him, but the ceiling and floor fought for dominance.

Rion pulled her closer as if cradling her to his side. "No, you're not."

He stood, placing both hands beneath her arms to lift her up. The position was awkward with his body behind hers, but he slowly walked her to the edge of his bed and forced her to lay down.

It took far longer for the dizziness to fade than she would have liked.

Rion's hand pressed against her forehead a second later and she tried not to moan at the heat radiating from his palm.

"You're burning up."

No, please gods no. She wanted to cry. Wanted to grab onto his arm and beg him not to throw her out into the cold. To plead her case and convince him she wasn't useless, but darkness claimed her before Arianna could beg for anything.

WHEN ARIANNA opened her eyes, the warm afternoon sun was pouring through their small window. She squinted, turned her head, and pain exploded behind her eyes.

She winced and rubbed her temples, trying to work the headache down to a throb before examining the room.

Rion was gone, likely tending to his warriors. He'd not woken her, and she vaguely wondered if he'd slept in the bed as well. She was a slave, not to be a burden on her master. Even if he did appreciate her for saving his life, she needed to tread cautiously. Rion was still The Demon and the images of the men he'd killed was still fresh in her memories.

Arianna placed her feet on the floor one at a time. The fire was low, but she didn't have the strength to feed it. Instead, she clung to the wall and slowly, one foot at a time, crawled along it toward the bathroom.

After relieving herself and struggling with the door, Arianna headed for the kitchen.

Zylah's jar of herbal remedies sat on the countertop. Arianna blinked against the sun shining through the kitchen window, squinting to focus through the pounding in her head. She reached for the jar, but the dizziness returned, forcing her to lean over and gather her bearings.

The front door creaked open and a heartbeat later, warm hands rested lightly on her shoulders.

"What are you doing?" An irritated tone, like the one her father had given her the night he'd caught her training after she'd broken her wrist.

"Making tea." He didn't reply. "For the fever."

Rion peered over her shoulder and it was a struggle to resist leaning into his warmth. He seemed to study the jar and its contents.

"Keep your hands in front of you."

Arianna gasped when Rion placed one arm beneath her knees and supported her back with the other. He lifted her from the ground, her world spinning with the movement.

Despite wanting to grab for his neck, she kept her hands close to her torso and buried her head in his chest.

His scent hit her harder than she expected.

That herbal blend devoid of blood or gore. That earthen scent rooted in flame. She couldn't resist breathing him in before he set her back on his bed.

She curled up under the blankets and Rion returned to the kitchen. Arianna listened as he unscrewed and re-tightened the jar. As he poured water into a small kettle. A cupboard opened and shut. Rion headed toward the fireplace and hung the kettle above the flames.

She studied him. He watched the fire.

“My sister made me tea when I was a child.”

An awkward silence stretched between them.

“Thank you.” She wished she could have told him it wasn't his job to care for her. That she should be the one serving him, but she didn't have the energy for it. Nor the energy to fear whatever repercussions were sure to follow.

When he finished, Rion set the steeping tea on the table beside the bed. “If you need anything else, wait for me to come back.”

IT WAS dark outside before she woke again. Rion knelt before the fireplace and the sweet aroma of stew drifted through the cabin.

Silently, he poured her a bowl and stood beside the bed to hand it to

her.

With a growling stomach, Arianna sat up and reached for the dish. She brushed his fingertips and when their eyes met, her heart jumped in response.

What was that look in his gaze?

A blush rose to her cheeks, but he turned away, served himself, and remained by the fireplace.

Both ate in silence.

With her stomach still queasy, Arianna ate slowly, but Rion didn't rush her, didn't look at her really, though, by the way he'd angled his body, she could tell he was watching her every move.

When she got down all she could manage, Arianna set the bowl on the side table and leaned back into the pillow.

After a long moment, the bed shifted.

She froze, her heart racing, and Arianna risked a glance to her right.

Rion, this seemingly flawless, powerful male, was lying beside her, in the same bed, clad in nothing but those black pants that hung perfectly from his waist. He'd already closed his eyes and folded his hands over his chest.

Gods help her. She watched him from the corner of her eye and could have sworn his breathing accelerated as well. Damn it he could probably smell desire all over her. But she was of that age now and—no. She turned her head away. That was the fever talking. He was an enemy of Móirín. He was a killer of her people and she'd promised herself to Talon. Though not in so many words.

Rion's breathing finally evened out and she glanced at him again. His facial muscles were more relaxed now and his lips had parted slightly.

She didn't understand the feelings coursing through her body, especially in her sick state, but there was one thing she did know. For reasons

beyond her control, Arianna wanted this male to trust her. She wanted him to talk to her and the way he'd been fussing over her the last two days made her wonder if he felt the same.

Demon.

Was he truly a demon or had a cruel life forged him into one?

Chapter Thirteen

Arianna

Arianna's eyes fluttered open, her headache gone and body feeling far more like itself than the day before. The fire had dimmed, leaving a chill to the air, and she thought about adding more logs to it until she tilted her head to the side.

Arianna sucked in a breath.

Auburn hair had fallen over his relaxed face, his slow even breathing the strands' only disturbance. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen him without his brow furrowed in rage or pinched in confusion. It was smooth now, not a single worry line marring his beautiful face.

His lips were parted, revealing the sharp canines she was sure had torn through more throats than she could count.

Who knew a monster could appear so serene?

Legends. Fables. Myths. She'd heard them all, but had any of those old scholars bothered to speak with those labeled as one of the cursed? Or had they simply reacted the way they were taught?

Arianna struggled to blindly follow those teachings now. After everything the gods denied them and the way their own families treated them, who wouldn't turn into a savage beast? They denied him happiness at every angle. The magic itself. The isolation. No animal shift or mate.

What was life without love?

His chest rose and fell, slow and steady. One hand rested lightly on his stomach, fingertips grazing the fresh scar. He'd moved the other beside his face, palm up. Mere inches from hers.

Arianna's breath turned shallow and, despite what he'd asked of her

the other day, she couldn't resist reaching for his arm. Slowly, so as not to disturb the bed, she ran one fingertip along the vein in his forearm. His skin was smooth, warm, soft. Nothing like what she might have imagined.

At one time, his earth had all but torn through her flesh, leaving it raw and bleeding, but it was still now. Silent.

Arianna traced the vein to his elbow, then ran her fingertip back up toward his hand. She smiled to herself, wondering if—his eyes flew open, and she scented his fear a mere second before his body was on top of hers. His fingers dug painfully into her wrists, and he slammed them above her head, pinning her entire body in place with that lethal magic of his. Rion snarled in her ear, fangs grazing the sensitive skin at the base of her throat.

Arianna froze, clenching her eyes shut, and images of the males he'd killed flashed across her vision. His magic was all over her, wrapping around her arms and legs, grating against her skin as if daring her to move.

Stupid. She was so utterly stupid.

Seconds passed and ever so slowly his breathing returned to normal. Arianna refused to move, even as his shoulders relaxed and the grip on her hands loosened a fraction.

With a ragged breath, Rion pulled back just enough to study her face. "What were you doing?" His voice held that commander's tone. One she couldn't disobey. She risked a glance at his face. His lips were still pulled back, fangs out, eyes wild.

And Arianna was a damned fool.

Because that warrior's body was pressing in on her, his warmth seeping through the blankets. Because his breath was hitting her face, drowning her in his powerful scent. And because everything about him that should've sent fear coursing through her body sent thrills of delight instead.

"I—I'm sorry." How foolish could she get? Of course, he'd wake up,

who wouldn't? And who was she to touch him while he slept? He'd offered her his bed as a compassionate gesture, and she'd violated his personal space.

His grip relaxed further and the pain in her wrists vanished. "You didn't answer my question." Arianna's face heated. "Why did you touch me?"

"I guess I just...wanted to." Embarrassment flooded through her, but she couldn't move. Not with him holding her in place. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done so without your permission."

She could feel Rion's eyes on her but Arianna couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze. His body was warmer now and she could feel her own responding, a need forming in the pit of her stomach.

His scent shifted and Rion's body relaxed, conforming to hers. He lowered his lips to her throat and Arianna scarcely risked a breath as she tilted her head, baring her neck to him.

She should have feared those fangs. She should have wanted to run screaming. Should have begged for anyone to save her. But the only thing Arianna wanted to beg for was the feel of his lips against her skin. To know whether they were rough like his hands or carried a softer texture.

Rion pressed his nose to the base of her jaw and ran it slowly down the racing pulse in her neck. His hot breath sent shivers of delight coursing through her body. His lips parted. So close now.

Arianna tugged at her bound wrists, wanting nothing more than to run her fingers through his hair. To feel the muscles in his back shift, but Rion pulled away, lifting his entire body from her own. He looked at her for a long moment then rose from the bed and left without another word. He hadn't even bothered with a shirt or shoes.

The door slammed, leaving Arianna reeling in the silence. Her heart thundered in her chest and her breathing came so fast she wasn't sure she'd

ever get it steady again.

She sat up, ran her fingers through her hair, and—

What was she doing?

Had she just been willing to—

Guilt gnawed at her as Talon's face appeared in the forefront of her mind. She'd been planning to escape this week, to leave Rion behind and finally return to a normal life. And she'd just almost lost herself entirely.

What am I doing?

THE WARRIORS within the vicinity scurried away as soon as he exited the door. He stalked toward the woods, sucking in the crisp air until it stung his lungs. He needed it to cool his body, for the wind to brush her scent away from his nose.

Because if it didn't, he was going to run right back into that cabin, tilt her head back and—

Rion entered the trees and broke into a run. He ran and ran and ran, but no matter how far he went, he couldn't get her out of his head. That female had wanted the exact same thing. He'd smelled it on her and damn it all, he could still smell it now as if it were following him. Plaguing him. Tempting him.

She was a daughter of Móirín. One touch could leave him incapacitated for the rest of his life. One touch could kill him and yet he wanted her hands all over him. He wanted to put his hands all over her.

Why? Why would she want such a thing? He was her enemy. He'd killed more Fae from Móirín than he could ever hope to count. She had another male waiting for her at home.

But that male hadn't claimed her, the darker part of him reasoned. She didn't carry another's scent which told him if the humans hadn't laid a hand on her, then no one had.

Rion pressed his forehead into the nearest tree, willing his body to calm down. A female had tricked him before, but even she hadn't smelled like *that*. She'd even bore her neck to him, offering herself like—Rion punched the tree, shattering the surrounding bark, and focused his attention on his split knuckles.

He couldn't lose control. No matter what he wanted, there was always an ulterior motive and he'd been fooled enough times in his life to know better than to hope.

UPON HIS return that evening, she served their dinner as usual, but the atmosphere in the room had shifted. It felt as if the space was far too small for them now. As if the two bodies within could burst the walls open at any moment.

He stared at her, studying her in a different light than he usually did. His eyes had shifted from their usual hardness, instead carrying with them that wonderment she'd witnessed the night she'd healed his abdomen. Arianna struggled to meet that gaze without blushing and when it came time to blow out the candles, she couldn't have been more thankful.

Tomorrow, she told herself. She was getting out of here tomorrow.

She padded back to her blankets, wrapped them around her shoulders, and curled up near the fireplace.

His deep voice broke the silence a second later. "What are you doing?"

Arianna glanced toward his half-naked form and her eyes followed the corded muscles down his forearms. “Sleeping?”

He stood and jerked his chin toward the bed. Heat flew through her body at the memory from that morning.

What would happen if he tried again? It wasn't as if he'd forced himself on her, she'd been more than inviting and the knowledge made her blush further. He could probably smell it on her now and even though she knew it was wrong, Arianna wasn't sure she'd want to push him away.

“You'll get sick again sleeping on the floor.”

She wanted to ask why someone like him took it upon himself to care. She wanted to understand why he kept looking at her like that and if the same thoughts that plagued her also haunted him.

Instead, Arianna stood slowly, and he moved to the other side, sinking into the blankets without looking at her. Arianna hesitated at the edge, then steadied herself and curled up as far from his body heat as she could manage.

She tried to ignore his deep, welcoming scent, to control her body even though she ached to touch him again.

The guilt returned. She'd never felt that way for Talon. Never clung to his scent or craved his touch so much it hurt.

She'd honestly never had anyone make her feel the way Rion did and it was the most electrifying and terrifying thing she'd ever experienced.

Chapter Fourteen

Arianna

Arianna joined Zylah and the other slaves for breakfast. “You’re quiet today,” Zylah said, taking a seat between her and a half-breed male.

“I’m just distracted I guess.”

Zylah took a bite of her food. “By what?”

She couldn’t very well tell the female the truth. What would they think of her if they knew she’d been having dreams about a certain redhead with their bodies entwined in ways that had her blushing even now?

Arianna tried to hide her face, but Zylah wasn’t having it. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

Zylah tilted toward her. “Something clearly happened.”

Arianna wrung her hands together, but it was the male, Irial, who spoke first. “I’d say she’s grown fond of someone.” He leaned in closer. “I’d even venture to say it has something to do with the general.”

Zylah’s eyes widened and she grabbed Arianna by the shoulders, her fingers digging in painfully. “Please tell me that isn’t true.” The slaves eating their breakfast turned to stare and Zylah lowered her voice. “I told you not to trust any of them. Especially the general.”

Arianna couldn’t meet Zylah’s gaze. “He’s been kind to me.”

“And I’m kind to the strays that sneak into camp, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t skin one and eat it if I had to.” Zylah huffed and drew Arianna’s gaze to meet her own. “He’s a monster, Arianna. We’ve all seen it. You’ve seen it. You’ve heard the stories.”

“Then why does he demand we have regular meals? Why are you all

dressed in warm clothes for winter?”

“You think keeping us alive, fed, and warm is enough to call him kind or justify the way we’re treated?”

Arianna remembered Zylah’s bruises. “Well no, I just—”

“Relax Zylah.” Irial placed one hand on Zylah’s shoulders. “We’re all just trying to survive, and gods know we’re more than a little starved for affection.” Zylah released her shoulders with a frightened look in her eyes. Irial leaned over the female and lifted Arianna’s chin to meet his dark gaze. “Just so long as you remember you’re nothing to him. All of us are. Don’t let yourself get lost in the fantasy.”

Arianna left the mess hall, grabbed two bundles of firewood, and walked back to the cabin fighting the sting in her eyes. Zylah and Irial were right. She’d fallen into a fantasy where the kindness of her captor had been enough to make her forget she was a captive. He was evil incarnate. He wasn’t capable of anything beyond carnal desires. This creature would use her and throw her away as if she were nothing.

Why then had he looked at her as if no one had ever shown him an ounce of compassion? Why had he cared for her when she was sick? And if the physical was all he wanted, why hadn’t he forced himself on her?

Rion had been gone for two days but she hadn’t been able to force herself to leave. The cabin smelled of him, summoning images and desires she couldn’t voice. Desires he’d denied himself. If he was such an evil creature, wouldn’t he have taken whatever he wanted? Or was that her saying the minimum was enough again?

Arianna sighed. She hated him going to the battlefield. Especially after what happened last time. The vision of him returning on his knees, barely alive sent more fear coursing through her body than she knew she should feel.

But he was a warrior, as was Talon and the many other males and females who fought in the war.

You could put an end to it, a voice inside her whispered.

But could she?

Maybe if she took up her name but—Arianna tilted her head toward the sky and let her breath cloud in the morning air. The sun had just crested the trees, painting the clouds with purple and orange streaks. She watched a bird circle overhead and envied its freedom. Her gaze dropped back to the cabin, then to those in the vicinity. There were fewer guards than normal. Fewer warriors to around the general's cabin.

Had he taken his warriors with him, or did they keep their distance for other reasons?

Arianna's heart pounded. She stared at the mountains in the distance then set the pile of wood beside the doorway. Arianna watched the guards, but even with her racing heart, none looked her way.

Was this her chance?

Arianna took a few steps toward the wood line, watching the surrounding males, waiting for the warning hiss or growl.

Nothing.

She wouldn't get another opportunity like this. She could do it now. Run into the forest and with The Demon away, there'd be no one to stop her.

No, not demon. Rion.

Her heart ached at the thought of him returning to an empty cabin. She imagined him standing on the threshold, scenting the air for her presence only to find it missing. She envisioned him staring at a cold fireplace and then to her folded blankets in the corner. He'd sit on the bed with his hands clasped before him, left with nothing and no one.

Don't get lost in the fantasy.

Arianna took a tentative step, still glancing toward the guards. She took another step then another until she was running through the remaining tents and the forest engulfed her entirely.

Alone. That's exactly what Rion was. Completely alone in the world, a creature starved for another's affection by a cruel land that'd labeled him a threat.

There had to be others, she reasoned. Surely someone from Brónach had earned his favor in the past. Someone that'd cared for him as a child. But no matter how much she reasoned with herself, Arianna couldn't shake the pull in her chest. She could make a list of excuses. She could write them all down and burn them, but one fact would remain. Something about Rion called to her in a way she didn't understand.

The breeze carried with it a familiar scent and Arianna slowed, letting her thoughts settle before shifting course. She ran her fingertips along the trees as she walked, and the water emerged through the tree line minutes later.

A beautiful, wide river. Arianna walked right to the edge, staring out over the water's calm, flowing surface. Trees hung down from the steep bank on the other side, dipping their roots into the cool liquid, but on her side, the water was shallow. Pebbles of varying colors lined the bottom, and the crystalline surface reflected the morning sun like a painting in her father's study.

It all reminded her of home. Of a time full of hope and laughter.

Arianna removed her shoes and rolled up her pant legs. She placed one foot into the frigid water, shivering as the cold shot straight through her body.

Arianna placed her other foot in and stepped deeper until the freezing liquid covered her ankles. She took another breath and dropped back into a

stance, allowing the scent from the water to flow through her memories.

A smart female would have run.

She still could. She should, but—

Arianna let her magic glide through her body and into the river flowing past her feet. She tugged, pulling the liquid up and around her limbs in a way she hadn't done in over a year.

The tendrils extended to her arms, spiraling around them, and reached her fingertips without ever really touching her body. So similar to the way Rion's magic had caressed her skin.

She let herself flow through the familiar form, something that'd taught her control and balance.

Her mind stopped racing.

She remembered watching others perform the same dance, twisting and molding the particles as if they were an extension of themselves. She did the same now.

Arianna raised a large sphere of water to her front and with one swift movement, shattered it into thousands of tiny droplets that circled her body. Each sphere caught the sunlight and reflected it through the others, encasing her in a prism of light.

She didn't stop the tear that slid down her face as she glanced toward that opposite bank, unwilling to face an impossible choice.

Home.

Or Rion.

RION MARCHED at the front of the line. He'd already washed the blood from his hands and swapped his blood-drenched clothes for fresh ones.

He'd ensured his subordinates knew where supplies were to be distributed and what their next assignments would be.

So why was he still with them?

Rion turned around and stalked toward a male who'd served beneath him for two years. He'd been the longest though time had never stopped others. If a father could attempt to murder his son, a soldier could just as easily turn on his general.

"Maher."

"Sir?"

Rion handed the logs to him. "See to it everything is taken care of."

Maher bowed his head. "Consider it done."

Rion broke into a sprint and everyone in the immediate vicinity jumped back, clearing a wide berth. He smirked, but the fear he'd once relished in no longer held much sway, not when a certain female kept invading his thoughts.

He didn't understand the need to be near her. Or the feelings that had emerged when his body was on top of hers. Nor the way she'd seemed to welcome it.

It was a trick. It had to be. She was a daughter of Móirín, kept from home for far too long. Perhaps she thought her only way out was to get close to him and take his life. She'd likely be regarded as a hero.

The memory of her warmth returned. She'd been so close. So willing.

Rion clenched his jaw. Never again. He'd never let himself be that vulnerable again. He'd already sworn it in his late teens, back when a commander had assigned a female to assassinate him in the exact same manner.

His legs pounded against the ground and he flew across the meadow faster than most Fae were capable. Thankfully, their entourage wasn't too far

out, and he found himself entering camp within a few hours.

The warriors stationed at the gate stood to attention, their gaze fixated on the trees now behind him. Fear stung his delicate senses, but Rion chose to ignore it today, his only goal the small cabin near the rear of their camp.

The wind carried her scent toward him. She'd been outside today, likely gathering firewood. The pile had been running low when he left.

The males surrounding his cabin fled at his presence, moving farther away than they usually did. He eyed the wood pile set beside the door, puzzling over them before twisting the doorknob.

Her scent weakened.

Rion took one step inside the cabin and stepped right back out. A growl rumbled deep in his chest and every Fae within hearing distance outright fled.

They'd let her escape. His anger bubbled over, but Rion spun on his heel and headed east.

He'd deal with them later.

He cursed. Of course, she'd head to the river. She was from Móirín after all. The water would give her an advantage over all of them. She could disguise her scent and travel, using the river as a means for escape.

Rion clenched his fists.

It was always the same. Always, it didn't matter if they were Fae or human. They'd fear him, convince him of their sincerity, then stab him in the back. Sometimes literally.

He knew better than to trust anyone.

The earth circled his body, reacting with the anger pouring from him. It twitched in agitated spirals as he stomped through the forest, rising up to hover above his head like a dark cloud. He didn't care. Let her know he was coming, let her—

Rion halted, the scent of her magic so strong he could have sworn she was standing directly beside him. He listened, settled his magic to locate the source, and growled when he found it.

She was still by the river, but as he stormed toward it, he caught sight of her doing the last thing he expected.

Arianna, in all her glory, stood in ankle-deep water, twisting and gliding as if she were one with the river. The water rippled with each step she took, and she moved with such fluidity that she barely disturbed its surface.

She pulled an orb of water apart, surrounding herself with tiny spheres of liquid before crouching and letting them fall. The water crawled up her body again. An elegant dance with the river itself.

Rion let out a slow, calming breath and found himself captivated. He leaned against the nearest tree to watch and relished in the scent that washed over the area each time she lifted and let the water fall.

Arianna hadn't run.

And he couldn't understand why.

Keeping still as only the Fae could, Rion watched her flow from one movement to another. He watched the morning sun as it reflected from the droplets and found himself envying the way the water crawled across her skin.

Something else caught his attention then.

Something was moving in the river. Many somethings, but before he could sprint toward her, a flower lifted from the water's surface. Another emerged from beneath a log. Figures floated against the river's current, all coming to surround the female manipulating the shallowest section of the river.

The Fairy Folk were gathering.

One by one they inched closer to her dancing form, playing in the

ripples.

He thought he saw her smile. Arianna reached down and to his utmost surprise, they reached back.

His lips parted as she picked one up, speaking to it in hushed tones, and for the first time in his existence, Rion found himself believing in fairytales.

Chapter Fifteen

Arianna

Arianna smiled at the little creature in her palm. She ran a gentle finger along one petal, eliciting a singsong laugh from it, then set the floral being back in the water.

She tilted her chin toward the sun, soaking in the light and warmth of the world. The last hour had been the closest to home she'd felt in a long while and despite knowing she should have run and could very likely have succeeded, she didn't regret staying.

Several of the Fairy Folk swam toward the bank and she followed, setting her numb feet on the hard ground.

Her gaze continued to travel upward as they ran, waddling their way through the forest when awestruck eyes locked with her own.

Arianna froze. She should have scented him sooner, been more aware of her surroundings, but it was too late for that now.

She expected anger from him, but Rion simply stared at her, his lips parted and arms lightly crossed as he leaned against a wide oak. Her heart started racing again at the sight of those curious eyes.

His gaze traveled back to the Fairy Folk walking across the forest floor. Some turned over leaves, others poked their heads into logs, but none fled from his presence as she'd expected.

She picked up her shoes and took a few steps toward him.

"They're not afraid of you," he said.

Arianna shook her head. "They never have been."

He stood there for several moments, seeming to contemplate, then pushed off from the tree. She expected the Fairy Folk to flee and return to

their burrows that blended so well with the forest, not even a Fae could spot them.

But the creatures didn't move. The nearest tilted its little head, the spindles of bare branches above it shifting with the movement.

Arianna thought she saw the ghost of a smile cross his face, but her heart sped with fear as the earth shifted around the little creature.

She took several steps toward them, but it leapt into the particles, eliciting that same singsong laugh she'd heard just moments before.

Her own lips parted when the tiny being jumped straight into his outstretched hand.

"They're... not afraid of you either." His green eyes met hers. "I've never seen them get close to anyone else."

Rion set the sprite on the ground and stood again, returning to lean against the oak with his arms crossed. But his earth didn't stop spiraling between them as Fairy Folk of all shapes and sizes came out to play in his magic.

"You didn't run," he whispered, almost as if he didn't believe it himself.

"I figured I wouldn't get far." She hoped he could smell the lie. She hadn't wanted to leave. The very thought hurt so much her heart ached.

And she couldn't understand why.

Arianna slipped her shoes back on, walked up the small hill, and leaned against the tree opposite him. They both stood in silence, watching the sprites as they chased one another around the trunks.

She scented the air and that intoxicating herbal scent filled her nostrils.

Wild. Unpredictable. Dangerous.

Home. Part of her whispered.

Rion interrupted the silence first. “One would think someone as cursed as I wouldn’t appeal to the Fairy Folk. A minor error from the gods I’m sure.”

Arianna cradled her elbow. “I wasn’t aware the gods made mistakes. Isn’t that why they’re gods?”

“One would think.”

Arianna struggled to prevent herself from fidgeting. She yearned for him to talk. She wanted to know everything about him, his hopes, dreams, fears. Arianna wanted to learn about The Demon people claimed was a plague upon Alastríona. A creature who wasn’t supposed to display kindness or compassion. A being put here to wreak havoc upon their land and plunge it into chaos.

Arianna sighed. “I’m so confused.”

He didn’t look at her. “About what?”

“About you. I was raised with certain beliefs. I was told you were someone capable of terrible things.”

“I assure you, I’ve done more than my share of terrible things.”

“But no one ever mentioned you were... normal.”

He barked out a laugh. “Normal? I don’t think anyone, in all my decades of living, has ever referred to me as such.”

“But you are. You have likes and dislikes. Moods. Kindness and compassion.” She paused when he glanced up at her. “Everyone paints you as a monster.”

“Perhaps people only see what they want to see.”

“But why feed into it? Why pretend to be cruel and uncaring if it isn’t true?”

Another swirl of his magic caught one of the Fairy Folk, sending it gently through the air before it settled on the ground again.

“It’s a tiring task to convince those who have already judged you. Fear is simpler.”

Her heart ached. “Don’t you have anyone at home? Someone who sees this side of you?”

He inclined his head toward the Fairy Folk. “You mean someone who’s seen me with them?” Arianna nodded. “No. I’ve never allowed it.”

“It could change their minds.” The Fairy Folk were sacred after all. “Everyone needs someone they can trust.”

“Get betrayed enough and you’ll think differently.”

Betrayal. How often? How many times had he trusted someone only to have them turn on him? And how many of those individuals had he killed?

“Don’t pity me. I’d rather live without ties than suffer with broken ones.”

Something deep in her core split, as if she were feeling the pain he denied himself.

“No,” she whispered. “The real suffering begins when we crave those ties but can’t attain them.”

“Because no one can be trusted.”

“Maybe, but isn’t it worth the risk?”

He raised a brow. “To hurt?”

“To love.”

He laughed again and that ache inside her tore a little more. “I’m cursed, remember? My mother fled when I was a child. My own father tried to kill me, not to mention a multitude of others. And according to some ancient text, I’m not even allowed to love, so no, I don’t think it’s worth the risk.”

“I don’t believe that.”

His mocking smirk vanished. “And what, exactly, do you believe?”

Her lips parted. She couldn't deny it anymore. What if this male was the only one she'd ever yearn for like this? What if he was the only one to make her heart race the way it was racing right now? He could vanish one day, abandoning the regiment he clearly held no love for.

Or worse. The Rion she'd come to know could cease to exist, lost forever to his blood lust.

Emerald eyes met hers when he scented the change, the desire she no longer tried to hide. She'd already made the decision to stay.

His heart rate spiked in response and her throat went dry.

Slowly, as if afraid to scare her off, Rion pushed off from the tree and stalked toward her. Arianna didn't flinch when he rested his hands against the tree on either side of her head and leaned into them.

He studied her for several breaths, scenting the array of emotions floating from her scent. His magic danced across her skin, teasing. Taunting. "You? You think you could be the one to love the monster?"

She flexed her fingertips, scarcely standing to remain still with him so close. "You're not a monster."

A disbelieving smile. "Then what would you call me?" He leaned closer as if some invisible force were drawing him in.

Her body went rigid when she felt the heat radiating from him, beckoning her closer. "Lonely," she whispered.

He didn't say it, but she could tell from the soft glint in his eyes that she was right. What was it like to go through decades of life without a single person to trust?

"You'd betray me. They all do."

Her heart pounded as he leaned closer still, their warm breaths mingling in the shrinking space. "I wouldn't. I won't."

Particles of earth caressed her skin, gliding along her arms and she

wished it were his hands instead.

He leaned in just a little more and his voice lowered. “How can I be sure of that?”

“You just have to trust me.”

He let out a breath, showering her in his scent. “You ask the one thing I find impossible.” His eyes remained locked with hers. Hungry. Full of desire. “But I can try.”

Arianna’s heart leapt when he closed the distance, his lips barely brushing hers in the whisper of a kiss. She tilted her head, inviting him closer and her breath hitched when he took a half step forward and pressed his mouth fully into hers. His lips moved with aching slowness. As if he were drinking her in, savoring this moment like a forbidden fruit he’d never partake in again.

But she’d never get enough of him. Not in this lifetime or the next. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck, pull him close, and get lost in the taste of him forever.

But Rion’s hands hadn’t moved, and she vaguely remembered his request the other night.

Keep your hands in front of you.

She’d prove he could trust her.

Arianna would prove not everyone was his enemy.

She wanted this male, this dominant, yet gentle male, to be hers. She wanted to claim him in every way and show the world how wrong they were.

Rion pulled away first, leaving her breathless and reeling. A cool breeze floated past, bringing with it fresh air that broke the trance his scent had placed on her.

She glanced to the side and noticed the Fairy Folk gathered around them, all staring. Rion followed her gaze, then caught her attention again with

a small smile.

It was unsure, timid. If such a male could be timid.

“The Divine and the Cursed. How fitting.” He stepped back and started toward the cabin, glancing behind to see if she’d follow. She did, her entire body flushed from their brief, yet intense encounter.

Arianna couldn’t help but smile.

Rion. The general of Brónach’s army. Her greatest enemy and the most feared warrior in Alastríona had just kissed her.

Chapter Sixteen

Arianna

Much to Arianna's disappointment, Rion had other matters to attend to when they returned to the cabin. He'd walked her to the door and for a fleeting moment, she thought he might forsake his duties. Instead, he'd cleared his throat and stalked off, leaving her to watch his retreating form before closing the door.

Arianna leaned against it and touched her lips. Her body trembled with giddy delight and she smiled to herself, replaying their recent exchange over and over again. Come evening, he'd return and her heart raced at the thought. What would happen when they were alone together this time?

The ancient texts were wrong, that's all there was to it. Whoever had written them had done so without knowledge or interest in the truth. He wasn't a demon, and he wasn't incapable of love.

She took a breath and set to her normal duties, though they felt more intimate now. She didn't feel like a slave. She felt more like a—she couldn't form the word.

Arianna dusted, scrubbed, changed the blankets, and made dinner, passing the time with mundane tasks to distract her from thoughts of Rion.

Another thought slipped in from her subconscious, dampening her spirits and Arianna stopped scrubbing. She sat against the nearest wall and leaned her head back. What would she tell Talon?

He loved her and a part of her loved him too. But her feeling toward Rion were different. Deeper. She didn't know him well. In fact, all she knew about Rion were the stories she'd been told as a child and the contradictions she'd seen firsthand. Was staying the right decision? Was she just being a

child who'd become infatuated with the unknown?

Arianna threw the brush into the bucket and crossed the room. She sat on the edge of his bed and cradled her head with her hands. What if staying, despite her heart yearning to, was wrong? And what if she regretted it for the rest of her existence?

Rion opened the door that evening, and Arianna's heart fluttered when those beautiful, emerald eyes met hers. He stood on the threshold, studying her, seeming to scent the air in the room before he closed the door, removed his boots, and went to the washroom.

She'd heated the water for him, something she hadn't done before, and noted that he spent longer cleaning up than normal. Was he nervous? She certainly was, and her trembling hands proved it.

Arianna half wondered if he'd emerge wearing a shirt, but Rion opened the bathroom door with only those black pants hanging from his waist. She let her eyes roam over his torso this time, taking in the lines of muscle he'd spent decades honing.

She noted the faint scar still lining his lower abdomen and then other, smaller ones beside it. Four of them, all jagged and deep as if made by some crude instrument. Rion stilled, but when Arianna realized what she was doing, she turned away to study the fire, a blush rising on her cheeks.

Rion walked around her, his steps soft, and seated himself on the edge of his bed. She poured them two bowls and just as she'd always done, Arianna tasted a spoonful from his before handing it to him. She tried not to watch him lift that same spoon to his lips.

"Come sit." Arianna stood awkwardly, inching her way around his

body to seat herself at his side. They ate in silence and she caught him staring more than once. Her heart never slowed and if it wasn't for him, she'd have skipped dinner altogether.

Once he finished, Rion set his bowl on the floor and angled his body to face her. She did the same.

“A while ago, you apologized for touching me without my permission.” Arianna recalled the moment but couldn't do so without also imagining his body on top of hers. “This is...new to me.” His brow furrowed. “If there's something I do that you dislike, I'd like you to verbalize it.”

All desire vanished, replaced, instead, by that ache in her chest. She nodded. “And you'll do the same?” She couldn't even begin to imagine the depth of scars he carried. Not like the ones on the outside of the body, where they'd heal and be little more than a memory, but scars that went so deep they rooted themselves to the soul.

His brow furrowed as he studied her hands. “I'm...not especially fond of touch.”

She'd assumed as much. His request to keep her hands in a certain position, the way his magic always seemed to wrap around her wrists, and his accelerated heart rate whenever she'd touched him before.

“Does it frighten you?”

He gave her a look that said nothing frightened him before answering. “It... I'm not comfortable with it.” Rion shifted. “With that being said, I'd like to touch you. Is that—can I?”

Gods yes.

Arianna nodded and swallowed hard. Those emerald eyes locked with hers and she saw the same blazing desire reflected in his dark pupils.

If he didn't like touch, then—gods help her.

She'd never been with a male, never wanted it, not like this, but if he

wanted it, gave any indication, Arianna wasn't certain she'd possess the willpower to say no.

She sat straighter. Ever so slowly, Rion reached toward her face and with the lightest touch imaginable, ran one warm fingertip down her cheek. She didn't flinch away from that calloused hand. That same finger trailed across the racing pulse in her neck and Arianna's breath quickened.

His eyes diverted, and he combed his fingers through her hair, lifting it from her shoulder before letting each strand fall back piece by piece.

Arianna wasn't sure she was breathing.

He brought his hand back toward her face, his eyes still studying her intently as if waiting for her to recoil. But Arianna hadn't moved and when that calloused hand met her cheek again she tilted into it.

He rubbed his thumb back and forth and the heat shot straight through her body. She wanted more. She wanted that hand to slide down her arm, to wrap around her back and push her onto the bed. Arianna wanted to feel his lips on hers, but just before her imagination could conjure up more intimate images, Rion let his fingers slide away.

She studied him and the way his brow had furrowed. She wanted to run her fingertips over the lines there and flatten them, but she knew something so intimate might prove to be too much. Instead, Arianna inched her hand toward his.

Rion's eyes locked on the movement, and it was like he watched every muscle fiber flex as she drew closer. His pupils dilated, his nostrils flared, and he sucked in a breath when she hooked her index finger around his.

The pair stilled. She watched the rapid rise and fall of his chest, but just as she was about to pull away, Rion stood. Arianna withdrew her hand and placed both in her lap where he could see them.

He just stood there, staring at her. She thought he might speak, but instead, Rion slipped on his boots. He paused with one hand on the doorknob. “Thank you.” And then he was gone.

Arianna fell back into the pillows, trying not to squeal like a lovestruck child. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but it was enough. No matter how little it might have been, Rion had trusted her and allowed her to touch him. It was on his terms with no expectation. And she couldn’t be happier.

Rion’s scent washed over her when she buried her face in his pillow. Everything would change from this point forward. Everything had already changed. She smiled, kicked her feet, and wondered what her younger sister would make of all this.

THE BROAD male slid through the shadows and into his commander’s tent.

“I trust you bring me good news?”

A devious smile crept to his lips. “I saw The Demon kissing the female.”

“Is she going to be a problem?”

“She’s royalty, but still a child. With numbers, she won’t be.”

“Don’t kill her but make sure he knows we were there.”

The male bowed his head. “Consider it done.”

Chapter Seventeen

Arianna

Her eyes fluttered open after a dream of crisp, clear waters and solid, warm earth. She shifted her head to the side, hoping to spot auburn hair and bright eyes, but judging from the faint scent, Rion hadn't returned last night.

Arianna stretched, sat up, and touched her lips again, reminiscing on the moments of the previous day. She couldn't put a name to the bond between them yet and there was still a long way to go. But he'd learn to trust her and she him, and that trust would serve as the foundation of what she hoped would become a long relationship.

She stood and her body protested, reminding her of the movements she'd gone through before everything that'd happened with Rion. She'd been out there for hours, squatting and bending with her magic. Maybe she and Rion could visit the river together and get lost in one another's arms beneath the forest's canopy. Maybe that's where their relationship would flourish.

Arianna relieved herself in the bathroom, then leaned against the doorframe. She knew he hadn't gone on another mission, but she still wondered where his nightly escapades had led him and what sort of thoughts were circulating through his mind.

She eyed the caldron containing the remnants of last night's supper and hauled it into the kitchen. Arianna noticed the spices Zylah had given her and felt a pang in her chest.

What was she doing? There were slaves suffering here. She'd been planning her escape for weeks and finally found a path to the mountains. She could take Zylah and a few others away from this camp. They'd have a better life in Móirín. But—

Arianna was glad she hadn't run. The thought of leaving them behind was too painful, but the thought of leaving Rion—she clutched her chest. But what if Zylah and Irial were right? What if he didn't care? What if this was all a fantasy she'd created in her head?

The knob twisted and Arianna's ears perked. She turned as the door creak open, wondering if Rion had changed his mind about attending to his duties today, but it wasn't Rion's herbal, flaming scent that filled the space.

Memories of Lan and his comrades made her take a step back, but a group of males were in the room before she could summon her magic. An iron shackle clamped around her left wrist. Her assailant twisted her arm behind her back and kicked the back of her knee, forcing Arianna to the ground. Then the other shackle snapped into place.

Her magic. Just like that, they'd taken her magic.

Hot tears stung her eyes and she tried to lash out, but the male slammed her head into the floor. He did it again and again until blood poured down her temple and nausea rolled through her stomach.

The male stuffed a thick cloth in her mouth and Arianna gagged on the material. He tied a blindfold over her eyes next and secured the shackles behind her back with a short chain. She tried to gather her bearings, to determine up from down, but black dots were still flying across her vision.

Fear jolted down her spine. They were going to kill her. They'd seen her with Rion and now they were going to use her death as a means to get under his skin. She struggled and though she knew better, Arianna made a desperate grab for her magic only to have an electric current slam through her body. She screamed, the sound muffled, and fought the shocking waves that pulsed beneath her skin.

The male pinning her in place laughed, his voice unfamiliar. "Behave now, the commander would like to have you alive." He leaned down to

whisper in her ear. “He didn’t say anything about keeping you in one piece, Móirín filth.”

Her nostrils flared, but she still couldn’t focus. Were there five males or six?

Rion.

He’d return soon. He had to and when he did—she faltered. What exactly did she expect from him? To be rescued? They’d shared a single kiss. Hardly an act to warrant his anger. Rion barely trusted her let alone cared.

No. At the very least he’d hunt these males down for invading his territory. Fae instinct was something she could rely on, but deep in her heart, Arianna hoped he came for other reasons.

But I can try.

She wanted to live long enough to see it. She wanted to witness the day Rion let someone in. Arianna wanted to be the one to teach him he could rely on others. Trust them even.

The male lifted her and threw her over his shoulder. Her head still spun, but she knew the moment they exited the cabin. Though she wore long sleeves and pants, the material was too thin to protect her from the elements. A chilling breeze bit through the fabric and she clamped her teeth together to stop them from chattering.

Someone would stop these males. A guard who’d witnessed what happened to Lan and his crew. Someone loyal to their general was about to scream, raise the alarm, and Rion would come running.

Silence.

She waited, her body bouncing with the movement of the male’s running gait.

Still silence.

No one? She tilted her head, trying to listen past the blood rushing

through her ears. Not a single warrior stood in these male's way.

How many wanted Rion dead?

Her head pounded in time with her pulse. She was helpless again, shackled and gagged with no hope for escape. Just like the last year and a half. She'd had an escape plan. She'd had an opportunity and if Rion didn't come for her, she'd never get one again. The tears slid free. She should have run. She should have grabbed Zylah and been a few days journey from this camp already. But she hadn't and now it was too late.

HER CAPTOR'S shoulder dug deeper into her ribs with every leap and bound. Arianna winced from both the building pain and the dull thud of her head, and she desperately tried to keep the contents of her stomach in check.

The male leapt again, over what she could only assume was a log, judging from the smell of trees, then he threw her to the ground with a violent thud. Pain shot from her right hip all the way up her shoulder. She tried to pull against her shackles, but the chains were too tight, causing more pain in her already aching body.

"We brought the female," her captor declared. Arianna tried to tilt her head, to locate whoever he spoke to. She could scent him now. A similar scent to her captor. They were from Brónach. No, wait, all of them were from Brónach.

"Good, now we wait."

"You're sure this will work?"

The new male chuckled. "You trespassed on his territory. Even if he doesn't care for the female, he'll come."

Her kidnapper gave a pleasing growl then he yanked Arianna to her feet. “Then there’s no need to keep her alive.” White-hot pain seared through her neck and she screamed despite the rag in her mouth. Arianna felt her skin tear, blood rolled down her neck, then something collided with the side of their bodies, knocking her and her assailant to the ground.

With her senses returned, Arianna had enough mind to back herself away from the male, hot tears trailing down her cheeks.

“Leave the female be.”

Her assailant spit and it splattered on her hand. “She’s from Móirín.”

“I didn’t ask you where she was from, I told you to leave her be.” She heard her assailant rise and the growl that rumbled through his chest sent shivers down her spine. Someone drew a sword. “Challenging me?” The growling ceased and silence spread, their harsh breathing the only thing that told Arianna both males were still there.

“Let it go,” another barked. “Eoghan always did have a soft spot where females were concerned.”

Her assailant spit again. “He wouldn’t feel so merciful if a few more put a blade against his throat.”

The unfamiliar voice laughed then she noticed the other scents. A dozen at least. No. More. Her assailant stalked off and Arianna recoiled when a hand touched her leg. She drew her knees to her chest and made a sad attempt at scooting herself backward.

This new male inched closer. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

He leaned forward and Arianna’s breath came in quick gasps as he lifted the veil from her eyes and gently pulled the gag from her mouth. She blinked against the bright afternoon light and focused on the dark-haired male before her.

A male she’d seen before.

He'd been there the day Brónach's warriors kidnapped her. He'd been the one to stop the males from killing herself and the remaining slaves.

The male pulled a knife from his belt, and she sucked in a breath. "It'd be best if you didn't try to run." He began sawing at the ropes around her legs. "Once this is over, I'll see to it you're returned safely to Móirín."

"Why?" He walked around her and unclasped the chain that held her arms, shifting them to her front.

"I think you've suffered enough." He scented the air and his brow furrowed, though she couldn't imagine what he might be thinking.

"Once what is over?" Her gaze wandered now, taking in the dozens of bodies that lined the area. Clusters of trees stood beside patches of crudely cut stumps as if someone had thinned out the forest in a hurry.

The dark-haired male stood. "Killing that demon."

Her heart thundered. "You're all from Brónach."

"And that surprises you? Surely you realize how much joy that soulless creature gets from killing." His gaze turned from hers. "It doesn't matter if they're friend or foe."

They didn't know. None of them did. They didn't see the male haunted by distant memories. They didn't see the male who smiled at the Fairy Folk, or the male who craved another's affection like it was the last morsel of bread offered to a starving child.

"You don't know him."

He tilted his head toward her, brow still furrowed. "I know what he's done. I know what he craves when he walks out on the battlefield and if you knew, you'd feel nothing for him. His soul is beyond saving." He shook his head as if remembering something unpleasant. "For centuries, we've been able to dispatch his kind as soon as their abilities appeared, but it's like he was born to kill. Not even his father could stop him."

“He was only ten years-old and that boy slaughtered everyone in his father’s study. He took out our country’s leader in seconds and it was only by a stroke of luck that he didn’t take his sister as well.”

She tried to imagine it. A ten-year-old Rion. A merry child who had his world turned upside down in a single night. No one was born a killer. The world made them into one.

“Trust me when I say we’ve spared you from a fate worse than death.” He surveyed the field, his gaze moving from one face to the next. “We’ll be here a while so get comfortable. As promised, I’ll return you to Móirín as soon as this is over. I’m sure you’d like to see your family again.”

She would. Gods knew she wanted to see Ellie and Talon and Myrna again. She wanted to run the familiar streets of home. She wanted to laugh and play and sing and dance by the main river front. But none of it compared to the fear that seized her at the thought of Rion covered in blood. And she knew, deep in her bones, that if these males tried to hurt him, she’d kill to keep Rion alive.

Chapter Eighteen

Rion

Rion left the war meeting in a better mood than he ever remembered. Everything was going according to plan. They were to strike another Móirín settlement in a few days, and it would finally give them the edge they needed. Once they took control of that village, moving supplies along the northern ridge would be simple.

Rion let his mind drift back to the events from yesterday. To how Arianna had allowed him to press his harsh lips against her soft ones. The way she'd let his blood-stained hands run through her soft hair.

It didn't make sense. She was such a pure creature. She was The Divine.

And then later, she'd pressed her fingertip against his. He'd scented her desire at that moment and fled. Otherwise, he might have lost himself entirely, and he wasn't sure he wanted that yet. Wasn't sure she wanted it at all.

He'd never felt these urges before. It was a need that set his body on fire and she was the kindling to his flame. Something about her drew him in, leaving Rion helpless in her presence. He wanted to drown in her essence, and it terrified him.

Rion continued toward the cabin but something in the air shifted. The Fae who were supposed to guard this area were missing, their scents faint on the wind. Rion's hair stood on end. His gaze shifted between the empty tents, all devoid of warrior and slave.

He paused, half wondering if someone had dared rig his dwelling with an explosive. It'd be a clever trap, though a stupid one. As if he would—

Arianna.

Rion's adrenaline spiked, and he sprinted for the cabin. *They couldn't have.* He slammed the door open and everything in him crumbled at the metallic scent of her blood. He stood in the doorway for half a second, dreading what he might find when he rounded the corner, but Rion forced himself to do it anyway.

The jar of herbs lay shattered across the floor, the broom had fallen from its place in the corner, and the kettle that held their lunch was turned on its side. But her body wasn't there. Instead, he spotted a few drops of blood and a scrape on the floor.

He scented the males who'd taken her and committed them to memory, promising a painful death to each and every one.

Rion blew out the candle on the counter when he stood.

Never in his life had he felt rage like what coursed through him now. Not when his father's loving gaze turned cold. Not when the male who promised to protect him lied. And not when a female he'd developed feelings for put a knife in his back.

No. This was something new. Like white-hot lightning pulsing through his veins.

His clenched his fists. Someone had taken her from him. Someone had taken *his* Arianna.

And he'd ensure their suffering rivaled his own.

ARIANNA STUDIED the Fae surrounding her. They sharpened weapons, tightened armor, and shifted uneasily in the stillness before battle. Some whispered to their comrades, others seemed to pray, bowing their heads

before their chosen gods.

She chewed her lip. All these warriors to take out a single male. But even with their numbers, Arianna could still scent their overwhelming fear.

“They’re all fools if you ask me.”

Her head snapped toward the male. Eoghan, if she’d overheard correctly. “What?”

He inclined his head toward his comrades. “They’re fools. All of them.” He pocketed a knife. “They’re not the first to stage an attempt of this magnitude and they certainly won’t be the last.”

“You don’t intend to fight?”

He chuckled. “Gods no. I’m only here to ensure they don’t take their anger out on you.”

“Why do you care?”

He tilted his head toward the heavens. “Call it instinct. Call it stupidity. There’s just something about you.” He looked at her again. “I felt it the first time I saw you too. Got reamed by my higher-ups for killing my own.”

“You remember.” He nodded. Arianna ran her hand along the links in the chain binding her wrists. “These higher-ups, they let you come just to watch out for me?”

“I can be very persuasive. The Fae from Móirín might believe us uncivilized, but we have gods we worship and beliefs we follow like everyone else. I just happen to be more vocal about mine.”

Beliefs. Did he know? He couldn’t. It wasn’t possible.

“And you believe I’m—what exactly?”

He laughed again, shook his head, and fixated his gaze on an exposed tree root. “I don’t know. I guess that’s what makes them think I’m crazy.”

An explosion echoed through the trees and Eoghan shot to his feet.

Birds flew from the forest canopies by the hundreds, and it seemed as though every warrior in the vicinity had taken a collective breath. They were waiting for something. Waiting—another explosion followed by the distant thud of tree trunks hitting the ground.

Eoghan took her arm. “Let’s give them some space, shall we?” He guided Arianna behind the first few lines of waiting warriors. The warriors clutched their weapons and moved forward, males and females alike, pulling their magic from the earth. The trees bent at their command, branches reaching out like menacing, taloned fingers.

Arianna’s heart pounded when another set of explosions went off, this one much closer. She heard the trees crash together, heard the gasps of shock from the Fae surrounding her and the growls that followed.

Rion was coming.

Silence echoed across the field for so long Arianna’s heart sank. Her throat went dry. What if he hadn’t survived? What if one of the explosions had hit and sent him flying into a tree, left unconscious and vulnerable?

She tried not to imagine the blood that had dripped from his abdomen onto the cabin floor. She tried not to envision his worn and fearful expression as he gripped that horrible, gaping hole in his stomach. But the longer they waited, the more her fear grew. She wanted to run to him, heal him, protect him.

Another explosion had Arianna diving for the ground and Eoghan knelt at her side. His eyes never left the trees. Fae warriors dodged three trunks that came crashing toward them and sank into fighting stances, gripping their weapons like a lifeline.

Smoke swirled through the air, carried by the wind. Then a figure emerged from the shadows.

She might have leapt for joy if not for the cold, wicked gleam in his

eyes. Or the prowling gait that spoke of a warrior honed from the harshest conditions.

The male she'd come to know in their small cabin was gone.

Rion's gaze searched the field, pausing on face after face as if he were counting them. He lingered on a few, then stopped altogether when he spotted her. Rion looked her up and down, pausing first at Eoghan's hand around her arm then at the shackles around her wrists. He didn't smile, nor did he offer a shred of comfort, only an unspoken, icy promise.

No mercy.

Eoghan's superior stepped forward and drew a long blade from across his back. Rion's gaze shot toward him. His lips pulled back from his teeth and he let out the most horrendous snarl she'd ever heard. It echoed deep in his throat and lifted every hair on her body. Several warriors took a retreating step back.

Rion smiled then the world exploded.

Vines with thorns as wide as her wrist shot from the ground while the earth itself rose and shattered into a million particles. They danced around Rion's body and the warriors ran for him, their battle cries echoing deep in her bones. More Fae flew from the trees, threatening to come down on top of him. Arianna wanted to cry out a warning. She wanted to rush into the fray and demand they stop, but fear seized her heart, and the words wouldn't leave her lips.

It was a swarm of blades and magic and bodies, but with a single shift of his hand, Rion's magic burst outward. It tore flesh from bone, ripped their magic from their grasps, and left a pile of skinless bodies in its wake.

Rion didn't pause to finish them off, he leapt from the circle of pain-racked Fae writhing on the ground and grabbed the jaw of the nearest warrior, ripping it clean off before spinning to bury his blade in the next

one's chest.

Rion moved so fast her eyes struggled to keep up. He dodged, danced, and twisted as if he'd been practicing the steps to this song his entire life. Nothing in his body hesitated and he glided across the battlefield with envious grace. It was like he'd done this a thousand times over.

He had. She reminded herself. Rion was the most feared male in Alastríona for a reason. This group had gathered dozens of seasoned warriors for a reason.

Rion shifted the ground at his feet, and it swallowed his attackers. She tried to ignore the crunch of their bones and the blood-curdling screams that followed. Arianna flinched at the carnage, her stomach rolling as it always did. Arianna tried to catch Rion's eye, but something in her froze.

He was smiling. He was killing warrior after warrior, his own people, and Rion was smiling.

This was him she realized. This was The Demon in his full, terrifying glory. A male who'd grown up fighting for his life. A male who had gotten so good at bloodshed that he craved it like one craves warmth or food.

Brutal was a word she'd once heard others use to describe him, but Arianna saw efficiency. A quick strike to end his enemies and nothing more. Her teachers claimed The Demon liked to savor his kills. But if that were true, he didn't do it now. He tore through flesh as fast as it came at him and walked through these warriors as if they were novices.

It was no wonder he always reeked of blood.

That smile on his face though. That part disturbed her. He was a different being now. A creature who relished in the lives he stole.

A monster. A murderer. A demon.

An image of Rion seated in the cabin returned to her. Gentle eyes, careful actions, a rare smile. Fear gripped her anew. Would he eventually lose

himself to the bloodlust? Would The Demon take over and consume the Rion she'd just started to see?

Eoghan's superior, the apparent leader of this failed assassination attempt, hissed and stalked toward her. Arianna stepped back.

"Go," he commanded Eoghan. "I'll see to the female."

Eoghan placed his body between the leader and Arianna. "I told you before, I'm only here for her."

"Go," he said again. "That's an order."

"I told you this was a suicide—" Eoghan barely had time to raise his hands before a blade plunged into his forearm. He growled, but his superior kicked Eoghan in the leg and shoved him to the ground.

Arianna tried to scramble back, but the male grabbed her arm, spun her around, and pressed another blade to her throat. "Demon!"

The warriors paused at their commander's voice, but Rion kept moving, tearing the throat from another in his path. Those facing The Demon took a step back and Rion turned, his gaze searching.

Lethal rage burned in those green eyes when he spotted the knife.

"She's what you came for, isn't she?" The blade bit into her skin so hard she scarcely risked a breath. Blood trickled down Arianna's throat. Rion let out another fierce growl and snapped his jaws like an animal. "Surrender, or the female dies."

Rion's eyes flickered to hers, his breathing ragged. Sweat coated his brow and he no longer smiled, only stared at the male holding her with undiluted rage.

No. She wanted to say. He couldn't give himself up for her. Because he knew as well as she did that this male wouldn't let her go. He'd kill them both and celebrate afterward, spouting his victory to anyone who'd listen.

Rion's eyes met hers again and despite the blade digging into her

flesh and the way she'd watched Rion rip through warrior after warrior, her body calmed. Like he was trying to tell her—

A sickening crack echoed in her ear followed by the leader's screams.

Arianna ducked from the grip of his other hand, rolling away and Rion's earth engulfed the male a second later. But her gaze didn't linger on the male screaming for his life. It shot straight to Rion and the warriors circling behind him, ready to take advantage.

They ran, closing in with weapons poised. Rion spun, growling in frustration. He blocked a sword coming down, ripped the flesh from another, and planted his boot in a male's chest so hard it sent him flying, but Rion was being driven back.

Because she'd been a distraction.

Arianna whirled to Eoghan. "Take these shackles off "

"What?" His scent was a whirlwind of emotions.

Arianna growled, baring her fangs in a desperate attempt to appear intimidating. "I said take them off!"

His stunned gaze drifted toward Rion and hers followed. There were more warriors pouring from the woods. Fresh males and females who hadn't had a chance to join the fray. Rion was holding his own, but how many enemies could one male eliminate? How long before—a knife slashed through his arm and blood sprayed. Another flew through the air and grazed his side.

Rion screamed in rage and his magic rose again, circling his body and tearing the flesh from whoever was unlucky enough to stand too close.

Arianna grabbed Eoghan by his shirt collar and growled in his face. "Now!"

Eoghan scrambled for the key in his satchel and all but yanked the shackles from her wrists. Maybe he believed her to be The Divine. Maybe he

just hoped to survive Rion's fury, but Arianna couldn't think through his reasons right now. Not until Rion had the upper hand again.

Arianna grabbed the dagger from Eoghan's belt and threw the blade toward those surrounding Rion without hesitation. It sank into a female's calf, sending her to the ground in a screaming fit of pain. Arianna sprinted across the field and grabbed another blade from a corpse. She stumbled on the bodies left in Rion's wake but took aim and threw. It buried into a male's shoulder.

Vines were wrapping around Rion's legs now. They crawled up his body despite his magic tearing at his enemies from every angle. Arianna didn't stop. Couldn't pause in the whirlwind of bodies launching themselves toward Rion. She fought through the line, stole another blade from her nearest assailant, and plunged it straight into the gut of the male at his side.

Her world froze and something in the foundation of her being cracked. His eyes widened and warm blood flowed down the length of the blade. Arianna's breath came shallow and sweat beaded on her forehead. Nothing else existed outside the male's dimming gaze, like she'd trapped herself in a single, agonizing moment for eternity.

Rion made a noise and Arianna snapped back to reality in time to dodge a sword aimed at her torso. Their magic wasn't letting up. She had to use it. She didn't have a choice now. Not with Rion cornered. Trapped. Arianna's body shook but she lunged at another male, grabbed his arm, and screamed as she tore the liquid from his body.

Nausea rolled through her again and hot tears poured down her face when she opened her eyes. His limbs had shriveled, the skin hanging loose from his bones, and he collapsed gasping for air from lungs that no longer functioned. Arianna reached for their magic next, thankfully able to tear the greenery apart from a distance. She drained the leaves and stems until they

were nothing more than empty husks.

A sob tore through her body. She'd finally done it. She'd stained her hands with the blood of her enemy and there was no going back.

The warriors curled in on themselves like an injured spider with every touch of her hand. She leapt over their wilted bodies, roaring in panicked fury. Her magic exploded on all sides, but she was oblivious to the damage. She just needed to keep moving. *Don't think*, she urged herself, but the tears wouldn't stop falling.

Arianna landed beside Rion and tore the water from every living plant crawling toward and across his body then exploded a ring of liquid outward with enough force to send every warrior to the ground. Rion watched her from the corner of his eye, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him. Would she see approval? Disgust?

Instead, the two backed against one another, staring out at their enemies. Arianna let her magic rise and expand, the droplets mixing with the particles Rion already had suspended in the air.

Her heart ached with a heaviness she couldn't describe. Her lungs burned from the acrid stench in the air. And she was pretty sure that was blood splattered across her tunic.

Why had it come to this? They were dying. Her people were dying and she—gods she was the one killing them. Her hands were meant to heal. She was supposed to bring peace to the land, not this.

Two males circled behind the cluster of growling warriors. The hairs on the back of her neck rose when she met one's angry gaze. She hated this. She wanted to warn them to back off, to submit, but this fight was beyond words now.

The males lunged, breaking through their comrade's line, and Arianna solidified spears of ice before letting them fly toward her attackers. Neither

dodged quick enough and they dropped to the ground, clutching lethal wounds that painted the earth crimson.

So many. The sheer numbers should have been enough to subdue Rion minutes ago, but he was still fighting. And if he was willing to fight, then she would too. Arianna slammed her palm into another's chest, drawing the liquid out.

“Don't falter!” Arianna's head whirled to their leader. She'd thought after seeing Rion's magic engulf him that he'd be dead, but the male rose to one knee, clutching his broken wrist. “He's weakening, don't falter now.”

The warriors, who'd previously looked ready to run, steeled themselves and charged. Arianna dropped into a fighting stance and joined in Rion's dance of death. She felt his magic rush past her body, the particles so close to her skin she could feel the wind in their wake.

Brónach's magic rose from the ground in a massive wave, snaking vines surrounding them on all sides, but Arianna was already moving. She ripped the fluid away in one swift motion, solidified it then sent her magic flying.

The pair brought down warrior after warrior, neither pausing for breath. Sweat rolled down the sides of her face, but there wasn't time to think or regret. She just needed to keep moving and stay as close to Rion as possible.

Arianna spun again and heat sliced through her side. She stumbled back, reaching for the side of her abdomen only to find a blade protruding from her skin. Arianna gritted her teeth and yanked the knife free then sent it flying back through the crowd of bodies.

Rion's nostrils flared at the scent of her blood and something feral tore from his chest when he roared. She couldn't stop the fear that spiked through her body at the menacing sound. The sand moved faster and faster,

engulfing those nearest to them in its deadly spiral.

Arianna watched in horror as skin peeled back from muscle, then muscle peeled away from bone, chunks of it joining Rion's frightening magic. Her stomach coiled in disgust and Arianna sank to her knees.

Rion stepped forward, separating her from the remaining warriors that stood against them. He growled, daring them to move and brought his grains of earth closer, spiraling them around her body in a violent storm.

Three warriors charged and he crushed their throats.

The remaining few exchanged fearful glances before they turned, sprinting as fast as their tired bodies would allow.

Earth exploded at their feet, crushing their legs, leaving them to crawl across the ground. They pleaded. Begged. But Rion wasn't listening.

The rest scattered despite their leader screaming for his warriors to stand firm. Some made it, disappearing through the trees, others didn't, but Arianna was certain Rion had marked their scents, intending to hunt them down later.

Rion stood before her, panting, staring off into the distance before turning toward their leader. The male, with one bleeding hand and blood running down his face, kept screaming and Arianna half wondered if he even realized he'd lost.

She tried to stand but hissed against the movement, clutching her side. Arianna peeled the fabric of her shirt away to check the wound. It was deep, but she'd have to tend to it later.

Her focus returned to Rion. She'd expected him to kneel at her side, fuss over the wound the way he'd done when she was sick. But the male standing beside her didn't so much as pass her a second glance. And before she could speak, he was stalking toward the still screaming leader.

A second later, the male's neck snapped.

Eerie silence stretched over the bloody field. She tried not to look at the broken bodies scattered before her, but movement caught her eye.

Eoghan staggered to his feet, blood dripping from the wound in his arm as he surveyed the carnage. Rion's attention snapped toward him, and he let out another low growl. Eoghan ducked his head and folded his knees beneath his body. He pressed his face into the bloody ground and upturned his wrists in surrender.

But Rion didn't seem to notice.

Arianna couldn't see Rion's eyes, but his prowling gait and the magic crawling across his skin in agitated spirals told her enough.

"Stop," she whispered, her voice hoarse. The male she'd developed feelings for didn't exist. Right now, he was The Demon, ready to tear another life from the world.

She struggled to her feet, crying out against the pain lancing through her side, but Rion didn't turn. She could smell Eoghan's fear and it propelled Arianna toward the raging storm that Rion had become.

Her legs shook, emotions flaring as she tripped over the mangled bodies, but Arianna clenched her teeth and ran, hoping beyond hope that Rion wouldn't kill Eoghan before she could stop him. *If* she could stop him.

Please.

Rion's magic reared back, rising behind him like a wave, but Arianna skidded to a stop between him and Eoghan's knelt form. She clutched her side, taking in ragged breath after ragged breath.

"Stop."

Rion growled, showing his blood-stained teeth. The magic surrounding him danced, snaking out around his body.

Tears blurred her vision and before she knew what she was doing, Arianna yanked the liquid from every living plant within reach. She

surrounded herself in droplets that circled Eoghan as well, never losing eye contact with the terrifying male before her.

“Please.”

Something in Rion’s gaze shifted. “Why?” The word rolled off his tongue thick and dark. Like a demon really was speaking.

“He wasn’t with the others.”

“He kidnapped you.”

“He didn’t want to. He didn’t fight.”

Another snarl rumbled from his chest, but Arianna stood her ground. Fae males were dangerous after battle, ready to take on any opposition thrown their way. And he was known to be the worst. It was a miracle she still stood and even more of a miracle that he hadn’t simply shoved past her.

Pain flashed across his face for a split second only to be replaced with anger. “You want to protect him? Then stay with him.” His magic flared, but before she could respond, Rion spun on his heels and stormed away.

Her lips parted. That was it. That was all it took for the speck of trust she’d gained to be wiped from the map. He’d come for her. He’d protected her, and she’d betrayed him by protecting one of the enemy.

Rion disappeared into the shadows of the trees, and she sank to the ground.

Silence echoed and her stomach churned at the stench of blood across the field.

She’d killed. For the first time in her life, Arianna had crossed that line, but how was she supposed to feel? She should regret her actions. Repent for them, but if she hadn’t fought, then Rion might have died.

But those warriors had all believed they were eliminating a threat. They viewed Rion as a monst—her stomach heaved, and Arianna vomited. She gasped for breath against the pain in her abdomen. Gentle hands pulled

her hair back and her stomach clenched again and again until there was nothing left.

Eoghan knelt at her side, keeping her hair away from her face and kept silent, waiting for her to finish. “He—he listened to you.”

She took a steadying breath, trying to focus on a shriveled piece of grass. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

Eoghan leaned down to examine her side. “Let me look at that wound.”

Arianna shook her head. “Your arm is worse.” She chewed her lip, debating. He already suspected something so why not give him a reason to believe? Arianna forced herself to look at the bodies left in the aftermath. Could she have prevented this? Maybe she *should* stop hiding. “Let me see it.”

Eoghan waved his uninjured hand. “Don’t trouble yourself, I can tend to it later.”

Arianna sighed and before he could protest, she laid one hand on top of his forearm and the other on the bottom. “Keep this to yourself.”

Eoghan opened his mouth but snapped it shut again when her hands began to glow. Arianna could feel the muscles within shift, reconnecting like a braided rope before the skin followed. She didn’t have much energy left, but she had enough for this.

He collapsed beside her, mouth gaping, staring at the closed wound with a look of utter disbelief. “Your—”

“Please, don’t say anything.”

He continued staring then composed himself and bowed his head. “Do you know who you are?”

Arianna chewed her lip. “I do, but...I’m not certain what I want to do with it yet.”

She wasn't sure how old Eoghan was or what Brónach taught their people, but she could at least assume he was older than Rion. And judging from his expression, he probably knew more about The Divine than she did.

Eoghan's awestruck eyes watched her as if she were a fabled creature. "All right, whatever you ask of me." His gaze shifted to the bodies then back to her. "I can still take you home. If you like. It'd be an honor."

Arianna shook her head. "I can't leave him like this."

"The Demon?"

"Rion," she corrected. He gave her an exasperated look. "He won't hurt me."

Eoghan opened his mouth to protest and closed it again, struggling against some internal battle. "I swear to serve you, thus I'll only ask that you be careful, Lady Arianna."

Chapter Nineteen

Arianna

Arianna limped toward the cabin, clutching her side. Eoghan had fussed extensively over her wound, but she assured him she'd care for it once she made amends with Rion. He wasn't convinced and as she walked, feeling the wound pull and blood roll down her skin, Arianna questioned her own judgment.

She wondered if everyone would be so willing to listen to her once she proclaimed herself their queen. Would they grovel at her feet and agree to every word she uttered? She hoped not. Divine or not, one person couldn't run an entire continent. She needed advisers willing to challenge her, demand explanations. The last thing she wanted was a group of mindless slaves.

Arianna hobbled past tent after tent in silence, Eoghan at her side, and cringed when every Fae who saw them ducked their heads and backed away. They knew who she was, and they remembered Rion's wrath. Arianna imagined they were still reeling from Rion's return. He'd been brimming with anger. She only hoped that anger hadn't led to unnecessary death.

When Arianna could see the cabin, she paused and glanced at Eoghan. He inclined his head and took a step back. She supposed seeing her off was better than following her to the door. She didn't imagine Rion's reaction would prove pleasant if he did.

Arianna let out a long breath and stepped forward. The sight of her blood had infuriated him, and she'd practically slapped him in the face by defending one of her captors. She tried to imagine their roles reversed. Would she be as furious if he'd done the same? Confused, certainly, but then again, she hadn't lived through a lifetime of betrayal and deceit.

She clutched her side harder when she reached the little stone walkway and paused at the door. Arianna knew he'd likely already scented her approach and the fear that accompanied it, but she turned the handle anyway and walked inside.

The room was dark and cold. Rion sat at the edge of his bed, his fists clenched, boots still on, and magic swirling at his feet. She let the door close, and those sharp eyes snapped up, pinning her in place.

She struggled to breathe beneath that gaze, and something deep in her core ached at the sight.

You'd betray me. They all do.

No. Please don't think that way.

"Don't send me away."

His jaw feathered. "You protected him."

With shaking hands, Arianna pulled the collar of her shirt down to reveal the bite mark on her neck. Every muscle in Rion's body tightened.

"He did the same for me."

Rion stood and her heart leapt. He approached slowly, that feral rage still consuming his scent, but it wasn't Rion that frightened her. It was the thought of him kicking her out.

Arianna tilted her head to the side, allowing Rion to push her hair back and examine the wound. She heard his breath quicken, the slight grind of his teeth.

"Who," he growled.

"A male that's already dead. Eoghan pulled him off me."

Rion growled again at the mention of Eoghan's name. His jaw worked and he stared at the mark for a time, making no move to touch it.

"Can I clean it?" he asked.

Arianna nodded and limped toward the bed. Rion followed, his

movements slow. He stalked around her, that intense gaze examining every inch of her body.

“Your other wound is worse.”

Arianna tried to sit and winced, grabbing at her side. Rion marched toward the kitchen and returned with a bowl full of water. He pulled a clean rag from the bottom dresser drawer, then sat on the bed beside her. Clenching her teeth, Arianna lifted the hem of her shirt, peeling away the fibers that had stuck to the dried blood.

Rion, with the lightest touch imaginable, dipped the rag into the bowl and pressed it against her side. Arianna hissed at the contact and his eyes snapped to her face. She ushered him on. He worked carefully, dabbing the cloth around the wound to clean away blood and dirt.

“You need stitches.”

Arianna glanced down, examining the puncture wound for herself. “I don’t suppose you know how?”

He disappeared into the bathroom only to emerge a minute later with a small box. Rion stood in the doorway, his brow furrowed. “It might be easier if you lie down.”

Arianna eased herself back and pulled her shirt up and away from the wound. Rion climbed onto the bed and crossed his legs at her side. She watched his fingers guide a piece of thread through a curved needle. “This isn’t going to be the most pleasant thing in the world.”

She slowed her breathing. “I know.”

Arianna turned her head away and hissed at the first prick of the needle. She clenched her eyes against the pull of the thread and tried to focus on Rion’s hands grazing her skin instead. When that didn’t work, Arianna turned her attention to his even breathing. The steady rhythm of his heart. It’d been pounding earlier, but with his mind occupied, it’d slowed, and his anger

had dissipated with it.

“Done.”

She glanced down. “You’ve done this before.”

“A time or two.” Of course, he’d done it before. It wasn’t as though he had anyone to treat his injuries. Arianna sat up then Rion moved behind her and brushed her hair away from the bite mark. It stung less than her side, but Rion was still careful, his fingers gentle and movements slow. She scented the rage building in him again, taking over his natural herbal scent like fire consuming trees.

“I’ll be fine.” She didn’t know why she said it. Whether it was to console him or break the silence. Rion set the rag down, but his fingertips lingered on her shoulder and despite being covered in dirt and blood, her heart surged in response.

Hesitantly, as if unsure of his movements, Rion shifted Arianna’s hair to her opposite side, exposing unmarred skin. He leaned closer, taking in her scent and that rage brewing around him quieted. He sighed, pressing his forehead into her shoulder.

Arianna sat perfectly still, relishing in his heat. Her heart skipped a beat when he sighed against her skin, sending shivers coursing through her body. His breath quickened in response. Just a slight tilt of his head and Rion’s lips would be against her skin. If she turned around, would he stay or —

“I should leave.” He did no such thing.

Arianna whispered, “Why?” She felt his jaw clench and the silence stretched, neither daring to move. “Talk to me,” she urged.

He let out another breath, bathing her in his scent. “I thought, after everything that just happened, you’d be afraid of me.” She should be. After seeing flesh ripped from bone and the sheer number of bodies lying lifeless

on the ground. After hearing the fierce roar that had chilled her blood and left her shaken. She should've been too afraid to return. She should be trembling even now, her instincts begging her to run back to Eoghan and home. But—

“I'm not.” Rion lifted his head slightly. “You came for me. I'm grateful.” Because she wouldn't have known what to do if he hadn't. Eoghan wanted to free her, sure, but his brethren didn't feel the same and if Rion hadn't shown up, she would have proven useless.

He took in a breath as if about to speak and let it out again. Arianna felt his body tense. He shifted but remained silent.

“Tell me.”

His lips grazed her shoulder and Arianna's body ignited. “I should leave because I want to touch you, kiss you, hold you—” He cut himself short.

Her throat had gone dry. “But you're afraid I'll want to do the same.”

He pressed his forehead back onto her shoulder and whispered, “Yes.” Arianna carefully turned to look at him and Rion pulled away to meet her gaze.

He looked so unsure of himself, so at odds with the male she'd seen on the battlefield.

“When I scented your blood, I knew exactly why they'd taken you. Finding you alive was the last thing I expected. I hate that they hurt you. I hate knowing there was nothing I could do to stop it. In the aftermath of that hatred—” He cut himself off again.

“Kiss me.” She said it before she could stop herself and Rion's breath hitched. His eyes flashed to her lips and back again and a thrill of excitement shot through her body when he leaned forward, those emerald eyes never leaving hers.

Their lips met and Rion's hand laced through the back of her hair to

pull her closer. His brows furrowed and he closed his eyes, moving his lips against hers in silent desperation. Arianna met the movements with equal fervor, relishing in the taste and feel of him.

It was needful, passionate and she couldn't help but deepen that kiss just a little more. Rion pulled away breathless and pressed his forehead to hers. They sat in that stillness, listening to one another's ragged breaths. She wanted so much more, but how when Rion's fear blocked their path?

"What if I make you a promise? Just for tonight." He pulled back with a questioning gaze. "You can kiss me, hold me, and I promise not to touch you." His eyes searched hers though she couldn't discern what he looked for. Trickery? Fear? He caressed her cheek and Arianna leaned into his calloused touch, relishing in the warmth of his palm.

Rion pulled away and her heart leapt in despair at the suddenness of his action. Then she saw what'd grabbed his attention. The blood and gore covering their clothes.

"We should clean up first." She didn't disagree, but the way her body was shaking told Arianna she wasn't ready to stand just yet.

"I need to rest for a minute." Rion stood but bent to press another kiss to her forehead before closing himself in the bathroom.

I want to touch you, kiss you, hold you.

Her entire body flushed, yet exhaustion also threatened to drag her into its comforting depths. He cared for her. She'd suspected it before but knew it now. He'd grieved thinking her lost and, in his grief, a rage had risen to consume him. The Demon's twisted face flashed in her mind's eye and Arianna wondered, not for the first time, if Rion could lose himself completely to the bestial part of himself. Perhaps he almost had this time.

Though her body ached, Arianna forced herself to stand and slowly make her way around the bed, tugging off the sheet. The blood from her

wound had soaked through to the mattress, but there wasn't much she could do about it in her current state. Her side tugged and she winced, grabbing the wall.

Arianna honestly wasn't sure if her body trembled from the battle's aftermath or from Rion's admissions or from the sins she'd committed.

He wanted her. He cared for her.

She'd killed. Arianna tried to shake away the feeling but it ate at her, digging into her soul.

How many?

Rion finished quickly, emerging from the bathroom wearing those same black pants he always did. Her gaze roamed over his bare torso and back as he refilled the washbowl and returned it to the bathroom.

Arianna bit the inside of her cheek, trying to reign in her thoughts. She focused on the cuts and scrapes all over his body instead. Nothing looked serious but—

“You're hurt.”

Rion eyed one of the marks on his shoulder. “I'll survive.”

She couldn't have healed them even if she wanted to. She didn't have the energy for it and maybe that was part of the reason Rion was agreeing to her promise. But wasn't he exhausted too? One wouldn't know by looking at him.

Arianna stood, wincing from the pain. Rion stepped forward as if to help but seemed to think better of it. She pulled a baggy pair of pants from his drawer and one of his shirts before locking herself in the bathroom.

Arianna peeled away her filthy clothes and used what little magic she possessed to heat the water.

She stared at her reflection wondering if the gods could ever forgive her. Or if she could forgive herself. She could still hear their final breaths.

Their hoarse gasps for air. Arianna clenched the sides of the basin and shook away the memory.

It took far longer than she would have liked to clean away the blood coating her body, especially with the wound in her side. Every movement felt like fire shooting through her core, but she gritted her teeth against it and continued.

She dressed, ran her fingers through wet hair, and emerged.

Rion had made the bed with fresh sheets and a thick blanket. He sat at the edge, closest to the fire, and electricity shot through her body when his eyes met hers. He stood and Arianna blushed furiously, thoughts running wild.

She took a step forward. Another. Then Rion's hands were reaching out to cup her cheek. She met his gaze and, for the first time, noticed the golden flecks that danced in his emerald eyes, the firelight bringing them out like stars in the dimming sky.

Instead of kissing her, Rion guided her toward the bed where she crawled in, opting to lie on her back. The pain was an afterthought as she watched Rion circle to the other side. He moved deliberately, slowly, though for her benefit or his she couldn't be sure. He propped himself up on one elbow to study her and his gaze floated down toward her hands. Arianna clasped them over her stomach.

"I won't touch you," she promised again. But gods did she want to. Rion's gaze softened, and he inched closer, his body heat just out of reach. Particles of earth floated around them in slow, lazy circles, as if content by her presence.

Her breathing sped up when his fingertips met her cheek and trailed down her neck, tracing around the still-fresh wound. He paused, his brow furrowed, and a hint of his earlier anger returned.

“I’d never do that to you.” Her heart clenched at the pain in his voice. “I’d never hurt you.” His hand fell away. “I want to apologize for what I did on the field. I shouldn’t have threatened you.”

The growl he’d given her. A warning to back off. The Demon wasn’t known for his warnings.

“I knew you wouldn’t hurt me.” He huffed out a laugh, more to himself than at her. “Does that make you angry?”

“No, it’s relieving. I need to know if I do things that upset you. I need you to tell me.” His fingertips returned to her chin, and he tilted it a little closer to his face. “Because that’s all I have to go on.”

Her breathing hitched and every muscle in her body longed to reach out to him when Rion pressed his lips against hers. He pulled back slightly. “I’ll stop whenever you want,” he promised. “If I make you feel uncomfortable, or you simply want me to.”

She wanted him to stop talking.

“Just kiss me,” she breathed.

And he did. Rion pressed his body closer to hers and Arianna had to clench her hands together to keep them still.

His lips moved in a desperate rhythm, devouring her whole. She flicked her tongue against his mouth by mistake, but the moan that escaped from him shot straight to her core.

He slipped his tongue over her bottom lip, testing, teasing, then dove straight into her mouth. Rion wrapped one arm above her head and buried the other in her hair, pulling her impossibly closer.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Rion kissed the side of her mouth, and she tilted her head as he trailed those kisses down her neck, pausing at the racing pulse to lick her skin. Rion lingered there, exploring, running a delicate touch around her throat before his lips returned to hers.

His hands moved over her shoulder, then down her arm and back up. She'd never felt anything like it. His touch was like fire, igniting every cell in her body. It devoured her, left her wanting more.

Then she was shaking. She couldn't tell when it'd started, or if she'd ever stopped, but her lips trembled and Rion pulled away so suddenly she might as well have burned him.

Arianna covered her face with her hands and an uncontrollable sob tore through her. Rion had frozen. She could hear his heart pounding yet didn't know how to explain. His magic, which had previously been crawling across her skin, had stopped and fallen away.

His voice was so soft she barely heard it. "Did I hurt you?"

Arianna shook her head and let her hands fall away. She swallowed hard against the tears, trying to clear them away enough to speak. "I killed them." She still couldn't look at him. "I've never—I'm not supposed to—" Another wave hit her, and Arianna covered her face again, sucking in breath after desperate breath. She could see the first male's startled expression. He hadn't expected the blade to his abdomen, nor the amount of blood that followed. Arianna could still feel it running down her hand despite having washed it away. She could still hear the screams of those she'd felled, see the blades flying, feel the limbs of her victims shriveling into nothing.

And she'd forgotten all of it in the moments that followed. She'd been more concerned for Rion, yearning for things in such a selfish manner. She should be thinking about how to bury the dead. Would Eoghan see to it? Would their bodies be left to rot in the sun?

"I'm here." Rion said. His tone made her turn. "But I don't have to be." She hadn't seen so much vulnerability in his gaze since the night he'd returned hurt, bleeding out in this very room.

Arianna shook her head. Would he understand? Did he care? Killing

seemed like second nature to him. Like something he enjoyed. Rion pushed up on his elbow, but she cleared her throat. “Stay.”

He sat up anyway and she did the same, resting her back against the wall. Arianna rubbed her hands together but quickly looked away, unable to stand the sight. “I never intended to hurt anyone.”

Silence drifted between them. “So why did you?”

Her lips quivered again, and she bit the inside of her cheek in a vain attempt to stop them. How could they stand the guilt? How did warriors go centuries killing in one war after another knowing how they’d feel afterward?

“I couldn’t—” She swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “I couldn’t stand by, not when they were hurting you.”

“You’ve saved my life twice now.”

“How do you do it?” She lowered her head. “How does anyone do it? Kill and keep killing?”

Rion stared at the fire. “Maybe they feel it’ll make a difference.”

“And you?”

“I do it to survive.”

Survive. Maybe that’s part of the reason she’d done it too. If Rion had died, there was no telling if Eoghan could have taken her back home. He might have wanted to, but the other warriors would have likely fought against the idea. They might have gone as far as killing them both just to get what they wanted.

But somehow there was a deeper reason too. The very thought of Rion’s demise shook her to the core. She knew she’d kill for him long before her kidnapping. And she knew she’d do it again. But she’d also kill for Talon, for Ellie. She’d bleed out for the beautiful city of Levea if it came down to it.

“You should rest.”

“So should you.” Monster, some called him. Yet he wasn’t a monster

now. Not with her. Arianna leaned in and pressed a lingering kiss to his lips before settling back into the blankets. She tried to ignore his ragged breaths.

“Can I still hold you?” he asked.

She smiled, though wasn't sure he could see it. “Yes.” Rion scooted closer and rested his chin above her head. Hesitantly, as if unsure of himself, Rion placed his free hand over her arm. His thumb rubbed back and forth, both comforting and igniting her body all at once.

She wanted to run her fingers through his hair. To caress his face as he'd done hers. But those were things that would come with time. And she was willing to wait.

His breathing calmed and her eyelids grew heavy. Darkness beckoned and despite fearing what horrors it might hold, Arianna let it claim her.

Chapter Twenty

Arianna

Arianna woke with Rion's hand still resting on her arm. She breathed in his scent, letting it wash away the horrible memories from yesterday. So much had happened, and she still hadn't processed it all. What repercussions would they face? What dangers lie waiting in the distant future? How much had she stained her own soul?

Arianna glanced over her shoulder to find Rion watching her and, though it was painful, she twisted her body to face him. He gave her a soft smile and gently shifted a strand of hair from her face.

So willing, yet so tormented. He wanted to touch her, desired it as much as she did, but she could see the uneasiness in his gaze. The surprise whenever she didn't reach out to hurt him. How long would that pain linger? And once she broke through his barriers, would he let others do the same?

Slowly, so as not to startle him, Arianna lifted one hand, palm out. Rion's heart beat faster. Earth swirled around their bodies, and his brow furrowed in confusion.

"I promised last night, but I was hoping today might be a little different." Understanding swept over his features, and Rion's body tightened in response. "But only if you want to," she assured him. Because last night, Rion had given her everything she desired without pushing boundaries. She wanted to do the same.

Tentatively, he lifted his right hand and brought it toward her own. His eyes darted back to hers then their hands. His fingertips touched first, light and timid, then Rion pressed his entire palm into hers.

Arianna stilled, letting the warmth of his hand seep into her skin. She

understood the risk he was taking. He'd seen her magic rip the liquid from her enemy's limbs yesterday. A technique that would render that appendage useless for the rest of their lives.

"There was another female once." He kept his eyes on their hands. "I was only eighteen and somehow, she convinced me I could trust her.

"She was a warrior and we spent several months together, taking down any obstacle assigned to us. She made me laugh, guarded my back, and I grew to trust her."

Arianna tilted her head closer to him.

"But the first time she wrapped her arms around me, she shoved a knife through my back, and I killed her. The way she looked at me in those last moments—" Rion shook his head. "I never want to see that again."

His gaze returned to hers. "But never in my entire life has anyone saved me or risked their life for mine. Never once has anyone allowed me to touch them like this. No one. Except you." He curled his fingers, and she entwined her hand with his. "I'm willing to try. I want to try. I just...need time."

She lifted their hands slightly and studied his soft grip. "I'm happy with this. And with last night. That's all I need for now."

Rion leaned forward and kissed her, slow and deep. Butterflies soared through her stomach and she clenched his hand tighter. "I have a meeting to attend this morning."

"Okay."

"I'd like it if you came with me. If you feel up to it."

"Of course, I just—" She averted her gaze.

"Tell me."

"Won't it look... odd?" His brow furrowed. "You fussing over a female, I mean. Won't it make you look..." she trailed off.

The smile that spread across his face was infectious. “Are you worried about my reputation?”

“I just don’t want them to test you again.” Not after yesterday. It’d been enough bloodshed to last her a lifetime.

His smile vanished. “I’d rather not be aggressive toward you, but if it’d make you feel better, I can make a show of it.”

She let their hands fall to the bed but didn’t let go. “If it’s necessary, I don’t mind.”

He caught her gaze. “I won’t let anything happen to you.” She wanted to tell him it wasn’t herself she was concerned over, but after seeing him tear through dozens of warriors yesterday, she knew he’d shrug it off. Or maybe he wouldn’t.

Arianna glanced at the red marks on his bare shoulder. “I couldn’t do it last night, but will you let me heal those?”

Rion looked at his wounds. They were nothing really, but she hated seeing him injured almost as much as she hated the idea of him leaving on another mission.

He released a heavy sigh. “Maybe tomorrow.” One step at a time, Arianna reminded herself.

She nodded and Rion glanced at their joined hands again before pulling away. Arianna shivered in his absence. She waited until he’d disappeared into the bathroom to move.

Slowly, Arianna placed her feet on the ground. Her entire body protested her standing, but she did, stretching sore muscles and her stitched side. She lifted her shirt to inspect the wound. No redness or swelling. Good, she hoped to avoid infection.

When Rion exited, they both pulled on their shoes. Arianna tried to ignore the blood still staining them. She’d have to clean hers in the river later.

She followed Rion toward the door but paused upon seeing the state of the kitchen.

Arianna hadn't had the mind to tend to it yesterday, nor the energy. The scent of her blood still lingered against the wooden planks and the herbs she'd hoped to use throughout the rest of winter lay scattered among the glass.

"We can always get more," he assured her. She knew that. Zylah would give her whatever she wanted. Arianna wondered how worried her friend might be. She was sure rumors were buzzing around the camp after yesterday's battle, but would Rion let her visit the slave quarters now? Would he ever let her out of his sight again?

Arianna joined him by the door, but Rion turned back to her. "Whatever I say or do out there, know it's only because you asked."

"I know." He caressed her face again, lingering as if he didn't want to leave. Arianna wondered if he would stay should she ask. But she didn't.

A familiar male scent floated past her when Rion opened the door and Arianna knew the growl echoing from Rion's throat had nothing to do with their façade.

Without touching him, Arianna stepped to Rion's side. Eoghan knelt upon the stone path, head bowed, and wrists upturned. "I'm here to pledge my service and swear my loyalty to your family name and vow to protect your female with my life if you'll allow it."

His female?

Rion's magic floated through the air. It caressed her skin and grazed against Eoghan's. "She doesn't need protection. She has me."

Eoghan didn't lift his head, nor react to the magic snaking its way around his body. "I'd like the chance to prove myself. The war is still at hand. When you are called to—" Rion growled and Eoghan's mouth snapped

shut.

Arianna lowered her voice. "It couldn't hurt, right?"

Rion studied her, but the fury from last night was still fresh. He'd thought her dead, she reminded herself, and Eoghan had been a part of that. Rion turned his attention back to Eoghan. "Rest assured, Arianna is the only reason you're still alive. Do not give me an excuse."

"Yes sir."

He did this for her. Rion allowed Eoghan to live because she'd asked him.

I need you to tell me because that's all I have to go on.

Rion stalked past the knelt male, and Eoghan raised his head slightly to meet her gaze as she passed. Arianna gave him a gentle smile and he nodded. All he wanted was for her to be safe. Eoghan might not think Rion the safest company, but he did recognize him as the strongest and in Fae terms, strength translated to safety.

Arianna absorbed her surroundings as they marched through the camp. Rion slowed when she couldn't match his pace, but the sheer dominance radiating from his presence didn't fade in the slightest. She hadn't been down this path since the first night she'd arrived. There'd been four other females with her that day, though one had perished soon after. Part of her still ached for the female, but there were so many she ached for nowadays.

Had those other three met Zylah or had they stayed with Lan and his comrades? Were they even still alive? She should have sought them out sooner. Inquired about their wellbeing at the very least.

Rion glanced back, likely scenting her distress. Arianna offered him a reassuring smile. There was nothing she could do for past lives lost. His magic floated between them and rose to caress her arms as if trying to

console her. It moved gently across her skin, but she knew it could harden into something deadly should the need arise.

The sounds of hammers on metal still rang through the air. Smoke floated from fire after fire and though she tried not to stare at them, the slaves were ever-present.

One stood at his master's side, the half-breed holding a stack of clean linens, awaiting permission to enter a tent. Another stirred a pot that rested over a fire, likely to serve as lunch for the day.

Arianna's stomach clenched at the smell. She was sure nothing could be worse than the white gruel served at the mess hall, but she'd take that over whatever foul concoction boiled in that pot.

Another female had a bruise on her face. The one beside her, a split lip. Arianna's heart hammered as they continued forward. She glimpsed a female redressing herself behind a flap, tears staining her cheeks. Then another fell to the ground, their master screaming obscenities about their clumsiness.

Rion eyed her. Adrenaline pumped through her body, a raging current she couldn't control. *This is Brónach* she reminded herself. *Slavery is normal here. Slavery has been normal since*—since when? Surely the last Divine hadn't tolerated such things so when had it started? And why?

She remembered Zylah's bruises and their unspoken rule about asking questions.

Arianna kept walking, her anger a hot iron boiling her blood. The first time she'd paraded through this camp, males had leered at her, and their desire had made her stomach churn. Now, they occupied themselves elsewhere, moving from Rion's presence if they could do so unnoticed.

They barely glanced at the female trailing him.

Eoghan followed as well but kept his distance. She was certain Rion

noticed too, though he gave no indication of it. As long as the male didn't reveal her to everyone in the camp, she'd remain as she was. A slave to the general.

Another female cried out, thrown to the ground by her captor.

Was that what she wanted? To remain unknown. Could she really put an end to the suffering of thousands if she took her place as queen?

A familiar face entered her view before disappearing behind another dirty tent. Arianna picked up her pace, looking between the flaps and poles to catch a glimpse of her again.

Arianna couldn't discern what Zylah carried, but she could see the chains dangling between the shackles around her wrists and ankles. The bruises staining her arms. Zylah had never had chains before. In fact, most slaves in the camp didn't wear them. So why? Arianna's anger stirred anew.

Zylah, with her head bowed and knees trembling, stopped before a male. One of Brónach's many warriors. She couldn't hear their exchange, but his snarl echoed loud enough for the other slaves to take several retreating steps away.

His broad hand came down on Zylah's cheek hard enough to knock her from her feet.

Arianna's blood ran cold.

Zylah, strong, outgoing Zylah, scrambled back with the male stalking forward. Whatever she'd held in her hands had fallen to the ground, completely forgotten.

I've had worse. Zylah had told her.

Arianna knew what that felt like. She knew the fear and uncertainty it brought. And she also knew how brutal the beating would be that followed.

And Arianna couldn't take anymore.

The male lifted his hand to strike again, but Arianna was running, her

magic flaring around her body in an uncontrollable current. Water shot from her palm and collided with his arm, blossoming into ice as it grew along his skin all the way up to his shoulder.

“Móirín,” the male shouted, forgetting Zylah as he dropped back into a stance and pulled at his magic. “Móirín is here!” Warriors surrounded the area, drawing their swords and knives while the slaves scrambled away. Fear and hatred filled the too-small space between tents and fires.

But Arianna was already moving. She drained the liquid from everything he summoned, leaving shriveled stems and leaves in her wake. He cursed, shot a quick glance at his comrades, then growled in warning. But only once.

Arianna watched his face go pale and his lips part. He no longer stared at the female from Móirín. His gaze had shifted behind her, to the male Arianna hadn't heard follow. She didn't move as his sand crawled across the ground, rising to swirl around her body in a protective embrace.

Whatever warriors had stood to defend the male bolted and Zylah pressed her forehead to the ground so hard Arianna thought she might become one with it. Rion paused at her side, his gaze shifting from the male that had fallen to his knees then back to her.

He wasn't angry, if anything Rion seemed, inquisitive. Arianna wasn't sure what she'd had planned when she ran to aid her friend, but she couldn't back down now, not with Rion standing at her side. She'd intended to pose as his slave, but she'd broken that façade herself.

Rion's magic crawled across the ground like a million insects swarming and wrapped around the male, lifting his body. The shriek that escaped his lips sent a shiver down Arianna's spine. She turned to look at the powerful male beside her and the way he studied the creature in his grasp.

I need you to tell me.

Could she ask for this?

Though he'd been violent toward Zylah and likely violent to many others, the warrior clenched in Rion's grasp hadn't done anything wrong. Not by Brónach's standards, anyway. His actions angered her, yes, but what would death accomplish?

"Rion." The name fell from her lips like a plea. She wasn't sure how to act around him with eyes watching. She didn't know what he wanted or how much he cared about their opinions. Rion's feral gaze slid to hers and his eyes, usually so filled with hate, softened. Softened for her. Arianna felt like someone had struck her. Anything, she realized. Rion would give her anything.

He shifted his attention back to the male and let a murderous growl rip from deep in his chest before throwing him into the nearest tent. It crumbled, knocking everything around it over. One warrior scrambled to ensure nothing caught flame while the male fought his way out of the fabric and backed away, ducking his head in surrender.

Rion growled again, directing it toward everyone who'd come to watch. "Consider this your warning. If anyone, *anyone*, touches this female," he gestured toward Arianna, "they will personally answer to me. They will suffer. Slowly." His eyes roamed the small crowd, daring anyone to challenge him. "Is that in any way unclear?"

No one answered.

Rion surveyed the crowd again, then turned to her. He still wasn't angry, only curious, telling her he'd likely ask questions later. But now wasn't the time. Rion inclined his head behind her and Arianna turned, but not before casting another glance at Zylah who hadn't lifted her head from the ground. Her body was shaking but Arianna's hands were tied. Zylah was one of many. If she genuinely wanted to make a change, Arianna would need

to do it on a much larger scale.

She steeled herself and instead of keeping her head down, as a good slave might have, Arianna met the gaze of every warrior they passed. Some stared, others averted their eyes as if she were someone to be feared. She guessed, being with Rion, that was a plausible assumption.

Could she really change their fates if she took up her place as The Divine? Her mother had outlawed slavery in Móirín when she'd married her father. If being the High Lady could do that, then perhaps being the Queen of the Fae could release them all.

The tent line stopped revealing an open space that led to a larger tent with two guards stationed at the front. They stiffened and stood straighter when Rion passed, but neither looked at her.

Seven males rose to their feet when Rion entered. They eyed her, then gestured their general toward the table. Candles sat at the table's center, illuminating a map with wooden figures scattered across it. There were other maps hanging on the tent flaps, furs placed on the ground, and enough chairs for everyone to sit, though no one made to.

Rion leaned against the table, splaying his hands wide as he surveyed the markers. "Let's not waste my time today."

Arianna tried not to listen as they discussed the plan to annihilate Móirín's northern settlements. She tried not to listen as they detailed her people's movements and location. But the more she tried to ignore it, the more she found herself memorizing the information.

Talon could be with them. He could be at risk, find himself ambushed, and left to die just like the warriors she'd felled yesterday.

She eyed the map, her gaze roaming over the entire continent. So much land. So many lives. How was she supposed to bring peace to a world so divided? Each country guarded their borders and resources fiercely.

Trade negotiations were always stressful events. The sheer anger had Arianna wondering where it'd all started.

There had been another Divine once. Hadn't she brought their land peace or had she failed in her attempt? Arianna couldn't recall what her lessons said on the matter.

But if the last Divine had successfully ruled over the continent then what had lead to so much discourse in the centuries that followed?

And if the previous Divine had failed how then was she supposed to succeed. She was eighteen and had only left the borders of her homeland in chains.

Arianna didn't know the far mountain ranges and grand stone halls of Fiadh. She'd never walked beneath the giant trees that protected Brónach's capital city nor had she glimpsed Pádraigín's seaside port that traded with the northern continent.

How could she hope to rule a world she didn't know?

"Arianna." She startled at Rion's voice. "Perhaps you should wait outside."

She glanced at the wary faces watching her. Right, she was probably filling the tent with anxiety.

She exited quickly and seated herself on a nearby bench. Those in the vicinity moved further away. Arianna ignored them and looked toward the field beyond the camp's border. She could see the field in the distance along with the hill where she'd stood upon first laying eyes on this dreadful place.

She should run. She should *want* to run, but the thought of leaving Rion twisted her gut so hard she thought she'd be sick.

So, what was a daughter of Móirín to do?

Chapter Twenty-One

Rion

Rion dismissed the males and paused on the tent's threshold. The two guards froze, one sucking in a breath at his proximity, but he didn't care about their comfort. His only focus was Arianna. His magic told him she hadn't wandered far, but her scent from earlier hadn't changed either. She was angry. Frustrated.

Was it from the incident with the slave or their discussion about Móirín's northern settlements?

He knew Móirín had outlawed slavery long before she was born, but he hadn't expected her to act out against it. Perhaps her own experiences in captivity had something to do with her actions. Did she still think of herself as a slave? It wasn't as though he'd verbalized her freedom, he'd just assumed—

His gaze fell to the water flipping through her fingers. It glided between her index and middle finger, slid to her ring finger, around her pinky, and back to her thumb, much in the same way he'd seen others roll a coin across their knuckles.

Half-breed slaves were the only ones anywhere near her, but even they kept their distance. He studied her body posture. Arianna sat like a serpent ready to strike. Despite her usually calm demeanor, he knew a warrior when he saw one.

Her magic was precise and calculated. On the battlefield, she'd moved with grace and elegance. Yet that night she'd shed tears for her enemy. Was it all a façade?

Rion wanted to believe she was genuine. With everything in his being

he wanted to believe her sweet words. She'd saved his life more than once, after all. But—but what if she'd simply doubted herself? What if she was bidding her time? What if he wanted to believe in her so much that he'd blinded himself to the truth?

Pain blossomed in his chest, and he placed one hand over the area, clutching the fabric of his shirt. He'd felt the sting of betrayal more than once, but this time—this time he might just let it happen. To have a taste of what she offered only to have it ripped away—Rion shook his head. He wasn't sure he could bear it.

Test her then, his thoughts urged. He could. She needed to work off steam, and he needed to know, once and for all. It wouldn't be out of character for him. After all, what else did a demon know but violence?

He stepped forward and felt something in his chest pull again. *Please*, he begged the gods. *Please don't let this be the end.*

ARIANNA WAS silent and kept her head down as they walked through the camp. She didn't want to see the rest of the slaves but she could still hear them. Whimpers. The crack of a whip. It stirred her blood, calling her to defend the defenseless.

Rion had simply inclined his head and she'd followed but he didn't lead her toward the cabin. Instead, Rion had marched straight toward the forest and she hadn't bothered to ask why.

“You're angry.”

What could she say to that? It wasn't as though she could deny it. She *was* angry. Angry at the slaves kept against their will. Angry at the High Lords who believed this war would lead to something. And angry at herself

for not standing up sooner.

She should have run when she had the chance. She should have told Eoghan to take her home, but her own heart was at war with itself, wondering whether loving Rion—she paused.

Love? Did she love him?

Arianna stopped in her tracks, her mind churning with memories of everything she'd endured. He paused as well, turning to look at her. His brow furrowed. "What?"

Had she fallen in love with her enemy?

Arianna looked away, struggling to catch her breath. That explained it then. Her inability to choose between two things she cherished. Rion and her country.

He fidgeted, his magic shifting at his feet before taking a cautious step forward. "Is it because of the half-breed?"

Arianna chewed her lower lip. "That's part of it. We don't mistreat them in Móirín."

"So I've heard."

"Slavery is an old custom. In my country, they're viewed and treated as equals. So are humans." She gave him a half-smile. "For the most part, anyway." Her father had his limits. He'd never allow a human or half-breed sit on the council or marry one of his daughters. Though Arianna was certain her sister would have a few things to say about her own destiny when the time came.

Rion turned away. "They're all slaves in Brónach. We don't have many humans, but—"

"I know."

He clasped his hands together then let them hang at his side. She'd never seen him so unsettled. "I'm not opposed to learning Móirín's way. I'd

be curious even, to see how they live without oppression.”

Her voice lowered. “Do you think I could end their torment if I told everyone? If I stood up as The Divine?”

He stopped fidgeting. “It’s possible. Is that something you want?”

“If I can help others, maybe.”

“But is it something *you* want? For yourself.”

“I don’t know if I have a choice.”

“Everyone has a choice. I all but abandoned my family name. There’s no reason you couldn’t do the same if you wished.”

“Was your family part of the council or something?”

He chuckled. “Or something. I’m not telling you not to pursue it, just don’t do it for the wrong reasons. Eternity is a very long time. You should enjoy it.”

Enjoy it? Even if that meant ignoring her responsibilities to her people?

Arianna continued following Rion through the trees until they entered a clearing. Clumps of dead grass covered the ground, and she tried to imagine what it’d look like in the spring. A gentle breeze shifting through the tall, green grass. Birds flying overhead. Children playing in the meadow with their parents sharing a packed lunch.

She tilted her head back, letting the cool air hit her face. She had so much to think about, tough decisions to make.

“Are you up to sparring?”

Arianna jerked her chin toward him. “What?”

He stepped several paces away. “I haven’t had a decent sparring partner in a while, and you look like you need to release some tension.”

“But—” She gaped at him. He feared her touch but was willing to spar? Earth rose from the ground. Sand, pebbles, loose chunks of earth. They

all danced between the pair as if urging her magic to join. When was the last time she'd spared?

"I might be a bit rusty."

He smirked. "After what I saw yesterday, I sincerely doubt that."

Right, because he'd seen her fight. He knew what she was capable of.

So why?

Arianna's heart raced, but it wasn't with fear. A thrill of excitement coursed through her body. She stationed herself across from him and lowered into a stance. Who had been the last person? Talon? Maybe. It could have been her sister. She'd never bested Talon and Ellie was a force to be reckoned with, but she'd held her own against three Brónach warriors when she'd first arrived. And she'd aided Rion in battle, resulting in their victory.

Arianna stretched her side, testing the injury. Rion followed the movement and grimaced. "Don't push yourself."

Magic pulsed beneath her skin and in one fluid movement, she pulled hundreds of particles from the air, surrounding her body in tiny glistening droplets.

Rion responded in kind.

Never in her life had she imagined herself standing against The Demon in a fight that wouldn't lead to her death. But Talon had given her pointers in the event she ever faced him. Earth was heavier wet. If she led him toward a large body of water, she'd have a chance. A small one, but a chance all the same.

Talon would think her insane.

Arianna steadied herself. Rion's body blocked her path to the river. All she needed to do was get around him and make a break for the trees.

Chunks of rock shot from the ground, snaking their way toward her feet. Arianna shifted the temperature in her magic and hurtled sharp spears of

ice, shattering the chunks into smaller bits. Then she ran. Because he could still use those particles, no matter how much she broke his magic apart. Unlike the rest of the warriors from Brónach, she couldn't steal his magic away. No one could.

She ran parallel to him, her eyes never leaving his. Arianna planted her feet, froze all the droplets in the air and launched them toward his still form before sprinting in the wake of her magic.

Rion yanked earth up to block her attack, but she ducked, hoping to get around his line of sight.

Rion was faster.

His magic wrapped around her arm and wrenched her left wrist behind her back. Arianna flipped with the movement, exploded the rock away from her arm, and bolted toward the river.

When she didn't hear him pursuing, she paused. Rion had stilled, his brow furrowed, and lips parted. *I'm not running from you.* Arianna smirked and gestured for him to follow. He answered with a soft snarl, and she was sprinting all over again.

The fresh air filled her lungs, her feet raced across the hard ground, and Arianna felt more free at that moment than she had her entire life. She lifted her arms out and relished in the wind filtering through her hair.

Earth grabbed at her feet in passing, but Arianna jumped around it, dodging his attacks whenever she scented them forming. She knew he was being gentle, letting her escape. Arianna spun around with a smile on her face when she was ankle-deep in freezing water.

Rion splashed in with her, then Arianna yanked the river up, snaking the magic around her body like a giant serpent. She sucked in breath after breath and her side stung, but the exhilaration flooding her body was worth every ounce of pain she'd feel later.

Rion smiled, but it wasn't the wicked, sadistic pull of his lips she'd seen yesterday. No. This was a genuine smile, one she was sure he'd rarely shown to anyone.

Rion closed the distance and Arianna solidified the water at his feet, letting it crawl up his body. He snarled in response and the ice exploded from his body. She shielded her face against the flying particles then formed a sphere of ice and launched it toward him with a thin icicle following in its wake.

He blocked the sphere but barely noticed the icicle as it shattered against his magic. Arianna did it again, forming a dozen spheres but only one had several needle-thin icicles following close behind. She launched them toward Rion, hoping to camouflage her attack.

The first sphere broke against his magic, exploding in a ray of shards that fell harmlessly from his body. The second did the same. Then the third. But he didn't seem to notice the icicles behind that third sphere. The first hit too close for her comfort and Arianna stopped attacking when the second icicle struck closer. She yanked as hard as she could, trying to melt each one into water before they could make contact, but too late.

Two struck him in the shoulder, right at the tender point that'd immobilize the tendons in the arm. Shock covered his face and the impact sent him staggering back into the water. Rion roared and fear shot through her core.

Earth encased her body, hauling her from the river. It pinned her arms at her sides but didn't squeeze tight enough to hurt.

No...

Rion pressed one hand to his shoulder and his fingertips came away bloody. Then he turned that betrayed look on her. Pain. Longing. Fear. Arianna's heart cracked, splintering right down the center.

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Let me fix it,” she pleaded. Arianna tried to move her body, but his magic held firm. “Please.” She’d never intended to hurt him. Not like that other female had. She never wanted to see the pained look he was giving her now. His gaze wavered, shifting from disbelief to acceptance and back to disbelief. “Rion.”

The particles loosened and he set her back on her feet, but his magic didn’t stop circling her wrists. Arianna didn’t care. She just needed to get to him and ease the pain she’d caused.

Arianna fell to her knees in the freezing water, ignoring the shock that went through her body. Her teeth chattered and his magic tightened its hold.

His breathing had turned ragged, but she knew it wasn’t from physical pain. It was fear. She could smell it all over him. The fear of being hurt by someone he cared for. Someone he loved.

His eyes flickered between hers, searching for the malintent. *I won’t hurt you*, she wanted to say, but she already had. And it killed her. Absolutely killed her.

Arianna summoned her healing magic and with shaking hands, pressed her fingertips over his wound. Rion hissed in pain, but she closed her eyes, letting her magic sink deep beneath the skin’s surface.

Just as they’d done before, his muscles stitched themselves back together. His body told her what it needed with temperature variations. More here, less there. Rion’s magic kept moving around her uncertainly, but his sigh of relief was like music to her ears. His shoulders relaxed when the final bits of skin knit themselves together.

Arianna sat back on her heels, her lower body numb from the cold. “I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked. “I—”

His fingertips grazed her cheek, catching the tear before it fell, then his lips pressed against hers. Both were trembling from the cold, but Rion sat

long enough to stare at her with a look of awe.

“We should get out of the water.” She didn’t want to move. Not with the way he looked at her now. Arianna placed her hands into the frigid river and warmth spread from her fingertips as she heated the liquid surrounding their bodies. She watched Rion carefully. The heat from her magic cascaded over him and he followed the line of warmth as it gradually engulfed his body. Within seconds, steam rose between them. They remained still, letting the heat thaw their numb skin.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“Accidents happen.” His voice was too soft.

“You didn’t think it was an accident.”

A moment of silence passed, but the hurt lingering in his gaze told her she was right.

“My demons aren’t yours to bear.”

“What if I want them to be?”

Rion dipped his hands into the warm water and flexed his fingers as if working the ice from his joints. “Are you sure that’s what you want?” He paused. “Are you sure *I’m* what you want?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with this male. She’d figure out the details along the way. There’d be obstacles, she knew that, but the thought of spending a single moment without him was so painful, Arianna thought she might shatter.

“You told me once that you wanted to go back to the male you were promised to.” He met her gaze. “Does he hold no sway over you now?”

Arianna shook her head. “Talon will always be my friend. Always, but you’re different. This is different.”

Rion touched his shoulder as if he didn’t believe she’d healed him again then sat up on his knees. He touched her cheek, running his fingertips

across her skin and down her neck. His magic rose, circling them, but it wasn't the cold, wet earth she expected. Pebbles and rock of every shape, size, and color surrounded the pair, casting rays of pale, colorful light over their bodies.

She paused to watch and even reached out to grab one that matched the color of his eyes. Arianna rubbed her thumb over the smooth surface and smiled at him.

“I have to leave again.” Her heart sank. “But when I return—” He pressed a needful kiss to her lips. She understood without him saying a word. When he returned, he'd give her everything.

Rion kissed her over and over again and her magic rose to circle with his, cocooning the pair in droplets of water and rock that bathed them in every color she'd ever seen. It matched the chaos of emotions flying through her in that moment. She felt like every color, constantly spinning, never settling in one place, because this feeling, this love was too strong to be confined to a single color. It was infinite and ever-growing, stretching beyond the veils of space and time and she'd never ever tire of it.

RION DIDN'T run from much, but when he dropped Arianna off at the cabin, he'd sprinted away like his life depended on it. He might have stayed forever otherwise. He had a job to do. Or did he? The options warred in his mind. What did he owe his country? Why should he keep fighting if he'd finally found something for himself?

He'd learned his lesson last time so instead of marching to the front gate where he knew his warriors stood ready, Rion took a detour. He knew where Eoghan waited. The male was always waiting and watching.

At the sharp jerk of his chin, Eoghan leapt to his feet and followed Rion into the trees. The male kept his distance, his fear palpable, but he didn't disobey. No one disobeyed where Rion was concerned.

Rion turned and folded his arms. He hated this, but he wouldn't leave her defenseless again. "I'm leaving. You said you wanted the chance to prove yourself." Eoghan stood straighter. "I want her protected."

"I will gladly die in her place." Rion's jaw clenched. Maybe he should abandon the war. They could go into the mountains. Disappear, but before Rion could change his mind, Eoghan dropped to one knee. "I will protect her."

Rion scented the air. No lie, but the absolute sincerity of Eoghan's statement raised the hair on the back of Rion's neck. "Why?"

Eoghan raised his head. "Because I know who she is, and I can think of no greater honor than dying for my queen."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Arianna

But when I return...

His words echoed through her body like a heated promise. Arianna curled into his pillow, pulling at the earthen scent that clung to his side of the bed. Their bed. She smiled, imagining herself finally getting to run her fingers through his auburn hair, to touch his skin without his heart racing. His powerful body.

But it wasn't just the physical she craved. She wanted his trust. Arianna needed him to know that no matter what happened, she'd never do anything to harm him, and she certainly wouldn't betray him.

Guilt still gnawed at her for the wound she'd inflicted to his shoulder. The next time they sparred, she'd be more careful, or perhaps he'd be more aware.

Arianna took in his scent again and her somber thoughts took a darker turn. She remembered their plans in the tent. She'd heard of the village they were striking and though she'd never visited, she could picture it on a map in her father's office. How many innocents would he kill? Who stood in their way?

Arianna sat up and stared at the embers in the fireplace. What if he encountered the one who'd injured him and never returned? What if she was left with nothing but a broken promise?

Her gaze shifted to the door and Arianna stared at it, willing him to walk through unscathed and take her as far away from the war as possible. They could disappear from the world. Maybe they'd travel to another continent where Fae were nothing but fabled legends and live in peace until

the elders of Alastríona faded from the land.

She smiled to herself knowing it could never happen. She'd never abandon Ellie or Talon. Not when she knew they missed her as much as she missed them.

Arianna gathered herself, stood, and set about her morning routine. She heated food for herself, bathed in the washbasin, wishing for something bigger, and rearranged what little herbs still sat in the cabinet.

She finished before noon. Arianna could have worked through her exercises, but instead, she paced, staring at the door, wondering about horrors Rion might face.

Arianna tapped her foot.

Rion had already threatened the Fae in camp, but that didn't stop her heart from thundering when she opened the door and afternoon light flooded inside. Eoghan stood at the end of the walkway and turned upon hearing the squeak of the hinges. He bowed his head slightly. Those in the vicinity cast her a wary glance before setting about their business.

Arianna scented the air, hoping to catch Rion's scent, but only metal, smoke, and sweat greeted her.

"Lady Arianna." She cringed at the title. At least he wasn't calling her queen. Back in Móirín, 'lady' had been a title everyone used to address her. It was a title reserved for the High family. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

She vaguely wondered if Rion had commanded him to stay close. Her eyes still wandered over various faces. "I was hoping to find someone. A half-breed I saw yesterday." Arianna fidgeted. "I usually meet her at the mess hall."

"I know the one."

She raised her brows. "You do?"

Eoghan dipped his head. "I'm keeping a close eye on those who come

and go.”

“I’d like to see her.”

He glanced around. “I believe they reassigned her to the infirmary tents after,” he paused. “Well, after yesterday. I can send someone to get her if—”

Arianna shook her head. “I can go to her. I want to make sure she’s all right.” And if she wasn’t, what then? Would she reveal her powers to another? Zylah hadn’t reacted negatively when Arianna had turned into a Fae so perhaps this wouldn’t be any different.

Eoghan sighed and shook his head. “You’re not going to make my job easy, are you?”

“What job?”

“Protecting you.” So Rion *had* spoken to him.

“You can protect my sanity by letting me out of this cabin.”

He dipped his head again. “I’d never dream of locking you up, but those within the infirmary tents might be...dangerous.” Because she was from Móirín. Because she smelled like their enemy.

“I’ll be careful.”

Eoghan eyed her before turning to lead the way. Arianna followed. Everyone in the camp, both slave and warrior alike, rushed from her presence as if she were Rion himself. Eoghan cleared his throat. “I know it’s not my place, and I’d never presume to question your judgment, but I’m not sure how much your people know about our history.” He paused a moment then softened his voice. “You realize he isn’t permitted a mate.” Arianna’s head shot toward him, and he lowered his eyes. “It’s not because of any law made by our leaders. It’s something instilled by the gods.”

Arianna tried to control the anger bubbling beneath the surface. “I’m aware.”

He waited for her to say more before continuing. “I can still get you out of here. I know you care for him, and I know it might seem cruel, but you should consider the potential outcome when your mate does come along. How do you think the general would react?”

She stopped walking. Her mate? She couldn’t fathom loving anyone as much as she did Rion, and she knew exactly how Rion would react if another male tried to claim her. He’d become territorial and possessive, like Fae males were known to do. She’d given him a glimmer of hope. It wasn’t as though he’d simply fade back into the shadows and vanish.

But how would she feel? She wasn’t obligated to be with her mate. There weren’t any laws against denying the bond and as a female, she could ignore it altogether. Sure, it’d linger in the back of her mind, but it’d be little more than a nuisance. As long as her future mate didn’t attack Rion—but wouldn’t he?

Arianna shook her head, unwilling to entertain the thought further, and began walking again. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Her mother had described the bond once. She’d told her daughters it was a feeling deep in the soul. An uncontrollable need for another life force and without them, you couldn’t breathe.

But that’s exactly how she felt about Rion.

Except, the cord was missing.

Her mother had also described a line that tethered mates to one another. In the early stages, it was fragile, a piece of string barely holding on. But as the relationship developed, that bond solidified until it was unbreakable, like a steel rope no blade could sever.

Eoghan gave her a sympathetic look but thankfully dropped the subject. Instead, he pointed her west, posturing and growling at any male who so much as looked their way too long. Arianna found the display

unnecessary, but she also wasn't from Brónach. Their people were harsher than those from Móirín and operated on a hierarchy system as old as the race itself.

She was still their enemy.

The scent of blood and sickness met her long before they came upon the first tent. It stood a bit larger than the one Rion had taken her to for his meeting, but size was the last thing on her mind as they approached.

Because around every tent, they'd practically piled bodies on top of one another. Bodies who still drew breath.

Eoghan pulled back the first tent flap to reveal the interior floors and Arianna sucked in a breath. More warriors lined the area with barely enough room to walk between them. They'd piled dirty rags in the corners. Flies swarmed and maggots crawled over their festering wounds.

Eoghan let the flap close, but Arianna caught it and held it open. Zylah could wait.

They'd been here all along, dying. Every single day she'd been in this camp, curled up next to a warm fire, comfortable, despite her circumstances, Fae were dying.

Of course, they were dying. This was war, casualties were a given but—her gaze wandered across the expanse, lingering on rotted flesh and stained rags. She almost gagged from the thick air within that reeked of old sweat and blood.

Half-breeds darted between the injured, but there weren't enough tents or healthy bodies to aid everyone. And those outside. She peeked around the flap. Were they just left there to die?

Arianna's heart clenched.

“Lady Arianna?”

Talon had hidden this from her. Every time he'd returned from battle,

he'd escorted her back to the central estate. She'd always presumed he wanted to clean up and rest, but that hadn't been the only reason.

How many of her own people could she have saved? How many times had she seen Talon distraught over the loss of his comrades?

Arianna fought back tears. She wouldn't let herself cry. She'd made the decision to hide. She'd been the one afraid of responsibility and she didn't get to cry for that.

Eoghan tried again, his voice softer. "Lady Arianna."

"Who's in charge here?"

He followed her gaze to a male writhing in pain. "It's hard to tell. We lose more every day. The dem—" he cleared his throat. "The general is an excellent strategist, but even he can't prevent casualties."

Casualties. *Casualties?* This was torture. Death with no honor. She looked in their eyes and found their hope stripped bare. They'd accepted their fate and simply waited for death to carry their souls to a better land.

Arianna worked her jaw, feeling the tears threaten anew. Her people had done this. And Brónach had likely inflicted just as much pain on her country.

It had to stop.

All this had to stop.

Despite Eoghan's warning, Arianna let the tent flap close and marched toward the nearest male. She rolled up her sleeves and knelt before his trembling body. Not so much as a blanket to keep him warm. Nothing beneath his head to prop it up.

Determination flared through her, and Arianna decided enough was enough. Let them discover who she really was. Let every Fae in all Alastríona know the legends were true.

The Divine was real, and she'd finally take up her name.

“What are you doing?” Eoghan knelt at her side, though he made no move to touch her.

“What I should have done a long time ago.”

The male looked at her with glazed eyes at first, then life snapped into him. He bared his teeth, snapping and growling so loud it drew the attention of those in the vicinity. Others began growling, a warning as they scented the magic wrapping around her arms.

Arianna gave him a sad smile. They’d all come from battle, some likely still fighting the ghosts brought on by fever and infection.

“Let me help you.” They were simple words. The same words she’d given Rion the night he’d entered their cabin broken and bleeding.

Exhausted, the male settled back and closed his eyes, content to accept whatever fate dealt him next.

Arianna pulled away the old bandages, revealing infected flesh that had Eoghan turning away. But Arianna wouldn’t allow herself to turn. She placed one hand over the pus-filled wound and let the warmth of her magic flow from her fingertips. The male hissed and thrashed, but one look from Arianna had Eoghan holding him down while she worked.

The infection crawled out of his skin like a living creature, dripping down his arm and onto the bare ground. His muscles reattached at the wrist and elbow and his once red and inflamed skin settled back to a normal, tan color.

Eoghan released the male and Arianna sat back on her heels. The male sat up slowly and examined his arm, rubbing at the place where an open wound had been just moments before.

His gaze rose. “You...” He took an uncertain breath. His eyes shone with unshed tears then he bowed his head. “My queen.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Arianna

Arianna healed and healed and healed, no longer caring how many or who knew about her abilities. After the first warrior, she'd healed every single Fae they couldn't provide shelter for.

When she'd returned the following morning, those whom she'd healed were waiting, ready to assist with anything she needed. With their help, she'd isolated the worst cases and worked well into the night.

By the third morning, she had a crowd waiting for her outside the cabin. Arianna exited the door and tried not to blush. They murmured to one another, whispering legends and stories of old. Arianna marched toward the infirmary tents, offering shy smiles as she passed, but a familiar face stopped her in her tracks.

Zylah.

The female stared at her, holding a basket between her hands. A chain still dangled between her wrists and bruises crawled up her arms like tattoos.

Zylah didn't move when Arianna started toward her, but when the Fae followed, the female ducked her head in their presence. Her body trembled slightly, but somehow Arianna knew it wasn't because of her.

She beckoned Eoghan over and lowered her voice. "Is there a place we can go that's a little more private?" Arianna didn't know what to expect, but Eoghan pivoted on his heel and she followed, gesturing Zylah to follow as well. The warriors surrounding them didn't growl at the half-breed as they might have once done. In fact, she hadn't noticed much aggression toward the slaves at all. Perhaps she really could make a difference.

"This is as good as I can do, my lady." He pulled back a tent flap and

Arianna stepped inside. Someone kept a tidy space, with a raised bed stuffed into a corner and a large wooden trunk at its side.

She scented the interior and turned to him. “This is where you sleep?”

“Where I used to sleep.” Used to. Did he never leave the cabin door? Maybe she could convince someone to take shifts with him. Why hadn’t she considered it before?

“Thank you.” Arianna held the flap open, and Zylah ducked past her and Eoghan. She made a point to stand in the center of the room. Arianna let the flap fall and the tent darkened. Their only light was a small opening in the roof.

Zylah cradled her elbow. “I was surprised when you shifted into a Fae, but this—”

“I’m still the same female you took under your wing when I arrived.”

“Should I bow to you?” She unfolded her arms, but Arianna rushed forward and gently took her hands.

“I think you’ve bowed enough for one lifetime.”

Zylah stared at their wrists. One clasped in iron, the other with scars. “Why did you want to talk?”

“I wanted to see if you were okay.”

Zylah gave her a weak smile, but her lips trembled. “I’m alive.”

Arianna eyed her bruises. “Can I heal them?”

“I—sure.”

Arianna placed her hand around Zylah’s arm and her magic heated the female’s skin. Zylah sucked in a breath, and she watched the dark spots on her skin fade to yellow then vanish, the magic working its way up past her elbow. Arianna did the same with the other side.

“Anywhere else?”

“This—I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

Arianna took her hands again. “No, thank you. Without you, I might not have made it past my first day.”

“Is he kind to you? Please tell me he doesn’t hurt you.”

“He doesn’t hurt me. Quite the opposite actually.”

“I heard his speech the other day. Do you think he’ll let you return home when the time comes?” Right, because she couldn’t stay in this camp forever.

“I think so.” Arianna tightened her grip on Zylah’s hands. “And I want you to come with me.”

Zylah’s eyes widened. “I can’t leave the others.”

“Then we’ll take them too. I have a feeling the Fae here won’t argue against it.”

“Taking advantage of your position already.” Zylah’s playfulness didn’t quite reach her eyes but Arianna was glad the female felt comfortable enough around her to try.

“I want to change things. Starting here. I want to make this land a better place for everyone. Would you—Do you think you could help me with that?”

Zylah furrowed her brow. “What do you need?”

Arianna glanced at their hands again. “First, to get these chains off. Then I need you to gather the slaves.”

ARIANNA TENDED to the slaves that were injured and told Zylah about her need to heal those within the infirmary tents. Zylah hesitated at first, wary, but eventually agreed. She had faced as much pain as the rest of them. To have her helping heal warriors that’d caused her harm was a lot to

ask.

With the help of the slaves and those seeking her attention the tents no longer smelled of rotting flesh. The week-old bandages she'd seen piled up a few days ago had been removed and burned. She still had several critical to tend to, but as the afternoon wore on, injuries became less severe.

Despite everyone's friendly demeanor toward her, Eoghan was in an uproar. He kept close. He'd only snarled once, and she'd quickly placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him. She didn't want fights breaking out over her attention. Let them do as they pleased. Whatever helped them cope with the trials they'd endured.

Because despite the praise they offered, Arianna could see the hollowness in their gazes. She could see the grief written all over their bodies even as they marveled at the miracles she performed.

Arianna stood, wiping her hands on her clothes. She'd successfully separated the warriors now, creating enough room for the half-breeds to move in and out without stepping on or forgetting a patient. The rest would heal on their own.

She moved toward the exit when another group burst through the tent flap, two males carrying a female between them. She screamed, cursing at anything and anyone in front of her. Upon spotting Arianna, they all but ran to her and set the female on the ground.

Blood poured from a gash in her leg. Too much blood. Arianna put her hands over the wound without hesitation, searching for the severed artery. Her magic was slow to respond, crawling through her body like sludge, but she couldn't let it waver now.

The female screamed again, and the males held her down, offering reassurance while Arianna worked.

Then it was done. No more blood. No more gash. The female looked

at her smooth leg awestruck then began all but worshipping Arianna as others had done.

Arianna sat back on her heels, willing her heart to slow.

The sun began its descent in the sky. She'd wanted to leave after the female, but another patient appeared, this one sick with fever. Arianna healed them. Another with a deep gash from a sparring match. Arianna healed them too. More flooded through and though she wanted to help, Arianna instructed the half-breeds on proper care before taking her leave.

Crowds sat outside the infirmary tents. Some offered her food while others reached out to touch her clothes. Thankfully, Eoghan was there to usher them all away. She didn't berate him this time. All she wanted was the comfort of her bed where she could drown in Rion's scent and let her worries fade into pleasant dreams.

Arianna wiped the sweat from her brow, noting the way her hands shook. She'd never used her magic like this. Three days and the exhaustion of it all was finally catching up. The critical were taken care of, which should leave her with a day or two to rest. She swore she wasn't going to leave that bed tomorrow.

Arianna tottered and gripped a tent post to right herself. She leaned against it, fighting the dizziness that threatened to send her to the ground. A strong, yet gentle grip steadied her elbow. She wished it'd been Rion, but Arianna turned to find Eoghan's concerned face instead.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I just need rest. I think I pushed a little too hard today."

"I'd venture to say you've pushed yourself too hard for a few days."

She smiled. "Maybe, but it was worth it." She'd never forget the smiling faces. The look of surprise when warrior after warrior realized they weren't going to die. Arianna glanced toward the cabin in the distance.

“When will he be back?”

“Tomorrow, I believe. There was a border issue he had to take care of. One of our lines was crossed.”

Oh. So he hadn't enacted his plan. She'd assumed from the meeting that he'd gone to take control of the northern village.

“My offer still stands,” he began. “And from the looks of it, you'd have an entire escort to Móirín if you wished.”

“I'm not leaving him.” She said it far more aggressively than she'd meant.

Eoghan bowed his head in response. “Forgive me.”

Arianna rubbed her eyes with her palm. “I'm sorry, I'm just tired.”

“Shall we get you back to the cabin then?”

She exhaled and turned toward the setting sun. “I'd like to visit the river first. The water helps.” She wouldn't rest now. With the new knowledge of Rion's location her mind was racing with all the possible ways someone could hurt him. What if it was a trap laid by those who'd survived after the assassination attempt?

What if they succeeded this time?

Eoghan moved at her pace as they strolled through the trees. He offered his help when stepping over fallen logs and moved branches for her to pass beneath. Maybe she could have him as part of her court when she officially declared herself The Divine. She didn't understand how everything worked, but if she was queen, she ought to have a say in who stood by her side.

But what would they think of Rion? Would they even permit him inside the royal halls? How far could she push the elders that resided in the royal city?

Arianna smelled the water long before she saw it. The crisp scent

called to her magic, and she felt a fraction of her strength return. Arianna kicked off her shoes, sat at the edge of a log, and dipped her feet into the frigid liquid. She used what little magic she had left to heat it and took a deep breath to clear her mind.

The thought of being queen terrified her. There were so many ways she could mess up. So much that could go wrong. And she'd have to deal with the political agendas of the High Lords within each country. She'd witnessed her father dealing with their advisors on occasion. It looked like a nightmare.

Arianna flexed her toes and wiped at her eyes. She would have loved to stay longer, but her magic had given out and her body wasn't far behind. The last thing she wanted was to burden Eoghan further.

She stood. Her balance left her, but Eoghan was at her side before gravity could pull her down. She was so, so tired. Maybe she could lie beneath a tree for a bit, just to gather her strength. She had Eoghan to look after her.

“I could carry you,” he offered.

“I wouldn't want to trouble you.”

“No, please,” he knelt, “let me help you for once.”

Awkwardly, Arianna climbed onto his back and Eoghan wrapped his hands beneath her knees. He stood with ease, as if the weight of her body was nothing, and began the slow trek back toward the cabin.

Arianna let her eyes drift shut, the rhythm of his breathing and gait lulling her into those blissful moments before sleep. Then his body went rigid, and she jolted awake at the scent of his fear. Her head shot up, but her magic was spent, even in the face of an unknown threat.

Rion stood in the path before them. A beautiful, deadly creature with earth circling his body in agitated spirals. Her heart slowed as relief washed

through her.

“Put. Her. Down.”

Eoghan bowed his head and knelt, but Arianna barely had the strength to stand. Particles of sand wrapped around her trembling body and Rion was at her side a second later, hands and eyes searching for a wound, blood, anything that might explain her weakened state.

She pressed her body into his, relishing in his scent and the heat radiating from him.

“I’m okay.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m okay,” she repeated.

“Lady Arianna overused her magic and—”

Rion growled at him, low and cruel, but Arianna drew his attention back to her. “I just need rest. Don’t punish him.” Her eyes were so heavy. She just needed to lie down for a while. A few hours and she’d be fine. But if she did, would Rion hurt Eoghan? Kill him?

Arianna reached for Rion’s arm and his earth lightly wrapped around her hand. “Please,” she whispered. “He’s not at fault for anything.”

Rion huffed then picked her up in his arms like he’d done when she was sick. Arianna curled into his chest but kept her hands to herself. He’d promised when he returned, but she wanted to be awake for it. She wanted to cherish each and every moment.

RION THOUGHT he knew pain when he’d scented her blood in the cabin. He thought he knew pain when the assassination leader put a knife to her throat but seeing her so weak fractured something in the core of his being.

He couldn't fix this, whatever was wrong with her.

Rion had growled at anyone in his path, far too many for his liking. They were all staring at Arianna, whispering amongst themselves.

Divine. Savior.

He'd only been gone five days, running as fast as his body would carry him to get back. What had she done in his absence to garner so much attention?

Once inside, he laid her on the bed, lit a fire, and curled up next to her. She needed rest and despite the worry plaguing him, he'd let her have it.

Rion shifted her hair and pulled the blanket over her freezing body. At this point, he'd give her anything. No matter what it cost him.

And he'd never leave again.

To hell with the war. To hell with his country. The only thing he needed was sleeping right beside him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Arianna

When her eyes fluttered open, Arianna's breath hitched at the sight of Rion's face mere inches from her own. His lips parted, his heart rate spiked, and the way his green eyes sparked had her half wondering if she was still dreaming.

"Hi," she managed.

His brow furrowed in a mixture of relief and anguish. Gently, Rion pulled her in and pressed a long kiss to her forehead. "When I saw you, I thought the worst."

"I'm fine." She tried assuring him, though her pounding head had her wincing.

Rion pulled back to examine her, still seeming to search for any wounds. "Eoghan said you expended too much energy. What were you doing?"

She chewed her lip, wondering at his reaction. After the attempt on his life, she knew he held no love for his people. "I might have found the infirmary tents."

He sat up, propping his body on one elbow. "And?"

"And there might be some Fae in your camp who've been following me around since."

He nuzzled her neck and sighed, though she wasn't sure if it was in contentment or frustration. "I'm not certain how to feel about that."

"At least you won't have to worry about anyone kidnapping me again."

"I wouldn't be so sure. There isn't a living being, Fae, human, or half-

breed who holds any amount of love for me. They might think kidnapping you a mercy.”

Arianna leaned forward and bravely ran her nose down his jawline. She didn't miss the way it made his breath hitch. “I won't go quietly.”

Rion caught her lips in a greedy kiss, his tongue diving deep into her mouth. Arianna's stomach tightened and heat flooded her body. He wrapped one hand behind her head, threading his fingers through her hair, but pulled away far too soon. “If you're feeling up to it, I want to take you somewhere.”

Arianna inclined her head. “Where?”

“To a place no one will bother us. If you're willing.”

She glanced out the window. “In the middle of the night?”

“I'd rather not attract attention.” He eyed the door. “Though there's no sneaking around your faithful guardian.”

“He's been helpful.” Rion's jaw feathered, but he returned his questioning gaze to hers. “All right, let's go.”

“You're sure?”

When she nodded, he removed the blankets, slipped his shoes on, and began packing a small bag. Arianna watched him a moment then followed suit, pulling on an extra shirt and pair of pants. Rion tossed her another sweater and she wondered just how long they'd be out in the cold.

“If you decide you want to turn back, say the word. We'll be alone, and I'll understand if that bothers you.”

Arianna slipped on the sweater and smiled at him. “I trust you.”

Rion looked as though she'd struck him and Arianna realized he'd likely never heard those words. Or perhaps he had, but betrayal and heartbreak had followed.

Once he finished, Rion threw the small bag over his shoulder and Arianna followed him through the door only to find a large snow leopard

curled up on the path. It raised its head then stood, shifting back into the dark-skinned male that never seemed to leave her side. Thankfully, it didn't look like Rion had hurt him.

Rion kept his voice low. "We're leaving for a few days. I trust you'll inform those who need to know."

Eoghan bowed his head. "Of course." His gaze met hers then and Arianna wondered if Eoghan would attempt to fight Rion if he thought she was in danger. Judging from the look on his face, she knew he'd at least try. Even if it meant dying.

So, she gave him her best reassuring smile because even if no one else believed Rion wouldn't hurt her, she knew it in her heart. He'd rip himself to pieces before laying one finger on the female who'd been thrown at his feet.

Smiling, Arianna followed Rion toward the mountains and left the sleeping camp behind.

THEY WALKED in silence for hours, never diverting from the path that led to the base of the mountains. But he couldn't be taking her there. The mountains weren't known for their friendly creatures. In fact, as children, she'd been told to stay far away from them.

They were haunted, many claimed, with creatures that roamed during the night, stealing souls and bodies alike.

A slight winter breeze bit through the trees and Arianna wrapped her arms around herself. Rion turned once to ensure she followed, but otherwise, he stayed silent.

When I return...

Her mind kept floating back to those words and whether they had

anything to do with why they were trekking through the forest now. There were so many possibilities. So many reasons he could want them far from interruptions. Some made her heart leap with excitement while others made it fracture with crippling pain.

Though the sun hadn't risen yet, birds were already chirping, ready to greet the new day.

She followed Rion down every path, trusting he knew the way, but when they reached the base of the mountains, Arianna hesitated.

The trees shifted, going from young to old in a matter of steps. They tripled in size and shadows seemed to shift behind the centuries-old bark. It felt as though something waited for her to enter its territory so it could devour her whole. Would they find her body at its base as they had so many others?

Rion noticed the shift in her scent and paused.

"I've always been told to stay away from this place." She held herself tighter.

"As I'm sure you were told to stay away from me." She blinked at him. "Not everything is as it seems. I swore to you once before, but I'll swear it again. Nothing will harm you while I'm around."

Arianna swallowed hard and peered into the darkness looming before her. The elders had warned her of monsters. Warned her of Rion too. How many of those old stories would prove false?

Rion extended a shaking hand, but she knew he didn't tremble from the cold. This was him trying and whatever she chose to do next would change everything.

Arianna stepped forward, wrapped her small hand in his, and let Rion lead her into the darkness.

ARIANNA CLUTCHED Rion's hand, her heart hammering in her chest the further they ventured into the forest. The young trees were a distant memory now. Snow crunched beneath her feet and, as if conjured by magic, strange lights began to appear in the darkness.

Lights that floated. Eyes that stared.

The full moon illuminated misshapen figures dashing between trees, too fast for even her Fae eyes to see. An enormous shadow shifted to her right. Arianna sucked in a breath and planted her feet, ready to run, but Rion tightened his hold in reassurance. Particles of sand floated between them, dancing across her skin as if it, too, were trying to comfort her.

She might have enjoyed this stroll, Rion's hand in hers, had it not been for the sheer terror coursing through her veins.

They shouldn't be here. A voice in her head kept repeating. How many times had the elders warned her? How many Fae bodies had they counted at the mountain's base, mangled and beyond recognition?

Growling huffs echoed between the trees, like animals offering a warning before they struck, but Arianna couldn't identify the creatures by scent alone. These were wraiths, beasts, demons. Beings only whispered about in their modern world.

Rion pressed his body against hers and she leaned into him, letting that familiar scent drown out the strange ones. He didn't tremble like she did, and his sureness had her fear dissipating slightly. How many times had he wandered into this wretched place and survived?

Or did these creatures fear him as well? Most knew Rion as a monster, but she'd seen another side. A Fae male, battle-hardened and isolated his entire life because of false prejudices written in an old book by elders who no longer lived.

Arianna took another steadying breath, her heart calming further. The world had misunderstood Rion so perhaps—

“Don’t attack them,” he whispered. “They don’t mean to frighten you.” Her heart started up again, but she nodded and opened her eyes to watch the shadows.

Rion’s earth rose and he stepped away from her. Arianna reached for him, afraid even the shortest distance would leave her stranded out here alone, but sand particles wrapped around her hand, caressing her skin in reassurance. It enveloped her, cocooning her body in a protective half shell. If her magic wasn’t so depleted she’d have reinforced the barrier.

Arianna counted the five steps he took to separate them. She studied the shadows, scented the air, and inclined her ears for anything that might endanger him. But the fear she’d scented in Rion before had vanished entirely, replaced by a calm sureness.

The only thing Rion feared in the dark, mountainside forest was her.

They stood in silence for a long while and Arianna willed her heart to slow. *Calm*, she told herself. *Just stay calm*. Rion wouldn’t let anything hurt her and after seeing his reaction to Eoghan, she didn’t believe he’d abandon her either. Right?

They all vanish. Could this be where the missing slaves ended up? Left to fend for themselves against the mountain’s monstrosities? No, she assured herself, recalling Rion’s fear when he’d thought her injured. It wouldn’t make sense and he hadn’t been lying when he’d promised to protect her.

The sun’s morning rays were just beginning to turn the night sky gray when something moved in the shadows. Something big.

A black figure growled in the darkness and her heart sank when it stood to its full height. She could have stood on Rion’s shoulders and still not

reached its chest.

Impossibly long, clawed fingers stretched from its arms and burning eyes, like a pair of blue flames, blinked at the male standing before it.

She tried to swallow, but her throat had gone dry and the fear she'd thought to have conquered came flooding back tenfold. Arianna stepped back and met Rion's wall of earth. The same wall that'd been cocooned around her the whole time.

It didn't offer the same level of comfort now. They needed to run. This monster was going to devour them both and then her sister. Talon. Her people—

“Shh, it's all right,” Rion whispered in the dark. “I promise.”

Her ragged breath clouded in the dim light and the cool air burned her lungs. *I promise. I promise. I promise.* He'd already proven he was willing to die for her.

When I return...

Despite the fear and how her voice trembled, Arianna said, “I trust you.”

He didn't turn, but she noted the drop in tension from his shoulders. The way he seemed to take a breath despite the giant stalking toward him.

Slowly, she noted.

“It's been a while, old friend.”

The creature growled in response then huffed as if it were smelling the air. It took another step, cracking fallen trees beneath its weight. Arianna's heart raced even faster. She could smell it now, a scent like musty cypress and thick moss.

Rion extended his hand and the creature lifted one arm in response. She sucked in a breath, the world seeming to stop on itself as that long claw reached toward his extended palm.

And the two touched.

It didn't tear Rion's arm off, it didn't try to devour him whole, and it certainly didn't appear as if it possessed any ability to rip the soul from a body.

Rion spoke without turning. "The Dark Fae aren't so different from the Fairy Folk. They've simply been forced to defend themselves from a society plagued by fear."

The sun's rays peeked over the trees, giving Arianna a better view of the massive creature. It resembled a tree with glowing eyes and a mouth large enough to swallow her whole. And those claws, they were more like branches in the light, but still sharp enough to pierce their bodies clean through if it wished.

But the creature didn't threaten them. It simply stared, first at Rion then at her.

Rion reached back then, holding out his hand for her. Arianna glanced at it, swallowed, and took a tentative step forward.

Both the creature and Rion remained still.

She placed a hand on the edge of her protective cocoon, and it melted, leaving her exposed. The Dark Fae tilted its massive head and she paused, waiting for it to still again before continuing. Rion's hand felt so far away, but when she grazed it with her fingertips, Arianna allowed him to pull her to his front.

How many times had she been told horror stories about the Fae of this forest? How many times had the adults in her village held their children tighter because of the fear that one day, these creatures would leave their dark mountain and take over the land?

She leaned into Rion for reassurance, his one hand still holding hers. The creature moaned, the sound akin to a dozen trees swaying with the wind,

and Arianna shrank back into Rion's body.

It blinked, examining her, then extended that long, pointed talon in her direction. Just like with Rion, it paused, seeming to wait for her to close the distance.

Rion was here, she reminded herself. Right here beside her and though all-consuming fear radiated through her body, Arianna raised a shaking hand. She moved slowly, not quite believing her own actions until they connected.

She'd expected something cold, like death itself, but warmth flooded through her palm along with something else. A feeling of life and divinity, just like with the Fairy Folk.

"Can you understand them?" she asked.

"Not any more than the Fairy Folk."

Swallowing her fear, Arianna stepped forward and raised her other hand to touch the creature. It gave a satisfied moan and brought its face closer to hers.

Its eyes still burned, and its mouth was sharp and jagged, perfect for tearing through flesh, but she didn't smell the blood and rot that might accompany a predator. She smelled the forest, deep, rich, and alive.

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "It's nice to meet you too."

Arianna stepped back when the creature rose to its full height. It stared at them a moment longer then turned, disappearing into the forest with crushing steps.

The sun illuminated the area enough for her to witness the exhilaration on Rion's face and the Fairy Folk that played at their feet.

"They're not afraid of the Dark Fae?"

"They're kindred spirits. It's how I knew they weren't what others claimed them to be."

“Dare I ask what prompted you to come here in the first place?”

Rion stared after the creature’s retreating form. “Maybe I hoped the monsters would welcome one of their own.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Talon

Talon soared high in the clouds, circling the village below. To any onlooker, he'd appear as another bird, riding the winds, hunting for its next meal.

Little did Brónach know, they were about to lose everything. After months of searching, he'd finally found their supply wagons. Without those supplies, it would force the warriors from their enemy nation to fall back, thus allowing Talon to reclaim the northern part of Móirín's territory.

He growled at the sight of so many slaves.

Levea, their capital city, already housed too many refugees, but Arianna had seen to their care, arranging housing, food, and supplies. He'd seen the way Avalon watched his daughter, a rare moment of approval from him as he likely imagined his lost mate. Despite how hard his High Lord had been on his daughters over the years, Talon knew he loved them fiercely.

Talon swooped lower, counting the warriors that would stand in their way. Part of him hoped to find The Demon again but rumor had it he'd left the camp days ago. It was disappointing, but without The Demon, the raid would prove easy enough.

Catching an updraft, Talon rose higher, circling far from the village before swooping toward the ground. Right before impact, he shifted back to his Fae form and sprinted toward his comrades.

"News?" one asked. His second in command.

"They've hidden the supplies in multiple buildings. We'll have to burn the village. However, their numbers aren't anything to worry about. Most seem to have left with The Demon."

“You’re sure he’s gone?”

“I’m certain.”

His second breathed a sigh of relief and Talon echoed the feeling. Though he wanted nothing more than to clash with that monster again, he knew this job took precedence. And once he finished here, Talon would be free to return to his other goal. Locating Arianna.

Talon summoned his warriors and went over the plan again. They’d wait for nightfall, catch the guards unawares, and set fire to each and every house. After checking them, of course. Brónach was known for keeping slaves, and he didn’t relish in the thought of burning innocents.

Still alive, he reminded himself. Ever since the Fairy Folk had gifted him a strand of her hair, he’d clung to that hope. That no matter how bad things seemed, Arianna was still alive.

TALON TIGHTENED his belt, drew his sword and his warriors followed him into the night. Some stalked in their animal forms, keeping low to the ground as they awaited his command.

His knife flew into the nearest sentinel’s shoulder and Talon’s second silenced two others. Talon lifted his hand, and the rest of his forces broke from the trees. A cry of warning sounded, then smoke filled the air.

He’d expected a trap. For Brónach’s warriors to be hiding in some underground bunker. The Demon was well known for his strategic surprises. Yet, there was nothing.

Talon made his way to a nearby house, The Demon’s faint scent catching on the breeze, then Talon’s entire body seized up.

He ran for the dwelling and slammed the door open. A tiny bed rested

in one corner, The Demon's scent all over it. But it was the scent that lingered with his that had every hair on Talon's body standing on end.

Arianna.

This Demon. This cursed, vile, inhuman creature smelled like Arianna. Which only meant one thing.

If he found Móirín's greatest enemy, he'd finally find her.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Arianna

The snow thickened and their pace slowed the further they ventured into the forest. Thin rays of light peeked through the trees overhead, sneaking past the pine needles and evergreen boughs. In her half-breed body, the steep climb might have had her panting by now, but her Fae form didn't falter even after the limits she'd pushed it to.

She took in the sights and scents, letting everything wash over her in a new light. A place once thought to be a nightmare had turned into something magical. The Fairy Folk followed them, flying through the trees and running across the ground.

The Dark Fae did too.

Lies? Or Misunderstanding? How did an entire race come to believe them evil if it wasn't true? Who had written books about them and their atrocities if there weren't accurate accounts to draw from? Was it fear? Or purposefully placed deception?

Rion paused and Arianna stood at his side, gazing upon a small cabin hidden within the ageless trees. It was larger than the one she'd occupied with Rion at his camp, but a crack along the front, right corner told her it hadn't been maintained. Shingles were missing, as though some creature had sought refuge inside and whatever had once surrounded the cabin had fallen into ruin.

Rion grimaced. "Sorry about the mess. I haven't been here in a while." He gripped the brass handle and its hinges creaked with misuse. Arianna followed him inside, but recoiled from the stale scent.

Rion headed for the fireplace, leaving her to take everything in. A

large bed stood against the left-hand wall, with furs of all shapes and sizes piled on top. Along with a layer of dust. A table sat against the opposite wall with a vase full of dry, dead flowers. Old sheets of paper were stacked beside it. Curious, she walked over to examine them and flipped through sketch after detailed sketch of various creatures.

“You draw?” She asked, continuing to flip through the thin sheets. They were so detailed, down to the finest grain of skin texture, and some had eyes so alive they seemed to stare back at her from the pages.

Rion blew an ember to life, then pointed toward the mantle. “They’re outlines. For those.”

She turned and took several steps closer, ensuring she gave Rion enough space so she wouldn’t startle him. Lined all along the mantle, the dresser, and even shelves along the walls were dozens upon dozens of carved figurines, some in such likeness to the Fairy Folk, they could have been mistaken for the real thing.

Arianna studied each one, taking in the intricate details, then her eyes floated to the cabin walls. Swirls started at one corner and branched out, snaking their way down the boards like vines. They intertwined with one another in multiple layers, with leaves as detailed as the figurines.

“Did you build all this?”

Rion stood and followed her gaze. “At one point in my life, I needed a place to get away. This seemed fitting.”

Arianna ran her hands along the wooden planks, tracing the carvings. “How long ago?”

“Seventy years, give or take.”

He’d build this for himself. This was where Rion had run to seek solitude. A place he felt safe. And he was willing to share it with her.

Arianna placed her hands on her hips. “How about we clean it up?”

“Yeah?”

She smiled at the surprise on his face. “It won’t take long.” She strode toward the window and eyed the crank. “It needs some fresh air, anyway.” She struggled with the window and Rion dealt with the other one. Outside was cold, and all she wanted to do was curl up next to the fire, but Rion was talking. Actually talking and she wanted to keep that going as long as possible.

Arianna picked up the bundle of furs from the bed and took them outside. She shook out layers of dust and left them on a branch. They likely needed a lot more care, but she didn’t want to be away from Rion. Not when they were finally alone.

She grabbed a broom and stared in the corner. Though the outside structure had a crack through it, the fissure hadn’t stretched to the inside yet. She imagined Rion pulling boards out and replacing them, carving those intricate designs while a fire roared in the hearth. She imagined him sleeping soundly in the bed, his fears soothed by the fact that no one dared to walk the mountain path.

“Tell me about your family,” she said to break the silence.

He stopped collecting papers. “There aren’t many pleasant memories.”

“Not one?” *Just talk to me.*

Rion began shuffling again and just when she thought he wouldn’t respond he said, “My sister and I were close once.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older, by about thirty years.”

“What’s she like?”

“Impossibly stubborn with more pride than most males carry.” He ducked his head. “She’s the strongest and most resilient person I know.”

Arianna dumped a pan full of dust out the open door. “Sounds like you admire her.”

“I do.”

She tilted her head. “Do you guys... not talk anymore?”

He released a long breath. “She tries, but as you can probably imagine, any association with me dampens a person’s reputation.”

“Shouldn’t that be her decision?” If his sister wanted a relationship, then he wouldn’t have to be alone.

“It’s difficult in our situation.” Arianna set the broom against the nearest wall. “The people in our country look up to her. If she’s caught spending too much time around me, she’ll lose their trust.”

Rion’s gaze met hers then, another thought seeming to cross his mind. She was The Divine and slowly, but surely, Arianna was taking up that title. When the Fae of Alastróna called for her, they’d escort her to the royal city, where she’d learn about the histories of each country and rule over them as their central monarch.

“There’s a tub inside if you want to clean up. I can finish the rest.”

“An actual tub?”

He gave her a sheepish smile. “Close enough.”

Arianna hesitated before walking into the bathroom. A sister who cared for him. She wondered what had happened in his past. What events led to his isolation. When had a child decided enough was enough?

A small, wooden basin sat in the corner with a wide window before it that would have provided plenty of light during the day. But the sun had already set behind the trees, so Arianna lit a candle and used her magic to fill the basin. She heated the water, peeled away her clothes, and sank into the warm liquid.

Dust covered the soaps in the corner and Arianna pulled them down

one at a time to examine the contents. Had he made those too?

Their scents had faded, but Arianna hardly gave it a passing thought as she soaked, relishing in the heat against her skin. She'd spent weeks using a rag and bowl and over a year before that rushing through baths in freezing rivers. The first thing she was going to do when she returned home was take a long, hot bath with every scent of soap imaginable.

Arianna's heart skipped. Home, what would that mean to her after tonight? She blushed, realizing she still didn't know the exact reasons Rion had brought her here. Maybe it was just to share old memories, or maybe it'd lead to something more.

She dipped her head beneath the water and though she would have liked to stay submerged all night, Arianna was too curious. She dried herself, pulled on fresh clothes, and reheated the tub for Rion's use before exiting.

Rion had wiped down the table, remade the bed, and she no longer made footprints on the floor with her bare feet. With the doors and windows closed, the fire was starting to heat the cabin as well.

"I warmed the water for you."

Rion stood, stared at her as if he wanted to say something, then disappeared into the bathroom. A heated blush rose to her cheeks as she tried to discern his thoughts.

They were alone now, completely, no one to barge in, no meetings to be had, no attempts on their life.

Arianna tried to clear her thoughts by examining his figurines, wondering if the scarier ones were all Dark Fae or demons he'd conjured from his own imagination. She couldn't begin to fathom the nightmares in his head, the agony and torment he'd gone through to create such beings.

She remained before the hearth, soaking in the heat from the flames until the door to the washroom opened again.

Arianna didn't turn.

The air charged in the small space like an electric current and a moment later, the warmth from his body pressed into her back. He brushed the hair away from her shoulder, just as he'd done at the other cabin, and ran his nose along her neck.

Arianna tilted into the movement and his breath hitched. Then she scented something on him she'd only scented a few times before.

"Are you afraid?" She kept her voice soft.

"No." His hot breath tickled the back of her neck, sending pleasant shivers down her spine, then he whispered, "I'm terrified."

A jolt went through her at his admission, but she didn't turn. "Why?" She wanted to break down that wall gently, brick by brick if she had to.

"Because you can hurt me in ways I've never been hurt. Without lifting a finger, you could shatter me completely."

Arianna turned to him then, slowly, and saw the pain he no longer tried to mask. Decades of pain in those beautiful, emerald eyes. Grief and sadness from a life lived in solitude.

"I won't."

"I brought you here in case you do." She furrowed her brow. "The Dark Fae won't hurt you and the mountains will lead you home." He swallowed. "No one would ever find me."

Her lips parted but Rion pressed his forehead to hers. "Before you make any decisions, I need you to know that I'd give you anything, Arianna. No questions asked. If you want to go home, I'll take you. If you want me to leave, I'll go." He took a shuddering breath. "If you want my life, it's yours."

"I want you to stay."

His body trembled, but Rion's hand laced through her hair, and he kissed her, breathless and unsure. His heart beat so wildly she thought it

might stop.

“I just want to keep pretending this is real,” he whispered.

Arianna pulled back to meet his gaze. She wasn't sure what she could do, where his limits were. When she raised her hand, his nostrils flared, and his heart rate accelerated. She bit back the tears threatening to choke her and used one finger to tenderly brush a strand of damp hair from his face.

He stilled. Frozen in time as she trailed that same finger down his cheek. Rion leaned into her palm, and she moved her thumb back and forth, trying to work the tension from his jaw.

“I will never hurt you,” she said.

Rion took her fingers lightly, pulled them away from his face, and placed a needful kiss to the inside of her wrist. “Just make it quick if you do.”

His eyes never left hers as he put her hand back against his cheek. His breath quickened again, that heart beating, beating, beating. Rion trailed her hand down his throat, over his chest, and stopped directly above his racing heart.

This was it, she realized. This was him risking everything. Because with her magic, she could end him right here. A simple shift and she could pull the liquid from that wildly beating heart and then the monster, The Demon of Alastróna, would be gone.

Arianna pulled at her magic and let it flow down her arm, into her fingertips, and over his skin. Rion sucked in a breath as if bracing himself, but he didn't move, like a moth caught in a beautiful flame.

His chest heated beneath her palm and Arianna's voice cracked. “More than anything, I wish I could heal the scars you carry in here.” He stared at her, his lips parting and eyes misting over, but before he could speak Arianna lifted her other hand and ran it through his thick auburn hair.

Rion's body melted against hers. As if it was meant to. He trailed

kisses along her jaw and back to her neck where his teeth lightly grazed her skin, right over the spot where another male had torn through flesh.

But Rion was gentle, the creature everyone feared treated her as though she were a delicate flower in early spring.

Rion's hands moved down her back and beneath her shirt. He ran strong, calloused fingers up her spine, tracing each vertebra with a soft touch. Then he reached her scars and his entire body went rigid. His fingertips wandered down the first that stretched the length of her shoulder blade. A reminder not to drop her master's cargo. He moved toward the second just below it. A small lashing when she'd tried to drink water without permission. Then over the third, which was the worst of them that ran vertical down her left side. She'd gotten that one by defending a young female. Along with the two on her lower back. The pain she'd suffered after that beating was torture she wouldn't soon forget.

She could hear Rion's ragged breath. Feel the tension in his body. Arianna wasn't sure what was going through his mind, but she didn't want this to stop.

Arianna pulled back and his gaze searched hers, but for what she didn't know. Did he feel guilty? Angry? She glanced at his abdomen, at the long jagged scar. Arianna ran her fingers down it and his stomach flexed in response.

But it was the other scars she was interested in now. The four above it. There was a story there. Pain. She touched one, but Rion remained still.

"Scars remind us of the battles we've survived," she said without looking at him.

He loosed a breath showering her in his scent. "Some battles are better forgotten."

Her hand moved around his back, right over the two scars on the

lower half. Who'd done such a thing? And were one of his scars the reason he'd sought solitude?

She kissed him, slow and deep and he returned her fervor, stepping toward the bed, guiding her, his tongue dancing with her own, devouring her as if he'd never get to do so again.

Her mind whirled. She'd never get enough of this. Never get enough of him.

Her knees bumped into the wooden frame, and he wrapped one arm around her body, lowering her into the furs. She ran her fingers through his damp hair, tugging lightly as his mouth continued to explore her own.

Hers. He was hers and only hers. Forever.

Rion laid his body on top of her own and she relished in the warmth. His hands dug into her hair, caressed her face. Rion ran his fingertips around the hem of her shirt and paused. He pulled away and met her gaze, seeking permission. Arianna nodded but blushed furiously when his eyes roamed over her half-naked form.

Arianna tried to cover herself, but Rion stopped her with a light touch and pressed a kiss to the corner of her jaw. "You're beautiful." His kisses trailed lower. "Absolutely beautiful."

He explored her with his lips, tongue, and teeth and Arianna became lost in the sensations. More. She needed more.

"Arianna." His voice was husky, deep, but she caught him in another kiss before he could speak. Rion whispered kisses down her neck, pausing at her ear. "What do you want?"

She caught herself then, reality dragging her away from the dream-like state she'd allowed herself to drown in.

His body. His beautiful, powerful body was on top of hers, but despite his apparent desire, Rion pulled back and pushed the hair from her face.

Uncertainty lingered in his gaze and Eoghan's words came back to her then. About a mate. About his curse. About a male the world had deemed unfit to love.

And yet here they were, alone, away from civilization and the monster was denying himself for her sake.

Arianna didn't know what her future would hold. She didn't know how hard it would be to keep Rion in her life, but she knew one thing with utmost certainty. No matter what challenges they'd have to face, she wanted this male at her side.

"I want you."

His tongue slid over the pulse in her throat. "I need you to be more specific." He kissed her again. "I don't want you to regret this." His hand slid down her abdomen and around her back, pulling her body tighter against him.

"I want you," she repeated. "I want everything."

He paused. "Have you ever—"

"No," she breathed. "You?"

A breathless laugh. "No."

She tilted her head to look at him. The firelight glinted from wary eyes. "Really?"

"You think I've ever let anyone this close?" He kissed her again. "You're the only one, Arianna. And I don't want you to resent me. I don't want—"

"I won't." He nipped the tender skin in the hollow of her neck, and she found herself hoping he'd sink his fangs into her skin to claim her completely. He paused when she spoke again. "I don't want to look back and regret never knowing what it felt like to love you. So yes, Rion. I want this. I want you."

A satisfied, male growl vibrated through his chest and though their

lower clothes remained, he positioned himself over her, pressing into her body in ways that had her magic flaring.

His magic moved against her skin, soft and delicate, like his touch, and only after worshiping her upper body again, did Rion reach to remove the rest. He pulled the furs up to cover them, meeting her gaze for a final yes.

They sat bare before one another, their bodies close, both ready, willing, and wanting.

“I didn’t bring you here for this,” he said, voice trembling. “I don’t want you to think—”

“I know.”

“You’ll tell me.” He kissed her. “If you want to stop?” She nodded, her entire body quivering with desire and fear. His brow furrowed. “Say it again.”

Arianna let out a shattering breath. “I want this.”

He moved her legs, wrapped his arms around her back, and pulled her close. Rion took his time, kissed away her tears, paused when she hissed in pain, always checking it was what she wanted.

And it was. She lost herself in his eyes, in every movement of their bodies until she could think of nothing else. All she’d ever wanted was to be loved and accepted by another. But becoming one with that person—she was whole. Safe. Home.

Breathless and reeling, the pair basked in the aftermath. His magic still danced along her body, cascading over her skin in slow, even strokes. Rion kissed her cheek, then buried his face in her neck and squeezed her body tight.

“Rion?”

His body shuddered and a strangled sob escaped his lips. Arianna heart fractured and she held him close. She ran her fingers through his hair,

imagining all the pain he'd suffered. All the loneliness he'd endured for so many years. And she cried with him.

Cried and held him.

His body shook, over and over, as if it were shedding years upon years of pain and suffering.

When the fire had shifted to embers and the crickets sang. When the stars came out to play and all thoughts of daylight vanished, Rion stilled. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath and calm himself. He rested his head on her chest, refusing to look at her. Arianna stroked his hair, slow and methodical.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

Her hand stilled. “For what?”

“For loving me. For allowing me what you did.”

Her heart clenched. Arianna shifted and Rion sat up, his eyes red-rimmed and flushed cheeks stained with tears. It had her heart aching all over again, but she cracked a teasing smile anyway. “I'd allow it again.”

Rion's lips were over hers a second later. He tasted of salt and pain, but she devoured it all. And in that moment, Arianna made a vow. She swore she'd never let Rion feel alone again. Not so long as she lived.

Because he was hers to protect now and she was his.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Arianna

She didn't remember falling asleep, but Arianna woke with Rion's body entangled in her own, clutching her as if she might fade away. She angled her head to look at him and lifted her free hand to brush a dark red lock from his face.

Rion's heart jolted, and his eyes flew open. His arms jerked from beneath her and grains of sand and earth shot from all corners of the room. The vase tipped, shattering to the floor, and he clambered from the bed, stumbling in the furs he'd wrapped around their bodies only hours before.

Wide, frightened eyes took in the cabin, her body with his magic pinning her in place, and his chest heaved with breath after breath until realization dawned on his anguished face. Rion shook, and he covered his face with one hand, struggling to collect himself. "I'm sorry."

The earth fell away from her body, and Arianna reached her hand out afraid he'd run if she didn't. His magic hadn't hurt her. Not in the slightest. "It's okay."

Rion took another shaky breath and sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. Slowly, Arianna scooted closer. She rested her fingertips on his shoulder, and he stiffened. Then she placed a kiss there and rested her head against his back. After a moment, Rion laid his hand on top of hers.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She kissed his back again and noted the shiver that went through him. "Perfectly fine."

He turned to her, eyes full of anguish and regret. "I didn't mean—" Arianna silenced him with a kiss. He lightly cupped her cheek, and she pulled

him back onto the mattress.

Arianna gave him a slight smile, willing the worry from his gaze. “Our demons don’t disappear overnight.”

“I could have hurt you.”

“You didn’t,” she assured. “I promise.”

“But I could have, I—”

“Rion.” He looked at her then. “I’m here. Everything is okay and I’m here.” He loosed another breath and kissed her desperately, his hands tracing her face and neck, searching for any marks.

He paused at her hand. “I’ve hurt you before.” His brows furrowed. “Gods, Arianna, how many times did I hurt you?”

They were silent, both remembering those frightening first days. When he’d knocked the bowl from her hand. When his magic had dug into her skin.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.”

He made to pull away, but Arianna held him. “You’re right. Maybe it’s not.” He didn’t look at her. “But I forgive you.”

Rion sighed and laid his head against her chest.

His heart calmed and Arianna ran her hands through his hair, willing the remnants of his nightmare to fade. She let her mind drift to their encounter last night, or should she say encounters? After Rion regained his composure, he’d devoured her, worshiping her body in ways she didn’t know existed. It was a learning experience for them both.

Arianna breathed in their scents. They’d changed, blending with one another to let others know the claim they held. She hummed in contentment and Rion lifted his head to look at her.

“You’re not real.” Her brow creased. “You’re an ethereal dream come

to torment me, granting every wish only to strip them away when I'm content. You're the beautiful wave before it crashes over the shore, dragging everything out to an icy sea." His voice lowered. "You're my salvation and my damnation."

"I'm real." She brought her lips to his. "And I'm not here to torment you." Arianna pushed him down on the bed. "I'm going to crash over your nightmares, not your dreams." She kissed him again. "And I'll be whatever you need me to be."

"Arianna." Her name was like a prayer on his lips. She kissed him again and again and again. Until his body shook from pleasure instead of pain. Until the darkness of his subconscious faded, and they were the only two beings who existed.

WHEN THE afternoon sun flooded through the windows, Rion left the warmth of the furs, pulled on his pants, and tended to the fire. He then proceeded to their packs and pulled out jerky, taking a piece for himself before handing her the bag.

Rion settled across from her and crossed his legs on the bed. He was so difficult to read. His thoughts a complete mystery.

Arianna cleared her throat. "How long are we staying here?"

"As long as you want. Forever." He glanced at her and though she'd love nothing more than to disappear from the world with Rion at her side, she couldn't abandon her loved ones.

"My little sister wouldn't appreciate that very much."

Rion took another bite from his jerky before replying. "Tell me about her."

“She’s a feral little thing. Stubborn, and knows herself better than most a century old. She can hold her own in a fight, loves chocolate more than life, and is always going against our father’s wishes. She’s in love with a half-breed, though only myself and Talon know how serious they’ve become.” Rion stiffened at the name. Arianna reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “He kissed me once. That’s all, then sent me in a canoe upriver. I probably wouldn’t be here if not for him.”

“Do you love him?”

Arianna tilted her head, scenting his jealousy. “He loved me, likely still does. I grew up with him, so love is a given, but it’s not the same love I feel for you.” His lips parted and a shy smile spread across Arianna’s lips. “I love you, Rion.”

He leapt on her, tears falling from his face once more and they lost themselves in one another’s embrace again.

ARIANNA’S STOMACH grumbled as she lay there rubbing lazy circles on the back of Rion’s hand. She couldn’t believe how sore her body felt, but she wasn’t about to deny Rion either. She probably couldn’t even if she wanted to. Sore or not, her body wouldn’t allow it.

“We need to hunt,” he said. When he pulled away from her this time, Rion put his regular pants and shirt on.

“Can I come with?”

He smirked. “I wasn’t very well going to leave you behind. Have you hunted before?”

“Not really.” Food had always been plentiful in Móirín.

“I cheat a bit. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I didn’t think you were one for rules, anyway.”

She dressed and though Rion gave her an appreciative glance, their growling stomachs kept them from indulging themselves further.

She followed him out into the cold. Her breath clouded in the air, but Rion only took a few steps from the cabin door before he knelt and closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?” She knelt beside him, keeping her voice low.

“Feeling for vibrations.”

“You can tell what’s walking through the forest by that alone?”

He chuckled. “Glad to know you have so much faith in my abilities, but no, not always. The weight of their gait tells me how large the creature is, how fast they move gives me another idea, but I never kill anything until I see what I’ve caught. The Dark Fae don’t appreciate being held against their will, but they’re usually quick to forgive if I capture them by mistake.”

They sat like that until Arianna’s knees went numb, then Rion finally stood. She followed him through the snow, vowing to bring thicker shoes the next time they visited this place.

Perhaps they could make an occasion of it. She could learn more about the Dark Fae and she’d definitely be asking questions when she returned home.

“You told me about your sister last night. What about the rest of your family?”

Rion didn’t look back at her. “My brother hates me as much as the rest of our country and my father died a long time ago.” He hesitated before continuing. “My mother disappeared when I was a child. No one knows exactly what happened, but as you can imagine, I get the blame.”

Arianna chewed the inside of her lip. “I lost my mother when I was young too.”

Rion stopped walking. “Your mother...was very kind.”

“You knew her?” Arianna gaped at him.

“I,” he paused. He turned back so she could see his face, but Rion refused to meet her gaze. His jaw feathered and tension returned to his shoulders. “I used to meet her at the border. We never spoke, but I saw the way she cared for the slaves.”

Arianna furrowed her brow. “You used to meet her at the border? Were you and my mother—”

“Gods no. I mean.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve never agreed with Brónach’s treatment of half-breeds and humans. Who am I to judge someone according to how they were born?”

“So when the slaves spoke of others vanishing.”

“I took them to the border whenever I could. I did it a lot in my twenties but eventually, my brother gave orders to keep the slaves away from me. He thought I was killing them of course. Your mother caught on to where the slaves were coming from and met me at the border line one evening. She tried to speak to me, but I took off. Thereafter, she was always waiting.”

Arianna smiled. “You were the male in black. She said you were a mystery but that she didn’t pry because it wasn’t her place.”

Rion gave her a rare smile. “She seemed kind. I think you get that from her.”

Arianna cleared her throat, fighting back tears and changed the subject. “You said the Dark Fae wouldn’t hurt me. Is that just because I’m The Divine?”

Rion held a branch for her to pass under. “No, they generally don’t hurt anyone unless provoked. At least, not this far south.” She didn’t want to know what that meant.

“Where do all the stories come from then?”

“From fools who don’t understand this mountain.” She went quiet and Rion softened his voice. “Even without the Dark Fae, this mountain isn’t for the fainthearted. There are a multitude of predators, and the storms are brutal if you’re not prepared for them. The Dark Fae have pity on those who die here so they carry them to the forests’ edge. When they’re spotted doing so, they get the blame.”

“Just like you?”

Rion paused again. “Not everything they say about me is a lie. I’ve killed for no better reason than having a bad day. Sometimes just because I felt like it. I’m not a misunderstood saint.”

“I know.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“It does, but it’s in your past. We’ve all made mistakes.”

“What if mine are beyond forgiveness?”

“Do you want to be forgiven?”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. “I’ve never thought about it. I just—I want to be with you. I want to be a male you’re proud to have at your side. But I also don’t want to give false pretenses.”

“I knew who you were the first time you walked into that cabin. I didn’t run then. I’m not running now.”

RION HAD caught a stag using his magic. A beautiful, majestic creature that she would have rather seen run wild for the rest of its life. But they had to eat. Such was the natural order of things.

Arianna left him to it, opting to collect herbs from the forest floor as she followed their tracks back to the cabin. She didn’t want to hear the

creature die, nor watch him dress the animal.

Rion returned with a bloody knife and a considerable chunk of meat. She tried not to imagine other blood on his hands.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“I took our share and left most for the Dark Fae. Unlike the Fairy Folk, they’re not vegetarians. If I don’t share, they tend to sneak into my cabin while I’m gone and snatch my food.”

“How rude of them.”

He laughed, actually laughed. “If they closed the door afterward, I wouldn’t mind as much.”

Rion cut the meat and she boiled water. Arianna couldn’t help peering at him while he worked. His fingers moved with precision, cutting and separating everything into neat piles. Is this what it’d feel like to live with him? Would he always be talkative and relaxed around her? Or would he tense up the moment they entered the real world again?

“What are you thinking about?”

She didn’t realize she’d been staring. “The future.”

Rion carried a tray to her and set it on the table, watching her finish the rest. “Things won’t be easy. Nothing about my life has ever been easy, but I’m willing to do whatever you need. I’ll be whoever you need me to be.”

“I want you to be yourself.”

They ate, made love, and were back outside with plenty of daylight to spare. She’d claimed she wanted to search for herbs, but upon seeing the snow on the ground, Arianna got a better idea.

She packed a ball, slid behind a tree, and launched the icy mush at Rion’s back.

It landed and he whirled, magic flaring and eyes hard. Arianna laughed and scooped up more snow before launching another.

Rion caught it with his magic this time and the ball of ice exploded on impact.

She placed her hands on her hips. “What’s wrong, never had a snowball fight?” Even if the world had branded him a curse, he’d still been a child once.

A smile spread across his face. Rion dove for a handful and rolled behind a tree at the exact moment she did. He launched a ball her way, and she roared with laughter when he feigned and caught her off guard from another direction.

Arianna grabbed another handful of snow, running as fast as her legs would carry her. They circled the cabin, throwing balls of ice at one another, ducking behind trees, and leaping over logs, but no matter how hard she tried Rion proved an impossible target to hit.

Arianna crept behind another tree and pulled on her magic, forming a dozen balls at once. She scented the air, searching for him. He’d circled around, coming from her front instead of behind. Arianna smiled and lunged.

A ball hit her chest, but she simultaneously launched her attack from all sides. Rion raised his arms to block the freezing snow from colliding with his face. He huffed, shaking the snow from his clothes. “That was cheating.”

“You never said we had to play fair.”

Chunks of snow fell from his hair, his nose was red, breath heavy, and eyes alight. Arianna walked up to him and wiped the pout from his face with a chaste kiss.

Rion laced his fingers through her hair and led her back into the cabin. “We should talk.” Arianna’s heart started, but Rion placed a kiss on her forehead. “About when we go back.” Right, because she couldn’t stay in the camp forever. “We can leave from here and head straight to Móirín. I packed enough reserves for the trip.” Rion brushed the hair from her face. “I

should have taken you back a long time ago.”

“I—” Home. She was going to head back home. So why did it pull at her heart so much? Why did she feel like she was suffocating? “I want the slaves to come too.”

Rion nodded. “I think you’ve made enough friends that, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“And you.”

Rion pressed his forehead to hers. “Are you sure? I’m not welcome in my own country. I certainly won’t be welcomed in yours.”

“We’ll figure it out. I’ll talk to my father and explain everything.”

“Your father,” he whispered. “Arianna, there’s something you should know. I—”

A roar echoed from outside and Rion threw open the door, his magic spiraling around them both. He stood to her front, placing himself between her and whatever danger stampeded toward them. The ground shook and the monstrous Dark Fae she’d interacted with the other night came barreling through the trees. Its long strides carried it fast, but it was the normal-looking Fae in his grasp, screaming at the top of his lungs, that had her undivided attention.

She stepped back when the creature drew near. The beast halted, flinging snow everywhere and all but threw the Fae male at Rion’s feet. It roared again and Arianna covered her ears. Rion remained still.

The male curled in on himself, trying to shield his face from the terrifying Dark Fae, but he must have caught her scent. Eoghan’s eyes shot toward her. His chest heaved and he crawled a few feet away from the beast. Relief and fear warred in his gaze as he looked from her to Rion, and back to the creature now standing in silence.

He opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. “Móirín attacked

the northern village.”

Rion’s back straightened. “Which one?”

“The one with our supplies. They were ambushed.” Eoghan’s pleading gaze turned to her then. “They’re dying. Our people are dying, and we can’t help them.”

Arianna’s heart skipped but she took a determined step forward. “Take me back.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Arianna

They flew, running through the trees at breakneck speed. Arianna leapt over logs and ducked under branches without so much as blinking, her Fae senses more than enough to keep her balanced and moving.

Rion had said nothing against her command and Eoghan had gladly jumped to his feet to lead the way. She didn't stop to ask why. Didn't pause to consider that Eoghan had just braved the mountain forest to find her. All she knew was Fae were dying, and he'd come to her for help.

Which could only mean the situation was bad. Really bad.

The trees thinned as they neared the edge of the woods and all three of them jumped over that invisible line that divided the mountain range from the normal world.

And not one of them stopped.

The warriors in Rion's camp had come to rely on her. A people she'd once considered her enemy, but no more. A queen didn't get to pick favorites. She'd save every single Fae that crossed her path, no matter how seemingly violent or foul.

The afternoon sun hung low in the sky before they arrived. Blood coated the air even from here, which had Rion picking up the pace to run slightly ahead.

He'd gladly put himself in the path of danger for her sake. Gladly risk his life if it meant keeping her in one piece. As would Eoghan.

She prepared herself for what she would face. Warriors fresh off the battlefield, broken and bloody. Screaming bodies with comrades fighting to keep their friends alive. And the fact that it was Móirín who'd put them there.

A shiver of dread pulsed through her. Did she need to worry about who led those troops? Had Talon finally caught up to her and if he had, what then? Would fate force her to stand between Talon and Rion?

Rion must have scented her apprehension because he grabbed her hand, spun her around, and scanned her face. She tried to pull away, but he rested both hands on her shoulders and forced her to meet his gaze. “Breathe.”

Arianna stared into that loving gaze and obeyed. She closed her eyes, using the scent of him to center herself. Rion had seen things like this a thousand times. She wasn’t sure what to expect, but she knew she could face anything with him by her side.

The trio entered the throng of tents and marched straight toward the infirmary corner. Shouting and screams turned deafening the closer they approached, and she sucked in a breath when they rounded a corner.

Crowds of Fae and half-breeds alike ran back and forth, hauling bloody bodies, stiff corpses, and screaming warriors. Most of them were laid in a row along the front of the tents.

Arianna’s eyes shot toward the nearest screaming male, and she ran to him, placing her hands on his bloodied leg. It’d been torn to shreds, likely from an explosion. Even with her magic, Arianna wasn’t sure she could save his limb. She worked anyway, piecing together the bits of flesh through his cries of pain.

And he wasn’t the only one. There were so many warriors she wouldn’t make it to in time, so many—

“It’s a trap,” Rion said. Her eyes tried to follow his but before she could ask questions, Rion roared. “Get down!”

Rion tackled her so hard he knocked the breath from her body. His magic flew up, cocooning them in solid earth as a mass of explosions

vibrated through her chest. Arianna clutched his shirt, gritting her teeth against the sound and tremors, fighting to keep her senses.

Rion's earth dispersed, and he yanked her up by the elbow. Her ears rang. Everything sounded distant, but Rion tugged her along, his magic dancing in all directions, deflecting raining shrapnel and deliberate attacks.

He spun her body behind him and knocked a male away with a flick of his wrist before grabbing her arm again. She couldn't look back to see who it was, her mind was still reeling, spinning.

Fire erupted on all sides and the smoke choked her lungs. Her eyes watered, but Rion didn't stop moving. He gripped her wrist tighter than any shackle had and zigzagged around the camp. She struggled to keep up, tripping over debris and bodies as they sprinted through the screaming chaos.

Arianna's gaze locked on a female momentarily, her hair aflame, skin scorched, and eyes distant. She looked like a walking wraith, something from the Dark Fae, perhaps. Arianna tried to go to her, but Rion spun her away.

"Don't stop," he pushed. "Not here."

Another explosion knocked them both from their feet and Rion wrapped his body around hers, using his magic to soften their fall. The force of the explosion reverberated through her chest, and she panted, trying to catch her breath as they lay on the ground. Rion was speaking, but she couldn't hear him.

War. She'd been so blind to the true chaos of it. She'd been sheltered, pampered really, compared to what she saw now. Fae collapsed in bloody heaps, their blades piercing one another's flesh. Smoke and blood coated the air so thick she thought she might drown in it. And the innocents, their crying, the screaming, the helplessness.

"Move." He gripped her waist hard, yanking Arianna to her feet. They were running again, leaping over obstacles, his magic still circling their

bodies. Protecting her.

Her mind cleared enough to summon her own, flinging particles of ice into the mix of his rocks and sand. If she couldn't help anyone else, she'd at least protect him.

A flash and Arianna planted her feet. Ice flew from her body without a second thought, rising above their heads in a thick wall. The explosion hit and she rocked back, but Rion held her firm. His magic pressed behind hers, solidifying when another explosion hit. Her ears were ringing again, but she'd regained her balance.

Arianna counted to two, Rion shattered her wall, and they were moving again, weaving in and out of clashing blades and battle cries.

Móirín.

She scented the misty tang of their magic. They were here, overtaking Rion's forces after years of fighting.

Móirín was here...

But what did that mean to her now?

They broke from the main part of the chaos in a blaze of swirling water and earth. Rion drew his sword and ripped his way through any who stood in their path. Arianna blocked objects flying at them both, protecting their bodies as best she could, and realized they weren't running into the battle, but rather, away from it.

Rion was trying to get her away from the ambush he hadn't seen coming. Was it because of her? Had she distracted him and made them all vulnerable?

A noise echoed nearby, and Arianna's Fae ears perked as she tried to locate the origin of the sound. The battle was fading, but Rion showed no signs of stopping and after listening, she understood why.

At least a dozen warriors were pursuing them, but with the wind's

direction, she couldn't scent what side they fought for. If it were Móirín, she might be able to convince them to stop, but if it were warriors from Brónach, they'd have another fight on their hands. Not that Rion couldn't handle a dozen on his own.

The noise continued, over and over, like a constant swish. Arianna kept searching for it. She calmed her racing heart and mind, eyes roaming until she finally locked onto its source.

Breathing.

Intensely labored breathing.

Arianna's gaze shot to Rion and then to the sweat pouring down his face. "Rion?"

"I'm fine, keep running."

She scanned his body. He most certainly wasn't fine. Not even close. This was a male she'd seen conquer dozens of warriors. A male who ran week-long expeditions with ease. He'd fought on the frontlines for a decade and yet—

Another step. Another ragged breath. Arianna glanced behind, trying to gauge how close their enemies were and how much time they had.

He was slowing. Slowing. Slowing. His face was pale and dark bags hung beneath his eyes.

Rion tripped and cursed, growling at his own body as if it were the enemy. But he rolled back to his feet and grabbed her hand again before launching back into a sprint.

Gods help them. She had to find a place to hide, anywhere so she could access his body and find the source of pain.

The pair of them broke from the trees and entered a familiar clearing. The river, she realized. Rion was trying to lead them to the river. She'd have the advantage there, and it'd give them an easy escape route.

She could smell the water, almost hear it flowing. Just a little further. She was already forming a plan. They could dive beneath the water's surface. She cou—

Rion hit his knees and screamed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Arianna

Arianna pivoted and caught Rion's falling form before he could hit the ground. Her elbow collided against the hard earth and lighting-like pain shot straight through her fingertips.

He panted, gripping his shirt so hard his knuckles turned white while Arianna frantically searched his body, trying to find—she gripped the knife in his thigh and yanked it out.

Arianna healed the minor wound, but he hardly seemed to notice. His iron grip didn't loosen from his chest as if the pain were coming from there. She tried to move his hands, searching for any sign of injury, but his skin was intact, and the rest of his body unmarred.

Voices neared and the sound of stomping feet had her heart beating faster. She looked out over the field, panic rising. There was no place to hide. Nothing she could do.

“Rion,” she murmured, running her hands through his hair. “Tell me what's wrong.”

“I. Can't. Breathe.”

Couldn't breathe? She scrambled for the blade, brought it to her nose, and recoiled, hurling the knife as far across the field as possible.

Poison. And it'd reacted fast, which meant she didn't have much time.

A mocking laugh echoed from the tree line, and Arianna growled as their pursuers emerged one by one.

“How does that serum feel, general?” He spat the last word with a mocking tone, and Rion turned a murderous glare toward the male. It took her a long moment to recognize him, then she placed his scent.

Rion gritted his teeth. "I should have killed you." The assassination attempt. They were the ones who'd escaped after Rion killed most of their comrades.

Rion rose onto his elbows, that intimidating, feral growl rumbling deep in his chest. He showed his teeth, summoned his magic, and a few of those stalking toward them paused. Fear leaked from the warriors, and they exchanged uneasy glances.

Then Rion's magic fell.

The male with the smirk on his face flipped a blade in one hand. "Too bad you didn't. Don't quite live up to your reputation, do you?"

Arianna glared at him. "Says the one who ran with his tail between his legs."

The male growled at her and Rion answered in kind, trying to push his body to a seated position. He didn't succeed.

"Stupid female. He'd be dead if not for you. I don't know what's more sickening. You helping this creature or your willingness to lie with it." He spat on the ground, then shifted his attention back to Rion. "I hope it hurts. I hope you feel every agonizing second as your organs shut down and you suffocate." He stepped forward. "And when you can't move, I'll make you watch as I do whatever I please with this female before tearing her apart."

Arianna stood, searing rage coursing through her body. She met the unflinching scrutiny of each warrior who stood before her wanting to kill the male she'd grown to love.

"Arianna." Her skin crawled with the way he said her name. She looked back and her heart ached at the fear in his gaze. At the longing for a life that might have been.

No, no he couldn't give up. Not yet.

Sweat rolled down his beautiful face and his soft hair hung over desperate eyes. She knew what he wanted.

“I can’t.”

“Please,” he begged. Please run. Live. But how could she after everything they’d been through? How could she just turn her back on him like everyone else?

Arianna growled, the sound reverberating in her chest. After all the pain this world had caused him. She clenched her fists. Damn the ancient texts, damn Alastríona, and damn this war. She’d live for nothing and no one except Rion.

“The poison will kill him no matter what you do. There’s no antidote.” The male picked at his nails as if bored. “So, run if you can, fight if you want. Either way, I’ll enjoy it.” He smiled, cruel and wicked. “And while you do, you can envision him weak, gasping for breath, suffering as a demon should.”

More warriors emerged from the trees, all lining up behind their new leader. She gaped at them as they drew their weapons, and their bloodlust sent a chill crawling across her skin. Two dozen at least. How was she supposed to fight so many? Her heart stuttered and hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Arianna clenched her fists and turned back to stare into those beautiful green eyes.

This could be it. This could be the last time she saw them open and pleading. Even if she won and killed every warrior standing in her way, she had no way of knowing whether her magic could save him or if she’d even get to it in time.

But she couldn’t leave him either.

Setting her jaw, Arianna dropped into a stance and yanked her magic from the air, surrounding herself and Rion in a thousand tiny droplets. The

setting sun reflected from their surface, but it'd fade soon, just like Rion if she didn't hurry.

The leader smiled and pulled another blade from his belt.

“Get. Out. Of. Here.” Rion's desperate, ragged voice struck her to the core.

Arianna didn't turn. “I won't abandon you.”

The warriors sprinted forward, and Arianna pivoted, yanking the fluid from their rising magic before they even neared. She spun the liquid around her body, solidifying it into sharp spears of ice before launching it back to her opponents.

Three fell, two grabbing at their pierced throats while another held his chest.

Their comrades growled but Arianna returned their aggression, refusing to submit to intimidation. Their lines gathered and the warriors fell upon her like a swarm to a hive. Arianna danced through her opponents, praying someone hadn't coated the blades in whatever foul concoction had incapacitated Rion.

Her heart seized. He was wheezing now, struggling to keep air moving in and out of his lungs. The more he fought, the faster the poison would spread, and she knew he'd never stop fighting, just like she'd never stop protecting him.

Arianna's hand grazed two warriors, and she robbed their body's water supply. She circled it around Rion, hovering her magic as an impenetrable defense then launched another arsenal of frozen blades to incapacitate her opponents. She didn't have time for mercy, it was them or Rion.

A blade slashed across her right arm, another cut her leg and though the younger version of herself might have succumbed to fear and doubt, the

new version, the version Rion had helped build, let her mind clear.

She wasn't a scared little girl anymore. She'd trained with Talon for years and survived sixteen months of enslavement. Arianna had battled warriors from Brónach and lived to tell the tale. She fought at The Demon's side. Struggle after struggle and she'd prevailed. Arianna would not falter now.

Consequence and excuse faded. She let her body move, reacting from muscle memory alone. Arianna stole one of the male's swords and slashed it across his comrade's torso, ducking to avoid another's swing. She let out a slow breath and danced to the left, driving her magic forward and backward in a wave that left her enemies scrambling.

Twist, pull, pivot. Keep moving. Keep breathing. Hold nothing back.

She became one with the water, a current of her own making even as a clock ticked in the back of her mind. A clock carrying the sound of Rion's every breath.

It slowed with each warrior that fell. Arianna moved faster. It slowed again. Faster. She could do this. She had to.

Hurry. Rion ceased growling at their enemies. He didn't pull at the magic in his veins or try to twist his head to follow her movements.

Tears slid down her face as that clock grew even slower. Weaker. She wasn't going to make it. No matter how hard she fought, no matter how bad she wanted it, she wasn't going—a knife plunged into her side. Then a fist slammed against her face. Arianna tried to catch her breath, but a foot collided with her chest, stealing the air from her lungs.

She fell right beside Rion and coiled in on herself.

“Arianna.” His voice was barely a whisper. She lifted her head and peered into those beautiful emerald eyes, studied the golden specks that no longer danced.

There were tears there, just like when they'd first made love. "Please," he begged. "Please. Don't make me watch you die."

Death. She'd never given much thought as to how it'd greet her. She thought she'd have endless years to watch her sister grow into a wise leader. She thought she'd have the chance to marry, raise children of her own and fade with the land when her time came.

But if death was going to reach out its gruesome hand, then she'd bring it a gift. Because if she couldn't save him, if she failed, then every last one of those responsible were coming with her.

Her magic flared, circling their bodies in a violent storm of sharpened ice and stinging snow. With a cry, Arianna scooted a foot beneath her body and yanked the knife from her side. She stared into Rion's dimming gaze, craving nothing more than to see a smile on his face once more. She choked on the tears.

If he died...if he died...

An earth-shattering roar filled her ears and Arianna threw her body over Rion's, cradling his head against her chest. Warriors broke from the tree line and those who'd been advancing on her found themselves at the end of a blade. One male sliced through her enemies in an elegant dance.

Her heart pounded, hope blossoming amidst the panic and despair.

Talon's honey-brown hair gleamed in the sunlight as he cut down warrior after warrior, twirling through them with a grace she'd always envied. His magic moved in unison with his body, water flowing from one limb to the next, striking and returning and striking again.

He'd found her.

Talon had finally found her.

"It's okay now," she whispered through grateful tears. "Everything is going to be okay." She rocked Rion and ran her fingers through his sweat-

soaked hair, his entire body tense. His eyes moved without seeing and his breathing—gods, she needed to do something about his breathing. She needed time, space, concentration.

She wasn't even sure her plan would work.

Talon felled the last of their enemy by ripping out his throat. He spit it on the ground then turned to her, blood dripping down his chin and gore splattered across his torso. Their eyes met and tears fell from her face as relief flooded his. He was here. Gods, Talon was really here.

Talon signaled for his comrades and barked orders that had them dispersing in various directions. He was at her side in seconds, lifting her face with his hands, gently brushing her tears away with his thumbs.

“Arianna.” Her name was a prayer on his lips, and she knew he was silently thanking whatever god had finally brought them together. He sat straighter, glanced toward the opposite tree line, and let a low growl rumble through his chest. “We have to go.”

Talon took her wrist, but Arianna turned toward Rion. He was too still, not even bothering to growl at the warriors who surrounded them. Did he know they were from Móirín or had the poison made him unaware? *Or worse...*

“He comes with us.”

Talon nodded but upon seeing Rion everything in her friend curled in on itself like a viper. The snarl that reverberated from his body echoed through her chest. He gripped his weapon tighter, and water surrounded his body, solidifying to sharpened ice.

Arianna responded in kind. She held Rion's head protectively, glaring at the confused male before her.

“Do you know who that is?”

“Yes.”

Talon's jaw ticked and his head whipped around again. She knew by the worry in his gaze that they were in danger. The battle still waged, Móirín and Brónach fighting as they'd done for a decade.

"What's wrong with him?" he growled.

"Poison."

She stiffened at his chuckle. "Serves him right."

The fiercest snarl to ever escape her lips had Talon backpedaling. She stood and the magic rose with her, increasing in tempo. It hit his skin, melting on contact. "I said he comes with us." She was running out of time. Rion wasn't responding and his heart, that slow, sloshing beat, was enough to make panic course through her anew. "Please."

Talon clenched his jaw, nodded, and let his magic fade. She gritted her teeth and draped one of Rion's arms around her shoulder. Talon took the other, glaring at Rion as if he were a parasite.

She didn't care, not so long as Talon helped her get him to safety. Wherever that was.

They ran, Talon's warriors forming a tight circle around the trio. Her legs throbbed and threatened to buckle beneath the added weight, but she had to keep going. He was still going. Rion was fighting. She'd fight too.

The group disappeared into the trees, running, running, running until she was sure her body would give out.

One of Talon's warriors veered to the left, and they followed. He pulled thick branches away from the side of a rocky hill, revealing the mouth of a dark den and they ducked inside. Talon assisted her with pulling Rion toward the back and they laid him on the cold ground then Talon backed away.

Arianna cupped Rion's head. His eyes slit long enough to look at her, but she couldn't be sure how much he understood.

Without looking at Talon, Arianna placed her hands over Rion's chest. She searched along the bloodstream, listening to Rion's ragged breath, and focused on his lungs first.

The world and its noise faded until Rion's pulse was the only thing echoing through her body. She furrowed her brow, focusing on the bloodstream and the tissues that had begun to decay.

Sludge. Thick, undiluted sludge. That's what the poison felt like. It coated everything in its path. Arianna quelled her rising panic and trapped one small particle at a time, forming them into a sphere so tiny, it'd slide through his sweat glands. She formed another. And another. Isolating. Holding.

A tear slid down her face. She swallowed and prayed to the gods that Rion wouldn't die from what she was about to do.

With another breath, Arianna pulled the poison from his blood, through his muscles, and out his skin. His body arched, writhing in agony and Rion's hoarse voice pierced her soul.

Chapter Thirty

Rion

Run, Arianna.

It was a mantra in his head. He'd started whispering it, over and over, praying she'd listen, but his lips had numbed and ceased moving. Then his eyes had gone hazy, and his hearing faded in and out.

He could hear the growls, hear her fighting, and when her body covered his, he was sure she'd fall still and silent. So sure, he was willing to die right there with her. But her hands had brushed through his hair, and she'd whispered while holding him in a protective embrace.

He couldn't make out the words, couldn't concentrate as his body fought against every command. Breath. Breath. Breath. Arianna might still be able to save him. It was clear she had no other plans and if she was protecting him, then maybe she stood a chance.

But he still wished she'd run.

Moments later a snarl ripped from her throat so loud and fierce he'd snapped to, but only for a moment.

A male.

From Móirín.

She was safe then. Protected.

But two sets of arms lifted him from the ground, and Rion knew he had one more task to complete. To stay alive long enough for her to try. Because if she didn't, she'd never forgive herself and Rion wouldn't let her suffer that torment.

So, though it felt as if a thousand shards of glass ran through his lungs, though his body longed to give up and rest, Rion forced air into his

chest over and over again.

Seemingly only moments later, her magic seeped into him, warm and welcoming. Soon, he promised his body. Soon, the pain would recede. Arianna would do it, Arianna would—pain lanced through his core like a hot iron and he couldn't hold it in. Rion screamed, thrashing against the agony that felt like a demon ripping the soul from his body.

When it subsided, he drew in a trembling breath, but his body felt brittle and broken. Seconds later, it filled, sweeping that unbearable ache away as if it never existed.

Then it happened all over again. And again. It tore through him in an endless cycle. Pain. Relief. Pain. Relief. Pain. Tears ran down his face and he fought, desperate to escape. He pleaded, thrashed, but it just kept coming.

And Rion realized this was hell.

He'd failed Arianna and somehow slipped into the world beyond.

And this time, there was no escape.

Chapter Thirty-One

Arianna

Rion's body arched off the floor again. His voice echoed through the small den and that painful cry was enough to rend her heart in two. Tears streamed down Arianna's face, but she couldn't stop. Not if she wanted him to live. So, she kept pulling the poison out, a portion of liquid with it, and replaced the lost fluid with fresh water. *Forgive me.*

She could have sworn Talon smirked at Rion's plight, but that smirk vanished, and his lips parted as the slow realization of her actions came crashing over him.

"You're healing him."

She didn't answer, but Talon quickly ordered his warriors to stand guard outside.

She panted, her body almost spent. Sweat poured down her face, but Arianna collected particles of poison again and yanked it from his blood, letting the foul mixture splatter against the far wall.

Talon tapped his foot, glancing at the entrance. "If you keep doing that, someone is going to find us."

She growled and he stepped back, letting her work without further interruption. If he questioned her actions, he didn't voice it. At least not yet. Questions would come later when she had Rion stable and breathing on his own.

Arianna soothed his lungs, repairing the damage inflicted by the toxin. With each piece of tissue she healed something unraveled in her chest.

She kept at it. Pull, fill, pull, fill. Until there was nothing left, and she collapsed against the moss-covered wall with sweat stinging her eyes.

Arianna leaned her head back, listening to the sweet song of Rion's strong heart.

She pulled his head onto her lap and cracked one eye open to find Talon staring. His gaze traveled over the male the world loathed and lingered on the way her fingers brushed through his hair.

One of Talon's warriors poked his head through the curtain of brush. "It'd be best to wait here until nightfall."

Talon nodded. "We couldn't leave if we wanted to." His gaze shifted back to Arianna and the warrior's followed. She couldn't read his expression, but one look had him leaving the den without question.

Rion inhaled, the sound no longer a rasp in his chest.

Time crawled and crickets began chirping outside while she kept a careful eye on Rion's body, watching his chest rise and fall. She prayed it never stopped. She didn't know for sure if she'd gotten everything out, or how much damage might linger. Arianna wasn't even sure he'd wake again.

Talon made a fire and had his warriors deliver wood and water. She relished in the heat, wishing she could move closer, but Arianna didn't dare leave Rion's side.

Talon finally rose and approached slowly. She leaned over Rion as if she might protect him and hurt flashed across Talon's face. He sat at her side, a careful distance away, and offered her a water skin.

She took a long, slow drink, leaning her head back against the den's dirt wall. The fire crackled in the stillness, and she cast another glance at Talon. She looked away when he caught her staring. He was here. He'd kept his promise and come for her. But so much had changed. She—

"I'm sorry." Talon's voice was soft. He clasped his fingers together and leaned forward. "I looked for you every day. Every moment." He eyed Rion then met her apprehensive gaze. "Are you... good?"

Arianna let out a long, slow breath. Her shoulders relaxed, and she finally took in the scent of the male beside her. How many nights had they spent together like this at the summer retreat, watching a fire and the lake's shimmering surface? How many times had Ellie convinced them to dive in, guided by moonlight as they discussed bright futures full of happiness and love?

The male beside her was a comrade and her closest friend. He was someone she could trust with not only her life but her secrets as well.

"I was a prisoner and a slave," she began. Talon stiffened, his gaze falling to the scars around her wrists. "I suffered. A lot, but I was never those things to him." She brushed Rion's hair out of his face. "At least, not for long."

"Tell me everything."

So, she did. Arianna sat with Rion's head in her lap and recounted every step she'd taken from the moment Talon had shoved her upriver in that little canoe. She told him about the first time she'd been clasped in chains and how she'd hid her Fae form from prying eyes. She elaborated on the fear that consumed her and the promise that kept her going as the slavers dragged her further and further from home.

Arianna told him about the attack on her slavers' caravan. She detailed the death of the young female and her heartbreak with it. Then she told him how she'd arrived inside The Demon's cabin. She paused then before telling him a story about a male that wasn't quite as malevolent as everyone made him out to be.

Talon listened, far more intently than she expected. He only interrupted to ask for clarification and once she finished, Talon looked at Rion with just a little less malice.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I know it does nothing for your pain, but I

don't know what else to say. I can't ever begin to make up for that night. If I'd just gone with you then maybe—”

She placed a hand on his arm. “You did more for me today than you'll ever know.”

Talon laid his hand over hers and lightly grasped her fingers. He looked ready to say more when Rion grimaced.

Talon stiffened all over again, but Arianna leaned forward, running her hands through Rion's hair, whispering words of comfort. Those impossibly beautiful eyes cracked opened, and her tears were already flowing anew.

He was alive. Rion was alive.

He took an unsteady breath and reached up to tenderly run his fingertips down her cheek. “This can't be hell if you're here.”

She clutched him closer, sobbing now. “I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.”

He wrapped his arm around the back of her head weakly and swallowed to clear his throat. “For what?”

“I had to get the poison out. There wasn't another way. I couldn't think of another way to—”

“Arianna.” She pulled back to look at him and he tried wiping her tears away. “Don't apologize, I—” Rion's gaze slid to Talon's. Neither male moved.

Arianna placed a reassuring hand on Rion's shoulder. “Rion, this is Talon.” She turned to her childhood friend. “And Talon, this is Rion.”

Talon's gaze flickered to hers, back to Rion, then to her again as if he weren't sure what to do with himself. Despite the struggle, he sighed and said, “Though I'd love nothing more than to rip your throat from your body,” Arianna growled, “I haven't seen her in a long, long time and a fight wasn't in the reunion plan. So, I'll make a deal with you. Keep your vile magic to

yourself and I'll do the same."

Rion chuckled, though it was far too strained for her liking. "And here I was going to thank you for saving her life. Glad to know where we stand."

Talon hissed. "Our issues have nothing to do with her. I'd gladly give my life for Arianna's sake."

"As would I."

"You—"

"Talon." He quieted at her tone. "I think we've all seen enough fighting for one day." His gaze softened, then looked over her body. Rion's eyes followed and both males noted her cuts, though she doubted either could see the stab in her side.

"Will you let me see to those?" Talon asked.

Arianna looked at Rion then back to Talon. "I'd like to say no, but—" She stretched her side and winced. Talon was on his feet before she could say another word. He opened his pack and rummaged through its contents, pulling out ointment, a rag, and bandages.

"It'll be easier if I can see what I'm doing."

Rion sat up slowly, moving to lean against the den's wall. She stood and hissed, gripping her side. Talon was there a moment later, guiding her closer to the fire. Arianna lifted the hem of her shirt and both male's scents shifted with fury.

The knife had entered her body right above the last one. She didn't miss Talon eyeing her scar.

Talon pulled water from the air to fill a bowl and set to cleaning her wound. She glanced at Rion and found him watching Talon with an intense gaze. Right. Territorial, though if a female were to put her hands on Rion, Arianna wasn't sure she'd have the strength to remain so calm.

Talon pulled stitching from his pack next, and she closed her eyes to

the burning of the needle piercing her flesh. He wrapped a bandage around her stomach, tied it off, and saw to her other wounds. Arianna was too tired to argue otherwise.

Once he finished, Arianna stood, but he grasped her wrist with a gentle touch. Rion's magic sputtered to life, rising from the ground around her and Talon responded, leaping in front of Arianna, his own magic flaring.

She'd had enough. Enough of the fighting, of crying, of everything. She burst in a kaleidoscope of ice, snow, and water, the magic swirling around their bodies in such suddenness that both males turned to her with their mouths gaping.

"Enough," she roared then the tears were falling all over again, and Arianna sank to her knees from exhaustion, the magic fading as quickly as it'd come.

Silence filled the space for a time, the tension in the den so thick she could have cut it with a blade.

Rion struggled to his feet, one arm draped across his chest as he limped toward her in pain. He eyed Talon a moment, then moved past him, sinking to his knees before Arianna. He pulled her into his chest and buried his head in her hair. Talon turned away.

Talon's warrior reported in every so often, though if she didn't know better, she guessed the male was checking on his commander's wellbeing.

Arianna shifted positions and let Rion rest in her lap. He fell asleep quickly, one hand holding onto hers. She caught Talon staring at them and the reality of her situation hit her.

Talon was here. Which meant she'd be going home. She'd been discussing it with Rion on the mountain, but how was she going to convince Talon or the other Fae in Móirín that Rion wasn't a threat? It wasn't as if she could march him through the city gates and expect her people to just accept

him.

Arianna chewed her lip. She was The Divine. If she took up that role, things would change. She'd stop the war, but would declaring herself queen prevent her from being with the one she loved? Would the Fae of Alastríona accept him on her word alone?

She could always approach her father first. It'd take some explaining, but with Talon there, she might be able to set up a meeting, have the two talk—no, her father would demand his execution. Then maybe—a soft touch startled her, and Talon half drew his weapon when her adrenaline spiked.

She gave both males a half-hearted smile. “Sorry.”

Rion tilted his head toward Talon and his half-drawn blade. Arianna eyed them both, ready to intervene again, but Talon sheathed his weapon.

“What’s wrong?” Rion asked.

She gazed into those emerald eyes, watching the firelight dance in them, illuminating the flecks of gold within the iris.

“Just thinking.”

“Worrying more like,” Talon retorted. Rion shot him a glance, but there was no malice in it. “She’s always been like that. One to worry about the world’s problems while trying to solve them on her own.”

Rion stroked her arm with a featherlight touch and Arianna didn’t miss the murderous gleam in Talon’s gaze.

“You two know one another,” she accused. Talon glanced away and Rion turned his head when she looked to him for answers. “Tell me.”

Talon kept his gaze averted. “It’s not hard to guess.”

Her lips parted. “You’ve fought?”

Talon smirked. “I damn near killed him once.”

“You didn’t escape unscathed.”

“No, but I didn’t have a healer.” Talon’s gaze drifted to Arianna then

and he lowered his head. She'd been hoping to delay that conversation. "How long have you known?"

She swallowed. "Since I was fourteen."

"Did you tell Ellie?" Arianna shook her head. Talon looked dumbfounded. "All those times your father berated you, put your name in the dirt and you just took it." He leaned forward. "You're the queen of our people, Arianna."

"I—"

"You have a responsibility to fulfill."

Rion barely held in his growl. "She's obligated to no one."

"You have no right to intervene, she's not—"

"Calm down," Rion hissed. "You'll only upset her further." Talon, who looked ready to murder, turned a concerned eye toward her. Arianna kept her mouth closed and refused to meet his gaze.

"You could stop the war," Talon said, his voice softer.

She still couldn't look at him. "I know." It's what she'd been telling herself all along. She was supposed to be their queen, but what did she know about leadership? And if she took up that title, Rion might not have a place in her life at all.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Talon

Talon stood at the den's entrance blowing warm air into his hands as he stared up at the midnight sky. Stars sparkled in its vast expanse and though it looked like home, this barbaric land was far from it. He longed for the way the mists curled from the bottom of the falls. The gentle breeze that shifted through the rocks, seemingly carrying magic of its own. He blew out a long sigh.

The Divine.

The gentle girl he'd grown up beside had turned into a strong female. He'd trained her even when her father had declared her a lost cause. He remembered the extra nightly lessons and the way she strove to improve so that one day, perhaps her father could look at her with fresh eyes.

But no amount of training could have prepared her for the horrors she'd faced. She'd spent over a year in slavery, beaten and tormented as if she were another lowly half-breed. He clenched his fists.

They'd beaten his queen.

Their queen.

He knew she needed time to process, but he couldn't let her throw her future away for that demon. He wouldn't. It was a façade. The creature would tire of her eventually and it would leave Arianna heartbroken. She'd carry a reputation she didn't deserve, suffering from all his failings.

Talon tried to quiet the raging storm in his blood. He could tell from their scents just how close they were. Everyone in Móirín would scent it too. And her father—Talon shivered. If she told her father the truth, he wasn't sure what would happen.

Talon ducked his head inside the den, caught The Demon's attention, and jerked his chin outside. He'd have to deal with this another way. If The Demon traveled to Móirín, they'd kill him and if Arianna tried to defend the creature, her people might cast her into exile. He couldn't let that happen.

The insufferable creature took his time, leaving Talon to shiver in the cold, but he couldn't risk Arianna overhearing. She'd fight it. Hell, The Demon might fight it too.

The Demon exited the den and the scent of him was enough to make Talon's blood race. He'd spent years trying to catch this male, helping his previous commanders try to locate him and lay a trap. But no matter how hard they worked, this creature always thwarted them, and their plans backfired tenfold.

The Demon's quick eyes took in Talon's sentinels standing at a distance, surveying the pair with hands on their weapons. Talon didn't miss the way the earth danced at his feet, staying low to the ground. He hated that magic and the smell of it.

The creature Arianna called Rion leaned against the wall at the entrance and tilted his head toward the dark sky. To a stranger's eyes, he might have appeared like any other Fae, but Talon knew better.

"You know who she is." Talon began.

"I know who she is."

"Then you know she needs to return to Móirín."

It all made sense now, why the Fairy Folk danced in her presence. How, despite a shy demeanor, she drew everyone in and why the idea of killing had always twisted her stomach in knots.

Rion's jaw clenched "What, exactly, do you want from me?"

"Don't play games."

"I won't force her. She's free to make her own decisions."

Yes, she was, but some decisions would have a lifelong impact and put her in more danger than it was worth. “She believes you love her.”

“I do.”

Talon clenched his jaw this time. “Then don’t condemn her to your way of life.” Rion didn’t look at him. “She may want to believe you redeemed, but I know the truth. I’ve seen the treacherous acts you’ve committed firsthand.”

“Don’t pretend your hands are clean.”

Memories surfaced. Memories he longed to forget. He’d learned the consequences to his actions at far too young an age. “A life spent with you is a life spent on the run. A constant struggle to survive. You’re strong, there’s no denying that, but how long will it take before someone realizes you care for her? How long before she’s injured. Or worse?”

“I can protect her.”

Talon continued as if Rion hadn’t spoken. “Do you think she’ll be happy with that life? Do you think she’ll be happy seeing the male she loves,” he choked on the word, “fight to protect her? To constantly worry whether you’ll come home?” Talon shook his head, hating his next words. “And what if you have children? Because she wants children someday. Are you certain you can protect them as well?”

Rion remained silent and Talon let his breath cloud in the frigid air. “She’d be better off if you disappeared.”

“She’d look for me. You and I both know it.” He did. Arianna would search until the end of time. He knew how persistent she could be. He’d seen her push herself until her hands bled and exhaustion drove her to her knees.

Talon glanced back into the den, noting the rise and fall of her chest. He lowered his voice to a near whisper. “Did you kill her mother?”

Somehow, Arianna’s father had kept her mother’s death a secret, but

his advisers knew the truth. The commanders knew the truth, but now that he saw The Demon up close, he wanted to hear it from the creature's mouth.

“No.”

Talon snorted. “Convenient to deny it now.”

“Everyone already believed me a monster.” Rion glanced at his hand. “And at my core, maybe I am. Maybe there's nothing I can do to cleanse my soul. I kidnapped her as part of some political bargain. The High Lord needed access to a nearby piece of land. I was to set her free afterward.” Rion ground his teeth. “But a shadow crept into her room that night and by the time I scented his presence, it was too late.”

“A shadow?”

“From Fiadh.”

Talon's eyes widened. “We've had peace with them for fifty years, why would they—” Unless they *wanted* Móirín and Brónach to go to war. Their two countries had been prosperous and powerful. The two smaller countries didn't stand a chance against their combined forces.

Talon shook his head. He'd consult with the other commanders and work through those details later. “If you didn't murder the Lady of Móirín then why take credit for it?”

Rion gave him a hard look. “Who would have believed me? You? Your lord? My brother?” He shook his head. “Why fight to clear your name of one murder when your hands are already stained with so many?”

“It started the war.”

“And gave me freedom.” Talon's mouth gaped. “You've never experienced the hatred I have. You've never had to defend yourself in your home from your own brethren. You've never scented malice from your kinfolk and walked down familiar streets with a target on your back. When the opportunity arose for me to leave, I relished in it. And because of that, I

met her.” Rion looked behind him, toward the sleeping female by the fire.

Talon looked at her too. But if she stayed with him—

“All the more reason for you to let her go.”

“And how would you have me do that?”

“You said it yourself. Everyone believes you a monster.”

A low growl. “I will *not* hurt her.”

“So, you’ll have her track you through miles upon miles of enemy territory? You’ll have her taint her good name just so you don’t have to lose her?” Rion didn’t respond. “You’ve pretended before. It shouldn’t be hard for you to do it again.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Arianna

Arianna jolted awake, adrenaline flooding her body before she remembered she was in a small den with Talon and Rion. Safe. At least for the time being. They were still in the middle of a war zone.

She sat up and stretched her sore body. So many things had happened yesterday. Brónach's main camp had fallen. She thought she'd lost the male she loved. She'd been reunited with a childhood friend.

But today would be harder. Today, she had decisions to make.

Rion sat at the entrance, his jaw clenching and unclenching as he stared through the brush into the world beyond. Something was off. Did he feel the heaviness she felt, or was there something else weighing on his mind?

Talon sat across from him, clutching his weapon in one hand. She wondered if they had spoken or sat in silence all night. Insulted one another more like.

Both males turned when she stood. Talon was the first to speak. "It's time to go."

Her heart fluttered and Rion seemed to sit straighter. She had a lot to figure out and a short amount of time to do it. Perhaps they could stop somewhere on the outskirts of Móirín's capital city, and she could go explain things to her father. After all, Rion was just another warrior. A dangerous one, yes, but one that no longer posed a threat to her country.

Talon stomped out their small fire, then turned to Rion, studying the male warily. She knew Talon would struggle with the change too. He'd been fighting Brónach on the front lines for most of his teenage and adult life. And

he'd have to explain to her father why he hadn't killed The Demon on sight.

Rion stood. "I'll leave her in your care then."

Arianna's heart jolted. "You're not coming with us?"

He didn't look at her. "I can't go to Móirín."

"We'll find a way," she promised. "I'm sure I can convince—"

"I don't want to go to Móirín."

Oh. Well, that certainly changed things. But of course he wouldn't want to go to Móirín. He was more hated there than in his own country. Nothing would change for him.

"Okay, where do you want to go then?" Talon's gaze shot toward her, but she ignored it.

"Home."

Home? To Brónach? But he'd said he didn't have anyone there. His sister maybe, if he were willing to rekindle their relationship, but he hadn't been there in years. He'd said so himself.

Could she travel to Brónach? She could if she went as The Divine. They'd welcome her just like those from Rion's camp. "Then I'll go with you."

"Arianna," Talon protested.

"I don't *want* you to come with me." She flinched, Rion's intonation hitting far harder than his words. Cold. So very cold.

Panic crept into her voice. "I don't understand."

His heart beat wildly now, but he turned to her with a wicked smile. Something she'd only seen him show his enemies. "The game's been fun, don't you think?" Rion tilted his head toward Talon. "She was certainly sweet."

A rage-filled snarl ripped from Talon's throat, but she was between them before Talon could lunge.

“Stop it, both of you. Rion.” She thought she saw him flinch at his name. “What’s going on?”

He stared at her for a long moment, seeming to consider then that same wicked smile returned. “I’m a demon, remember?”

“You’re not.”

“Oh, but I am. You think you’re the first female I’ve toyed with? Certainly, the most interesting.” He laughed and a chill ran down her spine. “You soaked up every word like a child starved for affection.”

“Stop it.”

Rion stepped toward her, and Talon pulled her behind his body. Rion smiled again. “Relax, I wouldn’t want to kill her precious Talon. I’ll leave her for you, part of the enjoyment is knowing they’re still alive. Knowing The Demon has forever tainted their bodies.”

Talon growled. “Leave.” Rion smirked, gave her a final look, and brushed the shrubbery to the side as he left the den. She stood there immobilized, breath barely escaping her lips. Despite his words, Rion’s heart continued to pound, his breathing too fast.

No. No, this was because of Talon. He’d said something to Rion last night. That had to be it. He was leaving because they’d agreed returning to Móirín was in her best interest. He was just trying to hurt her.

Arianna ripped her arm from Talon’s grasp and ran from the den. Rion had only made it a few steps.

“You don’t have to do this. We’ll figure it out. We can leave Móirín and Brónach behind, we’ll travel across the sea, whatever you want.”

His heart skipped, but when he turned, that same wicked smile still marred his face. “Persistent, aren’t you? Or is it desperation?” He sighed and shook his head as if speaking to a child. “Let me spell it out plainly.” Rion met her gaze then, his hard and unflinching. “I don’t want you anymore.”

“Then why did you say all those things to me?”

He shrugged and made a show of thinking. “I find it fun,” he ran his eyes up and down her form. “And I would have said anything to get that body on top of mine. My commanders chose well, I’ll have to reward them when I get back. Maybe I’ll get another plaything just as sweet.”

He turned and Arianna stared at his back, clinging to the sound of his racing heart. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes. “Rion.”

He didn’t turn and her heart fractured a bit. His earth floated up, dancing around him as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Rion.”

He shifted into a sprint, moving further and further away, and something in her splintered.

“Rion,” she screamed, hit her knees, and Arianna’s heart shattered completely.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Rion

Rion sprinted through the forest like a male on his first hunt. Loud, sloppy, untrained. His mind whirled, raging a war within itself that he still wasn't sure he could win.

He'd never given much thought to his name, but in that moment, he wished he'd been called something else. Anything else.

Rion.

The pain in her voice. The sorrow he'd caused. It'd almost made him turn around and fall to his knees right there and beg her forgiveness for the vile words that'd fallen from his lips.

But Talon was right. What kind of life could he expect her to live at his side? Even if they ran, how long would it take for someone to find them? For his enemies to catch up?

His gut twisted with the earth that swirled around his body. He'd never see her again. He hadn't even had time to process it or properly say goodbye. They'd held one another through the night. She'd saved his life more than once. And gods, he'd broken her.

But maybe not completely.

She'd mourn for him, mourn for the time they'd spent in one another's arms, but she'd spoken fondly of Talon before. Perhaps that male could put her back together. He could give her the life Rion couldn't. He could protect her.

It didn't make the pain in his chest lessen.

Arianna would take up her title as queen and they'd request his presence at formal meetings. He'd refuse, as his siblings would expect.

Because he had a reputation.

Rion gritted his teeth. And that reputation was exactly what'd caused him to lose the only thing he'd ever cared about.

It was fitting, really. He deserved punishment for the sins he'd committed. He deserved to yearn for her, to hear about her for the rest of his life, and never be able to see her beautiful face.

Because The Demon Lord of Brónach should never have fallen for a Lady of Móirín.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Talon

Talon sat before a fire, watching Arianna's sleeping form. Two of his warriors stood outside the cave, keeping careful watch over the landscape while the other six slept, preparing for the journey home. They were out of Brónach territory now, but slavers and hosts of other unfriendly companies still roamed the wilds. He'd take no chances where Arianna was concerned.

He wrung his hands together and glanced at her again. She'd crumbled to the dirt when The Demon left, folding in on herself, clutching her chest as if someone had ripped out her heart. She'd screamed and his blood still ran cold when he thought about that pain-filled shriek. All for that creature.

Rion had done his job well. So well in fact, that Talon had wanted to rip him to shreds for the indecent things he'd spoken. The Demon hadn't let his mask slip once, but that racing heart had Talon wondering. Could such a creature care for another? Had he truly loved Arianna?

No. Talon clenched his hands together. He'd seen The Demon rip mothers away from their children, crush brothers, fathers, and sisters without a passing glance. He'd seen a male beg for his life, only to be silenced with a swift flick of The Demon's wrist.

So why did his heart ache? What made him want to chase that creature down and formulate a new plan?

Arianna's eyes fluttered open, and she sat up, glancing, for a brief moment, at the sleeping males surrounding her before meeting Talon's gaze. Guilt crashed through him like a tidal wave. He'd done this. He was the cause of her tear-streaked face, the bags beneath her eyes. Talon had never seen his

childhood friend so...broken.

“Are you hungry?” He kept his voice low, hoping the others wouldn’t wake. She just shook her head and stared at the fire. After a moment, Arianna rose and padded toward the cavern’s entrance. Talon followed.

He didn’t know what to say or do. She longed for a creature as vile as they came, and he’d been the one to send said creature away. He should be relieved. He’d imagined finding her a hundred times. The two would smile, embrace, and race home to tell Ellie the good news. Things would return to normal, and he’d ask her out to dinner. Maybe they’d take a stroll through the streets or swim beneath the giant falls.

Móirín would celebrate with a party as grand as the solstices, and her father would make a speech about his daughter’s triumphant return. He’d imagined her in a dress to match her eyes, the fabric flowing with the waters that surrounded the capital city. And she’d be happy, smiling for all to see.

But reality was a cruel thing. This wasn’t happiness, this was sorrow and unending pain. Part of him felt as though he’d taken her prisoner, claspng shackles around her heart instead of her wrists.

Gods, had he done the right thing?

But what other choice did he have? Avalon believed The Demon killed his mate. He’d never forgive. Would such knowledge help Arianna recover or send her spiraling into a deeper depression? And what if she never snapped out of it?

Arianna drew the blanket tighter around her shoulders. No, he tried to convince himself. She would heal. Ellie would know what to do when they arrived in Levea. It wasn’t as if Arianna and The Demon were mates.

He gritted his teeth, a new reality sinking in. The Demon wasn’t her mate, and neither was he. Her mate would be the king of Alastríona. The strongest Fae to walk the continent. Once she found him, that bond would

snap into place, and she'd forget all about The Demon. And their kiss.

A fresh tear rolled down her face and Talon's heart clenched. "We're stopping at the summer house tomorrow." She didn't look at him. "I'll send a runner ahead to inform your father, but we'll keep your return quiet until you're ready." If the city got wind of it too soon, every Fae in the capital would gather to welcome her home. She already looked ready to crumble, he didn't think a celebration would help.

Arianna turned and headed back for her bedroll without a word. She curled in on herself with her back to the fire and that pain returned to his chest tenfold. One of his warriors rose and joined him, eyeing Arianna's sleeping form with a sad gaze. "You should get some sleep."

Talon looked up at the stars. "I should." But he knew he wouldn't.

TALON HELD the reins of her horse, guiding it down a familiar trail. The trees in Móirín were thicker, but without their leaves, they looked as bare as those from Brónach. He cast her a glance, wondering if the familiar scent of this place would perk her up. She'd not spoken since The Demon's departure.

Talon nodded at three of his warriors, urging them ahead to announce their arrival. He didn't want anyone crowding Arianna, not until she crawled out of the dismal place she'd locked herself up in.

The trees thinned, and they passed beneath an archway of branches that opened into a clearing. The house itself sat at the end of a long road lined with pear trees on either side. Talon remembered himself, Ellie, and Arianna gorging themselves on the fruit in late summer, their bellies so full there was no room for supper.

Water trickled down a stream that cut through the center of the yard, emptying at the lake in the back. Flowers grew along the waterway, the gardens well-kept and beautiful in spring. But right now, nothing bloomed, leaving the creek bare. How many times had they played in that stream, shoving one another into the water and running when their caretakers came to reprimand?

Talon peered back at Arianna and his heart skipped a beat. She was observing, taking in the landscape and the familiar scents before locking onto the lake. Her lips parted and for the first time, recognition sparked in those beautiful cerulean eyes.

It'd been so long since she'd seen any trace of home. He knew she'd suffer with emotional scars, but perhaps the familiar waters could help chase away some of that darkness. Maybe he'd talk to Avalon about allowing her to stay here for a time, away from the busy streets and crowds of people.

He wouldn't be the one to tell her father about her abilities. She'd do that when she was ready. Because once she revealed herself, they'd escort her to the royal city and crown her queen of their four countries. The texts claimed her mate would come from Pádraigín. A land full of wind and illusion magic. Talon wondered if he'd get to accompany her. He wanted to. He wanted to be by her side forever.

Talon stopped beside the house, handed the reins to one of his warriors, and reached up to help Arianna dismount. She braced her hands on his forearms and landed on the soft earth without a sound. Her eyes still hadn't left the lake.

The double side doors were open, waiting for them to enter, but Arianna didn't walk inside. Instead, she headed around the back, and he followed. They had so many memories in this place. His mother bringing out sandwiches when they were hungry. Her mother splashing them in the

shallows. Their fathers laughing, free from the stresses brought on by politics.

But one summer, his father left on a mission, never returning to his only son. Then her mother followed shortly after. That season had been a haunted one, the three holding one another beside the water's edge. And his mother had cried with them despite trying to keep everything together. Avalon stopped visiting the cabin and Talon began his training. And their childhood memories faded.

Arianna held her arms close to her body and stared out at the beach. The wind caught a tendril of her hair, pulling it from the loose bun and gods—what was he supposed to do? Arianna was the light in the darkness. What did one do when the light faded?

He stood at her side but kept a comfortable distance. “Everyone told me you were dead.” Arianna tilted her head. “Some gave up after a week, claiming you were too frail to defend yourself. It took others months to arrive at the same conclusion. And when half a year had gone by even your father told me we should have a proper funeral to honor your passing.”

Talon clenched his jaw. “But how could I? I knew,” he whispered. “I don't know how, but I knew you were alive.” His body trembled and Talon clenched his jaw in an effort to steady himself. “I know you need time. I know you've been through unimaginable pain, but when you're ready, I want you to know I'm here. Even if you don't want to talk, just know I'm here.”

The silence stretched for an impossibly long time, then Arianna took a step toward him. Then another and before Talon knew it, she was leaning her head against his shoulder. She didn't speak, but words didn't matter. Talon leaned his head against hers and wrapped one arm around her shoulders. They stood there, gazing out over the lake, reliving memories from a more peaceful time.

And Talon swore he'd never leave her side again.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Rion

Familiar and foreign. A land that haunted him with hostile memories yet carried those most precious. A place he strove to avoid and a home he yearned for.

Rion strolled through the dense forest, trees still barren from winter. Sprites played between his feet, weaving in and out, catching the particles of dirt floating around his body. He didn't dare let his guard down here. Not when he knew warriors from Brónach hid in the treetops.

Rion kept moving, walking along the path he'd played on as a child. Memories of his mother and sister surfaced with every passing step, and he resisted the urge to grab at the gaping hole in his chest. He'd been happy once, just like any other kid. But that happiness had vanished like smoke on the wind, and he'd created his own future.

The trees grew larger and larger until he stood before the wall that surrounded Brónach's capital city, Nàdair. The giant redwood trees hadn't changed, standing over three hundred feet tall and twenty feet wide. They circled the entire city. They were guardians grown by their ancestors to protect its citizens. The trunks were so close, not even an insect could have hoped to crawl between their bark.

He let out a long breath and stalked toward the entrance where one tree was missing to allow Nàdair's citizens passage to and from. Four sentinels stood at attention, likely scenting him before he'd even stepped on the path. He briefly wondered if they'd try to stop him from entering the city, but though they gripped their weapons, none drew on him.

Rion strode past several guards inside, all watching him with a careful

eye. He knew they'd already sent someone to inform his siblings. What an encounter that would be.

The sun settled behind the redwoods before the first house entered his view. Those from Nàdair lived as one with the forest, weaving the trees hollow to form their houses within. Some residences kept their homes crisply maintained, while others let the trees and plants run wild with natural beauty.

They'd built platforms into the canopy several feet above him, with bridges, ladders, and multiple levels. Citizens stood up there now, watching him as he passed by. He scented their hatred. Their fear.

How long had it been since he'd set foot here? Six years? Seven? He'd escaped their eyes for so long, but now he was The Demon again. A monster created by the vilest god imaginable. He'd earn no sympathy here. Not that he deserved any. How many of their family and friends had he slaughtered over the years? How many innocent lives, like Arianna's, had he destroyed without a passing thought?

The palace loomed in the distance, casting its long shadow onto the city below. Rion wasn't sure who he dreaded seeing more. Saoirse, with her sympathy or Alec, who seemed to carry the hatred of their entire country on his shoulders. Even when Rion had been a teen, Alec hadn't challenged him, though Rion wondered if Saoirse had a say in that matter. Alec had a hundred years on him and as a son to the two strongest Fae in Nàdair's history, he wasn't one to be trifled with.

Rion tried to ignore the hushed whispers as he wandered down the main street. He had no intention of hiding. He'd march straight through the front doors like he owned the place. Because he partially did. He was a lord after all, even if he never hoped to rule. A slight smile crossed his face at the thought. The entire country of Brónach would likely try to assassinate him.

Doors and shutters slammed shut as he continued his leisurely pace.

Those who'd been running stalls, selling fresh bread and wares abandoned their goods to seek shelter.

He grimaced. Who was he before Arianna? Had he craved so much blood that he might have slaughtered these Fae for simply existing?

He focused his attention back on the palace in the distance. Was his room still there or had Alec removed it, forever exiling him from the city? Would Rion force his brother to provide him a new room or would he drift from the city on a phantom wind, forever questioning his existence?

Rion ran one hand through his filthy hair. He needed a bath. He needed food, water, and a quiet place where his heart could bleed. How could he have been such a fool? Arianna was The Divine and he most certainly wasn't her mate. He should have taken her back to Móirín the first time his heart skipped. Maybe then, it wouldn't feel as heavy as it did now.

But he couldn't stay away from her. The female who'd saved his life had fascinated him. She'd treated him like a normal male instead of a creature born from the depths of hell. *And you hurt her.*

Rion walked up the smooth, marble stairs, the area completely devoid of guards. They had left the giant double doors open, though he knew they rarely closed. It led him into a circular room used for announcements to the people. A dais stood at the back, with another set of doors behind it that led into the palace.

No guards stood there either.

Inside hadn't changed much. Large, marble columns reached for the forty-foot ceiling with intricate carvings of leaves and vines upon their surface. He remembered these halls, running between the columns with his mother at his heels, laughing and pretending she couldn't find him in the vast space.

Rion paused and for a moment considered taking the long way around

to avoid his siblings. He'd have to climb endless stairs, walk down hallways haunted with memories and descend on the far side of the palace before trekking his way back to his room. But that'd only give him one night of reprieve. Best to get it out of the way.

Rion pushed open another set of doors and the scents of his siblings hit him hard. They were here often, their aroma coating the room so thick, he wondered if they ever left.

Rion met his sister's startled gaze across the room. Eyes they shared. A gift from their mother. His gaze shifted to Alec and their father stared back. A male who'd been all business with no time for distractions. So different from their mother's free spirit.

The guards drew their weapons and backed toward his siblings. One even growled in warning. What would the monster have done? He'd never laid a hand on his sister and though there were times he might have liked to put his brother in his place, he'd never attacked Alec either.

Rion opened his mouth, but movement from his right had his magic reacting, shooting from a pack at his side to solidify into an impenetrable wall. He dropped his foot back, ready to defend himself as he'd done so many times before. A growl echoed from deep in his throat.

He should have expected it. How many times had he'd survived assassination attempts in this city? He'd lost count, but so soon? And his sister... Rion didn't look at her. His sister had never—or had she?

Rion parted his grains of earth, but instead of a warrior, he saw a young half-breed on the ground, rubbing her backside. She didn't hold a weapon and when her annoyed gaze met his, recognition sparked, and horror turned her face pale.

She threw herself at his feet, heedless of the glass scattered across the marble floor. Tea, he realized. Rion froze, watching the female's blood mix

with the brown liquid likely intended for his siblings. She trembled before him, the scent of her fear stinging his nostrils.

Monster.

Rion turned when his sister's chair scooted back. She took a few steps toward him, but Alec grabbed her arm. That pleading look in her eyes almost brought Rion to his knees. This young female, despite being a slave, was someone she cared for. Saoirse had always been like that, caring for the slaves despite their father's reprimands.

The girl hadn't moved, but her shoulders shook with the sobs tearing through her now. He knelt and the female curled tighter into herself, cutting her hands as she slid them across the floor. Rion took her wrists, but he didn't recoil from the heat of her skin. Instead, he forced her to sit up. She was like a puppet on a string. He eyed the glass in her palms.

"You should go to the infirmary." Rion kept his voice quiet, almost a whisper, but she still flinched. He released her and she ran, disappearing through a side door. He watched it a moment before turning back to his sister. Her lips had parted, but his brother's expression hadn't changed. He kept one hand firmly around Saoirse's wrist, eyeing the monster in their midst. Their hearts were racing, anticipating his next move.

He couldn't take it. Rion turned, no longer caring about pleasantries. He slammed open a side door and stormed down a familiar corridor, his breath coming faster and faster. Rion ran up a set of spiral stairs and trotted down the long hallway that followed. He passed the upper gardens, ignoring the memories that pulled at him, rounded the next corner, and paused before an oak door.

He willed his body to calm, unsure of his next move should someone occupy his old room. Maybe one look would send them running like the half-breed. Like everyone.

Rion turned the knob and entered.

The window was open, a slight breeze blowing through the sheer, tan curtains. His bed was in the far-left corner with the same color sheets from when he'd left. And judging from the smell in the air, everything had been freshly washed.

A picture of his mother still sat on the dresser his sister had purchased from a woodcarver decades ago. And beside that, a picture of their family. Their father, with his stoic expression. Alec at his side, arms crossed. Their mother standing in the center with her long, red, flowing hair grinning from ear to ear. And Saoirse, holding him in her lap while he looked up at her. A memory from another life.

Rion locked the door and proceeded to the bathing chamber. He turned the water to scalding temperatures and peeled off his blood-stained clothes. His heart still pounded.

He could deal with Nàdair's citizens and their judgments. He'd earned those. Rion could handle his brother's murderous eyes and though it broke his heart, he could ignore his sister's uncertain expression. But it was the terror-stricken face of that young female that had Rion clenching his chest.

Arianna, despite being thrown at his feet, had never looked at him like that. She'd been frightened, sure, but her gaze had never held what everyone else's seemed too.

His heart seized in his chest, and he struggled to draw breath as steam filled the chamber.

He'd never see that again. He'd never feel her beautiful skin. Never relish in the gentle caress of her lips. He'd never see a look of trust from another being's eyes for as long as he lived.

Because Arianna was the only one who'd ever seen past the monster.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Arianna

Arianna kept her head down as they marched along the massive bridge that led into Levea, Móirín's capital city. She watched the cobblestone path pass in slow steps, counting, praying no one would notice the female in their midst.

Great arches towered above them, painted in a deep blue with silver spiraling down its columns. Sentinels watched from the top of those towers while others stood at their base, greeting the warriors returning home.

She could have stayed on the horse, but Arianna didn't want to attract attention. She honestly wasn't sure she could handle it. Talon walked at her side, a young commander leading his warriors home. A crowd had already gathered, positioning themselves on either side of the central road to greet lovers, friends, and family.

She refused to look up.

A variety of scents hit her all at once. The bakery on the corner she and Ellie used to visit, gorging themselves on sweets and rolls. The bookstore across the street where she'd spent countless hours studying magic and the histories of their nation. The weapon shop three doors down where Talon had taken her for the best quality of steel on her fifteenth birthday.

Then there were the citizens. So many bodies. So many scents.

Her heart rate spiked, and her breathing turned shallow.

Home. She was home, she tried reassuring herself as they paraded through the throng of voices. Talon's arm tightened around her shoulders, and she leaned into him. He knew. Talon always knew.

Soon she'd see her father, her sister, the servants who'd taken care of

her since she was a child.

Home.

But when had home felt more like a prison?

TALON'S WARRIORS split off one by one, but Talon stayed at her side as they ascended the stairs to her family's estate. The roar of the great waterfalls grew louder with each step. She used to run to the top of those falls with Ellie chasing and Talon not far behind. They'd leap from the height, wrapping water around their bodies to soften the landing below. And laugh endlessly long after sunset.

Up and up the stairs they climbed. Her legs burned, threatening to give way, but she kept pushing. That's what she'd done for the last two years. Pushed herself no matter what she faced, even if she felt she couldn't go on. She'd done it for Talon. For Ellie.

The guards stationed at the estate's main gate lowered their weapons. Her heart jolted and she stepped back, pulling her magic from the mist coming off the falls. She'd forgotten how easily it responded here. How fast. The guards responded in kind, but it was Talon's fierce snarl that had them all pausing.

"Step aside," he growled.

The sentries stood their ground, eyeing her with a suspicious gaze. "Who's the female?"

The female? She knew these males, though not by name. She'd seen them around her father growing up. They should have known her anywh—her scent. Of course they didn't recognize her. She no longer smelled like the young Fae who'd disappeared two years ago. Her scent carried a trace of

Brónach now. A trace of Rion.

Her shoulders shook at the thought of him, but Talon squeezed her closer. His anger grew, slowly coating the reassuring scent she'd been clinging to for the last few days. He was the only thing keeping her going and if that scent disappeared beneath his fury, she wasn't sure she'd survive another minute.

Arianna reached for her hood and pulled the cloth away. The guards regarded her for a moment, then their eyes widened. One look and they knew exactly who she was.

Talon guided her from their view, glaring in a way that had the warriors hanging their heads in shame. It wasn't their fault. They'd been posted to protect the High family at all costs.

She sighed, Talon had wanted to keep her return a secret, but word would spread now.

They walked around the first fountain, the statue a depiction of a phoenix with its wings spread wide. Water cascaded down its feathers, dripping on the head of a dragon curled beneath it, as if ready to protect the firebird from harm.

It sat sheltered beneath a gazebo, with stone benches on either side and a slow current of water that flowed between carved pockets at their feet. Every structure in Móirín flowed with water, a design meant for defense in case their city was ever attacked. Yet also a construct of utmost beauty, the sounds akin to music. And gods had she missed it.

They walked on the outskirts of the mansion, following the wooden path built into the rocks. She paused at the first pool of water and leaned against the railing. The spray of cold mist hit her face like a welcoming breeze on a hot summer day. Despite shivering, she tilted her head back, reaching for her magic. It vibrated all around her, ready to answer her call.

Arianna opened her eyes and looked at Talon. He didn't usher her on, and some of the sadness in his gaze had softened. Perhaps seeing her home, enjoying some small part of it, was enough for him. But would it be enough for her?

Dread swept through her as they continued. She knew Talon was leading her to her father's meeting room, but what would her father think when he smelled Rion's scent mixed with her own? Would he congratulate her for escaping or berate her for not fighting to the death?

Arianna kept moving. Servants gaped at her in passing, some running to spread the news while others fell to their knees with tears in their eyes. Warriors watched her too, but they were harder to read, and she didn't have the strength to try.

Talon paused at the sliding door and waited. For her, she realized. Would he allow her to run if she wanted? To hide in the shadows for the rest of her existence? She doubted it. Arianna clenched her trembling hands then slid the door open for him.

A fire crackled in that old, familiar hearth, and candles burned around the room, giving it a soft glow in the dimming light. Her father had the side sliding door open, telling her this particular meeting wasn't of too much importance.

But seven council members sat at his table, looking at those who'd intruded with a scornful expression. It shifted in seconds and their gazes shot toward their High Lord. She couldn't bring herself to look at him.

Talon took a single step forward and knelt before her father and his council. "I've brought your daughter home." Silence, then her father waved his hand and six chairs scooted across the wooden floor. Arianna held her breath as they passed. She imagined them examining her as if she were from another world. Though, upon catching her scent, the way their shoulders

stiffened was anything but imaginary. They knew. They all knew.

The last one out slid the door shut and her father circled the table until he stood before her. Arianna's body trembled in his shadow.

"Look at me." His voice was a command she couldn't disobey, not when she felt this weak. Her eyes lifted, tears already forming in the corners. Her father's nostrils flared, and rage flashed across his hard face. But instead of harsh words, Avalon did something she never expected.

Carefully, as if she were a doll who might break, Avalon wrapped his arms around his eldest daughter and pulled her close. "Welcome home, Arianna." The knot in her chest unraveled, and she leaned into his strong arms, letting the fear she'd been holding in roll down her cheeks.

And her father let her cry. She gripped the back of his tunic, clinging to him like her life depended on it, sobbing as she hadn't done since she was a small child.

His warmth. His scent. It took her back to a time before she knew war. To a time when two sisters would beg to stay up late and cuddle with their parents before a warm fireplace. To a time before strength mattered.

She sniffled and released her iron grip from her father's tunic. Arianna wiped her tears away with her sleeve and her father pulled back and looked her over. He nodded toward the table and called for tea and cakes from one of their servants. The woman appeared so fast Arianna wondered if she'd been waiting around the corner with said items already prepared.

Avalon, the High Lord, poured their tea and pushed the cakes toward her. She wrapped her cold fingertips around the intricately decorated cup but avoided the food. Her stomach was in knots already.

Avalon stood to throw another log into the fire and closed the side door, stealing the evening light from the room. She watched the candles flicker and dance. Green eyes appeared in her mind's eye and Arianna

choked back a sob.

Her father sat again and without being told, Talon began recounting her story, or rather, the version her father would want to hear. He wove his words carefully, avoiding direct lies that would condemn her forever. In Talon's version, Rion was nothing more than a bloodthirsty demon that'd kept her as his plaything.

But that wasn't Rion at all. She remembered the first brush of his lips. The trembling in his body when she'd placed a hand on his chest. His sobs at the knowledge that someone accepted him for who he was.

"You almost killed him once, yes?" Talon nodded. "Good, then I expect you'll succeed the second time." Her father's voice turned icy. "I want him to suffer. I want him to remember and agonize over every scream that came from my daughter's mouth."

"No," her voice cracked from misuse and tears fell from her face anew. She couldn't let them believe those things about Rion, no matter how much it might tarnish her reputation. "He never hurt me."

Silence, then Avalon rested one calloused hand on top of hers. "You don't have to be afraid anymore. I'll protect you. The horrors you suffered will not go unpunished."

Her body shook. "I didn't suffer," she whispered. "Not with Rion. He didn't—he didn't do those things to me. He never forced—"

"Rion?" her father spat, his voice instantly shifting back to that High Lord tone. He slammed his hands on the table and stood, his chair flying back. Arianna flinched. "Are you telling me you *let* that demon touch you?"

She was a child again, too weak to take over as the family head. She was the constant disappointment, the failure of test after test to display her powers and strength. But still, she couldn't back down from this. "He's not a demon."

Her small voice made her father fall silent. A deadly calm before the storm. He turned that storm on Talon. “Did you know about this?”

Talon opened his mouth, but she interrupted. “He didn’t.” She wouldn’t let Talon take the fall. Her father would demote him for withholding information from his High Lord. The council might even move to jail him, but Arianna needed him too much.

Avalon clenched his fists, and his body visibly shook. Rage poured from him in a current and the room suddenly felt too small. “First, he takes my mate, now he tries to take my daughter.”

She looked up at him. Mate? Her mother? But—

Avalon opened his eyes, but instead of brutal rage, Arianna saw sorrow. Deep, unrelenting sorrow. His voice softened. “I don’t know what he promised you. I don’t know what lies he weaved, but that creature. That monster,” he spat. “Took your mother from us.” He paused, letting the words sink in. “Do you understand what I’m telling you, Arianna?”

“No.” He couldn’t have. Her mother had died ten years ago of an incurable illness. She remembered the day her father had come in—and Arianna also remembered never seeing the body. Those responsible had fashioned the casket from the finest trees to the north and had carved elegant details over the lid. And it’d been closed.

Was she maimed beyond recognition? She’d seen Rion tear the flesh from his victims, leaving them unrecognizable.

“What do you think started the war?”

Arianna stood, anger flaring through her for the first time in days. It tingled beneath her skin, bringing her to life. “Why didn’t I know?”

“Because I didn’t want my daughters terrified the monster would come for them next. I didn’t want you to grow up fearful. I wanted you strong.”

Breath left her. “You wanted us—you wanted us *strong*? You lied to me about my mother because you wanted us strong?” She shoved the table across the room, rage and panic coursing through her body. Arianna had been a child back then, she wouldn’t have questioned her father even if she’d scented a lie. She had no reason to, her father wouldn’t lie about her mother’s death, he wouldn’t—

She fell back into Talon and her heart hammered in her chest. Both males were speaking, but she couldn’t hear the words. The only thing she saw was her quiet, mild-tempered mother who used to read them bedtime stories and make them hot cocoa. The mother who chased away their nightmares by singing to them in bed. A mother who loved unconditionally.

Arianna tried to imagine it. Rion, no, The Demon standing before her kind-hearted mother before cutting her down. She tried to reason he wouldn’t do it, fought against the image of blood and carnage.

But he’d killed innocent people before. He’d told her as much.

She couldn’t breathe.

Had he known? When he’d discovered who she was, did Rion know he’d killed her mother? Is that why he’d always assured her he really was the demon everyone claimed him to be? Was he hoping for her forgiveness?

Arianna grabbed at her chest, breaths coming more and more shallow as the image morphed before her eyes.

Her mother standing before a roaring hearth.

The Demon’s green eyes prowling from behind.

Her mother’s smile as she tried to reason with the creature.

That smile fading as she begged for her life.

Talon called her name.

Arianna saw The Demon’s wicked smirk. He raised one hand, earth dancing around his body before shredding her mother to pieces.

And she smelled it. Smelled all his victims.

“I saw it with my own eyes,” her father said, though his voice was distant. Hollow. “I got there too late, and that demon stood over her body.”

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't breathe.

“He started this war. I intend to finish it.”

She gripped the table when her father turned and Arianna collapsed, fading from the waking world that'd turned into a nightmare.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Arianna

Arianna's head spun when she came to, but the arms around her were solid and familiar. She clung to him, not even bothering to see where they were going. Talon could carry her out to the middle of nowhere and she wouldn't care. Arianna buried her head in his chest, breathing in his deep, aromatic scent. Like heavy rain in the middle of summer. How many times had she'd mentally begged Talon to rescue her? How many times had she ached for his presence?

He was here now, saving her from her mental demons instead of the physical ones. She was glad for it because while she could fight the physical ones on her own, the mental ones were winning their war, drowning her in thoughts and feelings too overwhelming to face.

He killed your mother.

He started the war.

Arianna's body shook. Rion. Her Rion. His violent self had calmed so much since that first touch. Almost enough for her to forget about the savage creature he'd once been. Or still was. He'd killed warriors right in front of her. She'd watched their painful demise yet, she'd tried to reason they deserved it because how could anyone ever kill out of sheer pleasure?

Demon.

Monster.

Murderer.

But that's exactly what he was. To everyone but her. When he returned to Brónach, they'd view him as that killing machine and grovel at his feet for mercy. And Arianna wondered if he'd grant it in her absence.

Talon shifted her weight to open a door, and he closed it with a light kick, shrouding them in darkness. He placed her on a soft mattress, and Arianna finally examined where he'd taken her.

Her entire body shuttered upon seeing the familiar shelves lining the walls filled with endless books, half of which she'd never read. Her bedside lamp, carved in the likeness of a willow tree, still sat upon the side table. And her last read lay beside it, though she had no memory of the story within its pages.

Her room. Arianna ran her fingers over the soft comforter and cool sheets beneath. She took in the lavender scent on the linens and settled into the familiar pillows. How many times had she imagined herself here?

Talon's voice broke her trance. "Your father commanded me to go after him." Arianna clenched her jaw. Talon would obey. He had to, and she'd suffer the pain of ultimately losing one of them. Talon's voice lowered. "I won't if you ask me."

She blinked. "What?"

Talon knelt at the side of her bed and took one of her hands in his. "I've been without you for so long, Arianna. The thought of you hating me is a burden too great to bear. So, if you ask me, I won't hunt him down."

Her voice quivered. "But he's your High Lord."

"And you're my queen."

Her lips parted as she stared into his faithful eyes, taking in everything that was Talon. He'd never given up the search, even after her father had declared her dead. This male, this compassionate, strong male had been everything to her once, and that loyalty hadn't diminished with the time she'd been away. He was till her best friend. Her family.

A silent tear rolled down her cheek, exhaustion taking over. She laid her head back on the pillow and tightened her hold on his hand. Talon seated

himself on the floor, folding his legs beneath him, content to stay with her, she realized, for as long as she needed.

“I love him.” Her voice broke and Talon stilled. “He killed my mother and I still love him.”

Talon’s thumb moved back and forth across the back of her hand. “Tomorrow,” he said. “We’ll get through it one day at a time, starting tomorrow.”

ARIANNA STAYED in bed the following day and the day after that. Talon brought her meals, forbidding even the servants from entering to tend to her needs. Somehow, he knew how fragile she’d become without her ever voicing it. She couldn’t face all their questions. Not when she didn’t have answers. Not yet.

Arianna curled into herself.

I don’t want you anymore.

He killed your mother.

Both statements were good enough reasons to forget him and move on as if the last two years of her life were nothing more than a horrible nightmare. But she couldn’t forget his tender kisses or the urgency in them as she willingly pressed her lips to his. Nor could she forget the way he’d ran his fingertips over her skin and the tears he’d shed.

She knew his last words were lies. But her mother. How could she ever face her people again if she were to forgive Rion? How could she stand before her mother’s grave with him at her side?

Her heart ached, far more than she’d ever experienced and she clutched at that place in her chest. He couldn’t have a mate. She knew that.

She'd known it long before she'd given herself to him. And when she met her mate how would that male react to the knowledge that she'd given herself to a demon? Would she disgust him? Would he refuse the bond?

But more importantly, could she ever forget Rion? He'd once told her eternity was a very long time. How much longer for those in misery?

Her mate. She rolled the word over her tongue. He'd be king of the Fae. A powerful leader that would sit at her side. And she'd be the tainted queen. She wondered if he'd kill Rion out of sheer territorial dominance.

Her doorknob turned and Arianna lifted her head, expecting Talon when another familiar scent struck her hard. Before she had time to sit up, Ellie's arms were around her neck, clutching her so tightly she couldn't draw breath.

"You're here." Ellie's voice cracked. "I didn't believe them then I caught your scent." She squeezed tighter. "You're really here." A flood of emotions bombarded her at once. Delight at seeing her beloved sister again. Guilt for not thinking about her as soon as they crossed the bridge into Levea. Fear that she'd scent The Demon and want to strike him down like her father had.

The females stayed that way, holding one another with tears rolling down their cheeks until Talon interrupted with a soft knock at the door. He twisted the handle a second later and carried a tray full of tea and sweets.

"Talon says you haven't left your room and that father has already been a jerk." Ellie's face scrunched as she looked over her sister's thin form. "He says you haven't eaten much either."

Arianna stared at her little sister. Ellie could have been her twin had she'd not been born a few years later. But the two were different now in every way. She'd caught a glimpse of herself at the lake house. Ellie's cheeks were round and full of youth, while Arianna's were hollow and sunken in.

Her eyes were bright and so blue in color they twinkled in the morning light. Arianna's were dull and lifeless. And the smile on her face. How long had it been since Arianna smiled like that? Was the time she'd spent in the cabin really only a few days ago?

"I missed you."

Ellie's lower lip trembled, and Talon took his leave. Her little sister curled up on the bed next to her and Arianna laid back, willing her racing heart to steady. She didn't release Ellie's hand. "He hasn't left your side, has he?" Arianna shook her head. Ellie sat up again, pulling Arianna with her. She grabbed a small plate with a cake and plopped it in her hands. "Eat and tell me everything."

Arianna stared at the pastry and the perfect icing that coated it. "There's a lot to tell."

"I'm not going anywhere." Silence echoed in the small room. Ellie scooted closer until their knees were touching. "Were you really The Demon's captive?"

"Rion," Arianna corrected. "His name was Rion."

"Was?"

"Is."

"Okay, so tell me."

"Has father told you about..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

"About mother? Yeah." Her voice lowered. "I was angry with him, but he'll get a piece of my mind later. I wanted to see you first." She looked crestfallen. "I can't believe he lied to us."

"I can't believe Talon knew."

Ellie picked at her cake. "Talon can't disobey his High Lord, none of them can else they risk being labeled a traitor. I'm sure it killed him to keep it from us."

If you ask me.

She sighed. “I know.”

Arianna took a bite of the desert and cringed at the sweetness.

“Anyway,” Ellie waved her hand. “I want to know what happened to you.”

Arianna stared at her plate. “I fell in love.”

“With The Demon? Rion?” Ellie corrected.

“I know it’s wrong, but the longer I stayed with him, the more I began to realize who he truly was. He was gentle, and it was like—like no one had ever offered him a shred of comfort. He returned injured one night and he was actually scared of me. I could have killed him right there—”

“But you didn’t.”

“I couldn’t. He was so weak and, gods Ellie, there was so much blood. I couldn’t just let him die when I knew I could...” Arianna trailed off and her sister perked up.

“Could what?”

She hadn’t thought about telling Ellie or the reaction her little sister might have. Talon had taken it well enough, and if warriors from Brónach spread the news, her identity wouldn’t be a secret forever.

“I can heal injuries.”

Ellie’s lips parted. “Like, with magic?” Arianna nodded. “But that means...”

“I don’t want to think about what it means. I can’t—I can’t deal with all that. Not yet.” Maybe never.

Ellie wrapped her arms around Arianna again, squeezing her sister tight. “Father is going to be in for it when he finds out. He’ll be bowing to you from now on.”

Arianna managed a laugh. “Yeah, that’ll be something to see.”

“Now,” she straightened. “Back to Rion.”

The two sisters talked and talked and talked. She told Ellie everything. About healing those in Brónach's camp, about her first kiss and the first night she'd made love, to which Ellie wanted the most intimate of details. She told her about the kidnapping and the Dark Fae in the mountains. Then finally, she recounted his painful goodbye.

Ellie snorted. "You know that was all for show."

"It felt real enough."

"But you said you could hear his heartbeat. That should reassure you. I'm sure Talon said something to Rion that made sense, you know, the Talon talk of what's best for everyone." The girls laughed.

"But there's still the other issue." She didn't have to voice it for Ellie to understand.

"Maybe," she paused, seeming to mull it over. "Maybe you own it to yourself to talk with him. Get closure at the very least. And if we have to sit in this bed and eat cakes for the next decade, that's what we'll do."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Of eating cakes?"

A small chuckle. "You know what I mean. And...what if my mate hates me for ever loving someone like Rion?"

"What if Rion is your mate?"

"You know that's not possible."

"Says who?"

"Everyone, the old texts included."

"And you believe those dusty old things?"

Arianna shrugged. "I don't know anymore."

Her sister laid back on Arianna's pillows. "At least you fell in love with a Lord. Father should give you some credit in that regard."

Arianna stopped chewing and recalled a conversation she'd had with

Rion at the cabin.

“Was your family part of the council or something?”

Or something.

A Lord. How could she have forgotten? The Demon was the estranged younger sibling of Brónach’s High Lord. Their greatest disgrace. Which meant the sister he’d spoken of was Saoirse. Arianna vaguely remembered her from childhood, when they’d visited with her parents for a matter involving their countries.

Ellie waved a hand in front of her sister’s face. “You okay?”

“I forgot.”

“That he was a Lord?”

“Gods Ellie, if I can’t remember something as simple as that, how am I supposed to rule over a continent?”

“To be fair, we had a rather boring history teacher. I can’t remember half the crap she taught me.”

“I’m serious.”

Ellie clasped her hands. “Relax. We’ll take it one day at a time.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Saoirse

Saoirse leaned against the marble wall and carefully folded the note in her hand. It'd happened again. She'd spent too much time focused on work and ignored the needs of her partner.

Saoirse sighed. Màili was a beautiful female with sun-kissed skin, a knack for gardening, and a laugh that could bring a smile to the most serious warrior in the room. They'd met at a tavern six months ago when Saoirse returned from an eastern village after solving a squabble over land. It'd been the best six months of her life. And she'd ruined it.

Saoirse read the note again. A fond farewell, wishing her the best with a hopeful message they could remain friends. *Yeah. Friends.*

The door down the hall opened and Saoirse stuffed the letter in her pocket. Her younger brother walked down the elaborately decorated hall and she followed, her footsteps hardly a whisper against the marble floor. She passed intricate artwork hanging along the walls, scarcely paying attention to the details as she focused on the male Alec had instructed her to stay away from.

He was headed for the upper gardens. Again.

Paperwork and meetings kept her busy most days, but with Rion home, she couldn't focus. Alec had instructed her to take some time off, and she spent it trailing her younger brother every chance she could. She should be in a war meeting right now, softening her brothers' harsh decisions and offering her strategic advice, especially considering their recent loss.

But Rion, her younger brother, was finally home.

Alec was convinced he'd wreak havoc on their city, as he'd done so

long ago. She remembered the killings. And their provocation. Her little brother had simply been on a morning stroll when the males attacked from the shadows. But Alec didn't like to hear that side of the story. Rion would always be the one who killed their father. And she'd always be the coward who let the world believe it.

Saoirse's heart had stopped when her slave had run into him that first day. She honestly wasn't sure what he'd do, but just like the Rion she remembered, he still held that soft spot for the slave's plight. She remembered the first time he'd stood up to Alec about the issue. Her older brother had laughed, asking Rion how they could run a country without labor. Rion had snapped back, saying a country who couldn't run without them was pathetic. She'd barely prevented the two from having an all-out brawl.

Saoirse turned down another hall and waited for him to round the corner. If he noticed, which she was certain he had, Rion didn't show it.

He hadn't killed a single person, Fae or half-breed, and with her constantly trailing him, their warriors didn't dare attack either. Much to her relief.

Rion trained every evening, pushing his body beyond its limits until he was covered in sweat and gasping for breath. No one dared enter the northern training rings, though he didn't seem to mind the solitude.

He pushed open the glass door and entered the garden. Saoirse stood at the entrance, staring through the fogged panes into the warm room beyond. He sat on the same bench, in the same position, staring at absolutely nothing.

She looked at the small tree behind him and the pink flowers that never stopped blooming. Saoirse knew why he came to this tree. He'd planted it with their mother, and she'd used her magic to push it from seedling to juvenile in a matter of moments. Saoirse remembered Rion's face that day, the young six-year-old awe as he tried to summon his own magic,

his hand pointed toward a small plant until his face reddened with the strain.

Their mother had picked him up and twirled him through the air, tickling his sides to elicit the laughter she so loved to hear. “You’ll get your magic soon enough,” she’d say. “And you’ll be one of the most powerful Fae in history.” She hadn’t been lying about that part.

Her mother was a seer, but such a gift was so rare that no one understood exactly what it meant. Sometimes she’d see glimpses of the future in such detail it was overwhelming. Other times, she puzzled through a maze of shadows, the fragments haunting her waking dreams. Saoirse always wondered if her mother knew what Rion would become. Perhaps things would have been different if she were still with them.

Saoirse spent so long searching for her. So many years, decades, gathering information from every corner of Alastríona. Many loved their mother and the thought that someone might have stolen her away, possibly murdered her, angered even the Fae from Fiadh.

Saoirse opened the glass door and walked down the pebbled path. Rion didn’t look up as she sat directly across from him, closer than she’d been in a decade. She remembered all the times she’d tried to approach and all the times he’d turned away. Her heart cracked with each memory.

This was her little brother. The small boy she’d led from stall to stall at festivals. The boy who’d laughed endlessly and possessed such curiosity about the world around him. Someone she used to hold before a fire as they both cried for their mother’s absence. The defeated male on the bench before her wasn’t the monster she’d seen him grow into. He was that boy again. Mourning.

Could the rumors be true? She’d heard whispers from the warriors that’d returned. They spoke of legends, of a female from Móirín that The Demon guarded fiercely.

“Rion?” Her voice was smaller than she wanted. How long had it been since she’d spoken his name? He didn’t respond, but he didn’t stand to leave either.

Saoirse looked at the tree again. Rion resembled their mother so much it was painful. What words might their mother have spoken to console him?

“Do you remember coming here when we were children?” she started. “I do. I remember the delight on mother’s face when she planted that seed. I remember how often we came here to play, escaping winter’s chill on the coldest days of the year.” She caught herself smiling, but Rion didn’t move.

“Alec doesn’t come here much anymore. He never has time, really.” Her mind jumped to another memory. “What about the first time he put you on a horse? I think you were five and mother was furious. You’d likely have broken your arm if she hadn’t been there.”

Silence.

Saoirse leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “Rion?” He lifted his eyes this time and Saoirse’s heart clenched. Those eyes. Those impossibly sad eyes. He looked away again. “Talk to me.”

Rion’s jaw feathered. “What, exactly, do you want from me?” The first words she’d heard in such a long time.

“A conversation.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my brother.”

A momentary spike of anger. “I haven’t been your brother for a long time.”

She stood to reach for him, but Rion recoiled and shot to his feet, walking around the stone bench to put space between them. She couldn’t keep the pain from her face and could have sworn he flinched at the sight. Saoirse deserved the distance he kept.

“I’m The Demon, lest you forget.” His voice was low, a strained growl that didn’t quite feel like the aggression he intended. “You remember that teacher you loved so much? What was his name again? Caol? He trained you for twenty years. You trusted him like a father, and I ripped the skin from his body. Or how about the male you grew up with? He was like a brother to you, wasn’t he? I overheard your cries after I crushed him.” He shook his head, a grimaced smile covering his features as if he were trying to conjure that wicked smirk he gave to his enemies. “And what about the slaves you so love? How many of them have I murdered over the decades? You couldn’t have forgotten about them.”

“Don’t lie about the slaves. I know better.” Rion’s jaw clenched. “You make everyone see the worst in you. Why is that?”

“It’s all they’ve ever seen, so why not?”

“Do you want to be alone for the rest of your life?” Rion didn’t respond. Saoirse remembered those deaths in vivid detail, but they were only one side to the story. He didn’t mention how her teacher had put four holes through Rion’s abdomen, nor did he talk about her friend’s assassination attempt. And the slaves. She’d caught him smuggling them from the palace, running them to Móirín’s boarder in the dead of night only to take the blame for their disappearance without complaint. “Talk to me.”

He let out a long sigh. “I started the war.” Everyone knew that.

“Tell me about the female,” she tried again.

Rion met her gaze. “She’s Avalon’s daughter.” *Shit*. He’d had one of the ladies of Móirín this entire time? “I didn’t have time to explain before we parted, but she’s likely heard I killed her mother by now.” Saoirse averted her gaze. There was no mending it then. She’d never forgive someone for hurting her mother. Saoirse imagined this Arianna would feel the same.

“Saoirse.” He said her name with such reverence. She studied the

desperation in his gaze. Something else she hadn't seen in decades. "I didn't do it." She furrowed her brow. Didn't do it? What did he meant di—he wasn't lying. But—they'd seen him. She, Alec, and Avalon had seen Rion standing over the Lady of Móirín's corpse. "A shadow weaver from Fiadh killed her and fled before I could catch him."

Her lips parted, words failing her as she tried to absorb the new information. "Why tell us—"

"That I did it?" he finished. "They blamed me anyway." Just like with the slaves. He took the blame again. Let them believe he was a monster. Again.

"But the war—"

"Was all for nothing," he said. "The war Avalon declared should have been against Fiadh, but I was so hell-bent on destruction that war sounded... fun." He looked away, shame filling his gaze. "I wanted out of this city. I wanted the chance to fight, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Until I met her."

Rion leaned against the nearest tree and looked toward the sky. "And now she believes I hate her," his shoulders shook, "and that I murdered her mother."

He cared, she realized. About so much and so many things. This wasn't The Demon Alec feared, nor the creature her warriors whispered about. It'd all been a façade, a way to keep himself safe from further heartache. And she'd been blind to it.

Some sins couldn't be forgiven, but perhaps, one day, with a little help, others would begin seeing her little brother in a different light. And if she could somehow fix this, then maybe she'd fix the stain on her own soul as well.

Saoirse stood at his side, but she didn't reach for him again and they both watched the sun rise over the horizon, bathing the city in its golden

light.

Chapter Forty

Arianna

A month.

The longest month of Arianna's life. She wasn't sure her crippling grief would ever end.

She'd experienced suffering as a slave. The scars around her wrists proved as much. She'd felt the sharp pains of an empty stomach. The agonizing burn of a parched throat. They'd beaten her until she was broken and bloody, left to either pick herself up or die with those deemed worthless.

But despite all that misery, it was nothing compared to the hollowness she endured now. She ached, so deep Arianna was certain it was her soul that suffered. It felt as though she were hanging onto the last threads of Rion's essence, and no matter how hard she clenched her fists and planted her feet, he was slipping away.

Ellie secured another flower in Arianna's hair, twisting a final tendril to the back before removing the pin from her mouth and carefully working it between the braid. Her younger sister's face beamed when she stepped back to examine her masterpiece. "Done."

Arianna lifted her eyes to the mirror, uncaring, and sucked in a stunned breath.

Their mother stared back.

Proud.

Elegant.

All the things Arianna could never hope to be.

Her mother wouldn't have thought twice about attending this celebration. She would have ignored the heavy pain in her chest, lifted her

chin high, and marched down that stone path with a smile on her face.

All Arianna wanted to do was scream.

Her father had been planning this since her return. A festival to mark the homecoming of their country's lady and show the citizens of Móirín how a single female had risen above adversity and survived against overwhelming odds. She was to be the symbol of hope and show them that no matter what trials they suffered, they too could prevail.

But she wasn't hopeful. She was drowning day by day, struggling in the currents of her fractured heart.

Arianna ran a gloved hand down her arm, the delicate silk pleasant against her bare skin. But Rion's touch had been softer. Warmer. She pressed her fingertips to her lips and remembered how his had trembled. And how he'd devoured her, chasing away any doubts lurking in the back of her mind.

Tears fell and Ellie's smile faded. "You can still say no." Arianna knew Ellie would stand up against their father for her sake. Arianna just didn't want another confrontation. She just wanted—what did she want?

Rion.

She wanted Rion.

And she shouldn't. She should loathe him. The very thought of him should disgust her, but no matter how hard she tried. No matter what she did, Arianna couldn't bring herself to hate the male who'd stolen her heart.

ARIANNA EXITED the side door to the deafening roar of cheers from all sides. A stone path wound its way toward the central dais where her father and his council waited. She steadied her racing heart, watching the way the water on either side of path reflected the color of her dress. Ocean blue

with silver beading swirling down her bodice.

Ellie had picked it out. Along with the gloves and shoes to match.

The people of Levea chanted her name, but all Arianna could do was clench her teeth in response. She'd planned to wave at them, smile as her mother might have done. Don a mask in place of the broken female who stood before them now. An hour, that's all she needed to push through, but it already seemed too much.

Arianna stopped and the sound of her steps no longer echoed off the stone. She couldn't do this. She needed to turn back. Run. Hide from those prying eyes that knew what she'd done.

Talon was at her side then, looping his arm through hers. She knew her father would disapprove. He'd meant her to walk this path alone, to display her strength. But she didn't have any. She—

"I'm here," Talon whispered. She took a shaky breath and allowed him to escort her further. One step at a time. That's all she needed to take.

When they were almost to the dais, Arianna met her father's gaze, but it wasn't disapproval she saw in his eyes. It was love. Tender, unconditional love. And Arianna realized her father wasn't looking at her at all. He was looking past her, to the ghost of her mother.

Her mother had been the only one who could quell his temper. All it took was a soft hand and her father would snap his mouth shut, watching his mate as if she were the holiest thing to ever walk the earth.

They'd been mates, not simply husband and wife and despite not feeling the bond, Arianna felt like she finally understood the depth of his grief. To be abandoned by the one you loved was unbearable. To feel your mate die at the hands of your enemy was worse.

Arianna sat in a smaller chair to the right of her father's and Talon stood behind her. Avalon eyed Talon. He usually stood behind her father, a

guard to their country's leader, but someone else had taken that place tonight.

Avalon returned his attention to the crowd and raised one hand to silence them. He gave a brief speech to welcome his daughter home, which she drowned out, then called for food and drinks to be served.

Arianna didn't touch the food and neither did Talon. She simply sat there, content to get through the evening in stillness. It wasn't until Talon touched her shoulder that Arianna realized her father had addressed her. *Why? Why couldn't he just let her be?*

"Daughter?"

Arianna gazed out over the sea of faces. A female leaned against her male. Another couple held hands, waiting in anticipation. The wind shifted and the scents of those lucky enough to have found their mates assaulted her like a hard blow to the gut.

He was gone. He wasn't her mate, no matter how much she wanted him to be. Whatever she'd thought she felt, whatever she'd hoped for, wasn't real.

A tear slipped down her face. Then another and the crowd murmured. They pointed as if they understood the female who'd had her heart broken by a cruel, unfair world.

Talon blocked her view, and the next thing Arianna knew, she was in his arms. He marched right back down that stone path without bothering to seek her father's dismissal and in that moment, Arianna realized Talon no longer cared.

Her father addressed the people when they vanished from view, claiming the war still haunted his daughter as it did so many of their warriors. He claimed she'd heal with time, but Arianna wasn't sure her heart would ever mend. She'd bleed and bleed until there was nothing left but an empty shell.

THEY DIDN'T go back to her room. In fact, Talon skipped the main house altogether. He walked around it instead, carrying her all the way to the pools they'd played in as children.

The water's calming scent washed over her anxieties, but Talon didn't stop at the pool's edge. He walked straight in.

The liquid sloshed between them, steam rising as Talon used his magic to heat the pool of water. He carried her to the back corner, shaded by bare branches and a small walking bridge.

Talon sat in the alcove, submerging them both, and clutched Arianna to his chest. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. Arianna leaned into his shoulder and silence took over the small space.

A safe place. The same one she'd run to when she was depressed or worried.

And Talon remembered.

The Fairy Folk she'd grown up with began to emerge one by one as if summoned by her presence. Flowers drifted toward them on a phantom wind, then their spindly bodies rose from the water.

Arianna glanced down when she felt something tickle her arm and stared into black, beady eyes that seemed to echo her own pain. They'd never liked it when she was upset.

Arianna reached for the little water sprite, and it clutched her fingertip with rooted hands. She leaned her head into Talon's shoulder again and let her tears fall anew.

How did one mend when the remedy for their soul lay beyond reach?

SUDDEN SUNLIGHT blinded Arianna, and she pulled her thick comforter over her eyes to shield them from the piercing light.

“Up you go,” Ellie said, her singsong voice lancing through Arianna’s pounding head.

“Go away.” Arianna turned over and pulled the blanket tighter around herself, but Ellie ripped the blankets off the bed.

“Not a chance. We have somewhere to be.”

Arianna’s heart jolted. After yesterday, the last thing she wanted was to disappoint the citizens of Levea any further. They’d expected a strong lady, proudly displaying her victory and she’d shown them a broken one instead.

Ellie rummaged through Arianna’s drawers and threw an outfit on her bed. “Don’t get worked up. It’ll just be you and me. I have something I want to show you in the western shopping district.”

In the city? Arianna hadn’t ventured there since she’d arrived. Actually, she hadn’t left the family estate at all.

“So get dressed and meet me there in two hours. I had Myrna draw a bath for you across the hall and breakfast will be ready afterward.”

Arianna sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “How will I know where to find you?”

Her sister winked. “I’ll find you.” She held up two fingers. “Two hours.” Then disappeared into the hall.

Arianna yawned, stretched her body, and couldn’t help the smile that crept to her face. She knew what her sister was doing. Trying to get Arianna away from the reminders of yesterday. To Ellie, every day was a new start, no matter what level of failure preceded it.

Ellie had given Arianna a month to wallow in her grief. She'd listened to her stories and held her when she cried. So despite wanting to remain in bed, Arianna peeked her head out the door, glad to find the hall empty, and padded the short distance to the bath chamber.

TIME CRAWLED. After submerging for a quick scrub, Arianna had stuffed herself full, thankful that Myrna had simply left a tray in her room. She glanced at the clock on her bedside stand and tapped her foot. It'd barely been an hour.

Her mind churned, thoughts invading that she'd rather keep at bay. Arianna glanced at her books and an idea struck her.

After seeing the Fae from Brónach, the Dark Fae, and The Demon who wasn't quite what others claimed, she had a million questions. And their library had a million answers.

Arianna opened her bedroom door and peered up and down the hall. She could hear the servants walking to and from but she didn't smell her father. Good. Hopefully he was out for the day.

Arianna ducked back into her room, fastened a heavy cloak around her shoulders, and pulled the hood up to hide her face. The Fae would still be able to scent her presence but with any luck she'd at least avoid conversation and their questioning looks.

Arianna padded through the halls, avoiding any large gatherings and walked down a set of polished stairs that led her below the first floor. Most residences lived on the first floor to enjoy the waterfalls and fresh air, everything else resided beneath.

A servant passed, carrying a load of linens and Arianna ducked out of

her way. The female paused, her mouth gaping, but stopped whatever question was about to come from her lips when Arianna didn't reveal herself. The female kept walking and Arianna did the same.

There would be a time, she told herself. A time when she'd seek out Myrna and thank her for her patience. A time when Arianna would walk the halls with her head held high again. But it'd be after her heart had healed. After she no longer suffered beneath the guilt that haunted her every step.

She turned down another hall, passing fountain after fountain. Some were so large, their basin had been built into the floor while others were tiny, the stone depicting the Fairy Folk's small stature. Arianna couldn't help but think of Rion's carvings and the hole in her chest chaffed. She clutched her heart, trying to breath past the pain as she leaned against the nearest wall.

Would it ever pass or would this heartache last an eternity?

Down another flight of stairs, Arianna found herself in the only space where water didn't flow. The Fae here ensured moisture stayed out of the air and that nothing above dripped onto their precious archives. She pushed open a large set of heavy oak doors and let them close behind her on near silent hinges.

Arianna stepped toward the edge of the railing, pulled back her hood, and peered down, gazing upon the thousands of books that lined the shelves below. The circular space was trimmed with the same dark oak as the entrance doors, with carvings of fairy folk and waterfalls along the railings. Each of the five floors had row upon row of wooden shelves and old artifacts stood behind glass. A spiral staircase led to lower levels, its steps made in the likeness of interwoven vines and leaves. She breathed in the scent of old books and something in Arianna's heart lightened a fraction.

She'd spent countless hours here, researching for school, reading for pleasure, and wandering the aisles as if she might memorize every title. She'd

likely never have time to read them all, but Arianna had a good idea where she might find the answers to her questions.

The elders who watched over the library resided two floors down, but she didn't see them at their desks. Perhaps they were shelving books elsewhere or had gotten lost in a good story. She crept down the central staircase on silent feet, moving as fast as she could until she found herself on the bottom floor.

The tomes here were much older than those above, but also well preserved. This was where their histories had been written down and passed from one generation to the next and hopefully where she'd find the answers she sought.

Arianna walked along the circular expanse, running her fingers along the shelves until she found the historical section. Surely there'd be something about the previous Divine. She moved down the aisle slowly, scanning the spines. Arianna pulled one down and ran her fingers over the cover.

Histories of Levea Vol. V

She put it back and pulled down another.

Trade and Policies Vol. III

Arianna flipped through a few pages and scanned the chapter headings, but she didn't find any keywords she hoped might point her in the right direction. She placed the book back on the shelf and walked a little further. A title caught her attention then.

The Dark Fae: A Guide

She pulled the large book down and opened it to a middle page. A picture of a beautiful female with a large wingspan, human-like arms, and taloned feet sat poised as if ready to strike. Harpy was the name written across the top of the adjacent page. A being said to devour humans and sometimes other Fae. Banished during the dark age. Current residence:

Unknown. Arianna squinted at a note scribbled at the bottom of the page. She tilted the book and thought one word might have been north but she couldn't be sure.

“My, my, it's felt like an age.” Arianna jumped and the book fell from her hands, landing with a hard thud on the polished floor. The male bowed his head. “My apologies Lady Arianna.” He bent to pick up the book and closed it. The male stared at it longingly, as one might their own child. “To see you in the library again brings back fond memories.”

She wasn't sure what to say. Brogan was the keeper of old records and had often helped her with her studies. He'd watched her grow up, taught her how to care for books, and was someone who'd likely have questions she didn't feel up to answering.

But Brogan slid the book back into place on the shelf. “Are you looking for anything in particular?” Nostalgia rolled through her. How many times had he asked her that very same question?

Arianna cleared her throat. If anyone could answer her questions, it'd be him. “I was wondering if you had any books on the previous Divine?”

He perked up and gestured for her to follow. “Any reason for the interest?”

“Not really, I just couldn't remember what we learned in history about her.”

“Not surprising since you and your sister seem to enjoy sleeping through that class.” He gave her a playful smile. “Ellie is quite the handful but her mind is just as sharp as yours.” He studied the shelves. “I should have —” His brow furrowed. “I could have sworn I put that back.” Brogan moved further down the shelf, examining each book with a feather light touch. “Perhaps someone checked them out already, though I can't imagine who else might want to read through ancient history.”

“Brogan, do you have a moment?” Another male stopped in the center of the staircase but when he spotted her, he snapped the book in his hand closed. “Well if it isn’t Lady Arianna.” She ducked her head, unsure of what to say. Of course she’d have to run into him. Demetri had always made her uneasy with his squinty eyes and pointed nose. Sometimes, she even swore he smelled strange. She couldn’t quite explain it. She’d shared her thoughts with her father, but he’d waved her off, claiming Demetri was a valued member in Levea and held in high regard.

Brogan didn’t seem to share her discomfort either. “I was just assisting the Lady with finding a few books, though they seem to be missing from the shelves.”

“Borrowed for research I’m sure.” He waved his hand around the old archives. “There’s not much else one would read these old volumes for. What subject?”

Arianna dashed out from behind Brogan and ran toward the stairs. “It can wait, I have somewhere to be anyway.”

“Are you sure?” Brogan asked. “If you give me a while, I’m certain I can locate them for you.”

Arianna waved her hand. “I’ll come back later.” She bolted past Demetri and pulled the hood back over her face. Arianna moved quickly, making her way back up the stairs and to the first floor without looking back. Her skin still crawled from Demetri’s presence.

But Arianna could worry about him later. She’d spent too much time in the library and if she didn’t hurry, she was going to be late meeting Ellie.

She exited the estate, walking quickly past the water falls to the stairs that led her into the city. Sentinels stood at attention, guarding the gate, but she ran past them too, desperate to escape before they could apologize for not recognizing her that first day.

She'd longed to gaze upon Levea's bustling streets for so long that Arianna found herself looking forward to her sister's surprise. The first thing she'd looked forward to in a while.

Her legs carried her down, down, down then Arianna paused at the base of the stairs. Fae, half-breeds, and humans alike walked the streets before her, running from one place to the next. Some paused to glance at her, but they smiled instead of glaring. One even called her name, waving frantically, before rushing off toward whatever their agenda called for. Work perhaps.

Arianna felt more at ease with the familiar scents carried on a cool breeze. She pulled her cloak tighter over her shoulders, but let her hood fall. This was home. A place she could be herself.

She could smell the river that ran through the city from the next street over and found herself letting her magic flow freely, gliding it along posts and through the small swirling streams lining the sidewalks.

Levea. It still looked the same. Houses stood around her family's estate, most old in structure, though well preserved. A cobblestone sidewalk led her toward the more modern part of the city where the buildings began to take on multiple floors. But the storefronts were the same, with the same vendors selling mostly the same wares. Perhaps she could visit one after meeting her sister. Arianna might not appreciate sweets like she used to, but the bak—an acrid scent sliced through her newfound joy and Arianna whipped her head toward the western district. Her chest tightened at the smoke rising in the distance. Too much smoke.

She started down the street, shifting to a run, her heart hammering in her chest as that black cloud grew bigger and bigger.

A scream pierced the air and the frail female Arianna had become vanished entirely, replaced with the Fae warrior who'd survived slavery and a

land haunted by war.

A fire, she told herself, still sprinting. It was just a fire. They happened. But the closer she got, the thicker the smoke became.

Then the warning bells echoed throughout the city.

Chapter Forty-One

Saoirse

Saoirse moved her pawn forward and studied the game board. “You could always grab her and run.”

Rion gave her a strained laugh, eyes flashing between the pieces. “And how did you react the last time a male put his uninvited hands on you?”

She sighed. “To be fair, he had it coming, but she deserves to know the truth.”

“It’s not like I can simply march into Móirín and ask her to hear me out.”

“Maybe not yet, but if what you’ve been telling me is the truth then —” Then their entire world was about to change. A simple command from this Arianna would force their two countries to reconcile. Not even Alec could deny the queen of their people.

“But I’m also responsible. If not for me abducting her, Arianna’s mother wouldn’t have died at all.”

Saoirse waved him off. “You can’t predict every tragedy. No one can, except maybe a seer, and even then, I’d be skeptical. None of us had any intention of killing her.”

“I don’t think Avalon will see it that way.”

Saoirse huffed when Rion moved another piece, knocked her king over, and sat back with his arms folded. “Checkmate.”

“How are you so good at this game if you never had anyone to play against?”

“What makes you assume I didn’t?”

“Because you’re,” she waved her arm around him, “you.”

He chuckled. "Right, because The Demon doesn't get downtime."

"That's not what I meant. I just figured they'd be too scared of you to, I don't know, sit down like this."

"Oh, they were scared. That was half the fun."

Saoirse huffed after a soft knock at the door. "Come in." The knob turned, and her slave entered, keeping her eyes glued to the floor. She'd begged Saoirse to keep her as far away from Rion as possible, but Saoirse had dismissed her request. The girl would grow accustomed to her brother.

"Alec is calling for you."

Saoirse clicked her tongue. "He can wait. I'm busy."

She shifted, risking a glance at Rion. "He said it was urgent."

Saoirse rolled her eyes. "Of course it is."

The female continued, wringing her skirt with her hands. "I know it's not my place, but I overheard him talking with Lord Isaac." Saoirse paused to listen. "It sounded like Fiadh was attacking Móirín."

Rion's heart skipped, and he was on his feet before she'd even registered the words. "Tell him we're on our way." The female bowed and fled from the room. Earth sprang up from his satchel, circling the table at the sound of Móirín's name. She stared at it, marveling at the strange magic that set him so far apart from everyone else.

Saoirse followed Rion's hurried steps through the halls as they rushed toward the throne room. She often had the girl relay information, but for Alec to drop an important piece so casually meant he'd wanted her slave to overhear. So she wouldn't waste time.

Rion's boots echoed off the walls as they rounded the last corner. The fear radiating from him was almost palpable, and she wasn't sure how Alec would react to their little brother barging in with magic flying. It wasn't as though either of them had shown signs of reconciliation. *Nor would they.*

Though he wouldn't admit it, Alec relied on Rion for his strategic skills. It was why, despite his demeanor, Alec had appointed Rion as the general of their military forces. Sure, it got him out of the palace, but Rion had never lost a battle. So long as one didn't count the most recent failure.

Rion shoved the doors open and was across the room before she could intervene. Those stationed to guard Alec drew their weapons, placing themselves between their High Lord and The Demon, but Rion didn't so much as look at them.

“Is Fiadh making a move against Móirín?”

Alec's eyes flashed toward her, but they weren't reprimanding. It wasn't as if she could control Rion's actions any more than he could.

“Yes.” Alec swirled his glass of wine, returning his gaze to the maps spread across the table before him. “Our scouts noticed their advancement two days ago.”

“How many?”

Alec eyed him. “Ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand?” she echoed. “Since when?” The numbers they'd previously calculated had barely been half that.

“They've been hiding in the shadows, as they've always done.”

“You think they're shadow weavers?”

“What else could they be?” Her skin crawled. She'd faced them before. Instead of harnessing the natural elements, those blessed could also summon shadows, seemingly from the depths of hell. They burned just like flame and danced around their bodies like demons of their own.

Saoirse composed herself. “So, what's our move?”

“We'll aid them of course.” Rion stiffened at her side. “We've been trying to crush Móirín for years, why pass on a perfectly good opportunity?”

Her gaze flashed to Rion's motionless form. “Do you believe Fiadh

can be trusted? You know as well as I that an alliance with them is... temperamental at best.”

“Which is why we’ll wait. Fiadh will lose a large portion of their forces against Móirín, making them more open to negotiations with us. I’m certain The Demon won’t object to having some fresh blood to spill.”

Rion still hadn’t moved. She couldn’t tell if he’d gone into shock or if her little brother was trying to devise an impossible plan.

Saoirse took a deliberate step forward, crossing the small space. Her heels clicked as she ascended three stairs and came around the low table to stare at Alec’s maps. Despite what her elder brother wanted, she knew Rion wouldn’t attack Móirín. Not with Arianna there. And then there was the possibility this female really was The Divine. She was her brother’s second in command, she’d have some sway in his decisions. She had to try.

“With their history, I’m not sure I agree.” Saoirse lifted a wooden figure that represented Brónach’s army and slid it toward Móirín. “What if we were to aid Móirín instead?”

“What?”

Saoirse folded her arms, refusing to meet Alec’s penetrative gaze. “If we crush Fiadh, Móirín will be forced to see us as allies again. Our two countries had peace for centuries. The same can’t be said of Fiadh.”

Alec rubbed his temple. “You can’t be serious. After a decade, you want me to march a legion of warriors over their border and claim aid?”

“Two legions, to ensure we’re heard loud and clear.”

Alec pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why the change of heart? I thought you, of all people, would jump at the chance to crush Móirín and be done with it.”

Her gaze traveled to their little brother. His face had turned deathly pale, and he’d clenched his fists so tight she could see the whites of his

knuckles. His breath was shallow, but he gave her a subtle nod.

“Because Rion never killed Móirín’s High Lady. Fiadh played our countries against one another, and I’d rather not be another pawn in their game.”

Alec stared at her, shifted his gaze to Rion, then returned it to her. “Is this supposed to be a joke?”

“No,” Rion said, taking a step forward.

Vines broke from the floor in response, winding their way along the arms of the guards as they readied themselves for a fight.

Alec raised his hand to steady them. “Our little brother runs home with his tail between his legs and now you’re inclined to believe anything that comes from his filthy mouth?”

“It’s true,” Rion said. Alec scoffed, but Rion continued. “Tell me honestly, would you have believed me if I’d claimed innocence? Do you think the Lord of Móirín, who stood over his dead mate, would have believed me?”

“I don’t believe you now, so what’s your point?”

Rion growled in frustration. “I haven’t done anything since my return, shouldn’t that count for something?”

“After decades of cleaning up your messes? No, I’m afraid it doesn’t.”

“Brother—”

Alec slammed his chair back in such a violent rage that Saoirse flinched. Greenery shot from the floor, cracking the marble and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end from the sheer force of his power. “You do *not* get to call me that. You do not get to come in here and pretend you’re part of this family. Not after what you did to our father.”

Their father... he still blamed Rion. Everyone did. Because she

hadn't taken a stand all those years ago.

Rion stood before Alec, magic flaring in response but he didn't so much as look at his sister.

I'll protect you.

She'd sworn it from the depths of her soul. What a horrible lie. How many times had she failed him? How long would she continue to fail him?

"He didn't." Saoirse's voice was barely audible.

Alec clenched his jaw and rolled his eyes. "Saoirse, your love—"

"He didn't," she cleared her throat, "because I did." The entire room fell silent and slowly, as if in a daze, Alec turned toward his little sister. "I killed our father."

His lips parted, searching for the lie in her words. Almost as if he hoped for it. "Why?"

Saoirse shook off her tears. "Because I watched a father try to kill his son for no other reason than being different. Then I watched a nation rise against a child who'd done no wrong. A brother who, at ten years old, understood the need to protect his sister. And then I let him. Like a coward, I let that child suffer from pain and exile."

Alec stood in shocked silence then fell back in his seat. She remained standing, her heart beating hard and fast. There, she'd finally confessed her greatest sin. Not that she'd killed her father, but that she'd hurt her sibling in the process. She should have been the one to suffer as an outcast, not him.

"I owe this to him Alec." Her brother didn't respond. "I owe our little brother a debt I can never repay, and I've never asked you for anything, but I'm asking you for this. Aid Móirín, rekindle our lost allegiance with them."

Alec stayed silent for a time. "I can't change our entire course based on a rumor."

"It's not a rumor," Rion said. Alec looked at him, really looked at him

for the first time in almost a century. “If not for her, I’d be dead. She healed me, along with hundreds of others in that camp.”

“She’s The Divine,” Saoirse said, still not quite believing it herself. “That female Rion has been with is The Divine. Even Eoghan attests to it.”

“He’s alive?” Alec eyed Rion.

“He made it out.” When Alec didn’t speak again, Saoirse continued. “You can’t believe in one part of the ancient texts without believing in the other. You have an entire unit of warriors claiming her existence and a duty to the people of Brónach to uphold your faith.”

Alec let out a long breath and studied the map again. “If I refuse to aid Móirín, I might very well be killing the queen we’ve waited on for centuries. If her existence turns out to be a rumor, then I’ll look like an incompetent fool.”

“Better to be branded the fool,” Saoirse said.

Alec studied his maps again. “All right.”

“All right?”

He gave her a crooked smile. “It’s not a though you twisted my arm or anything.” His face turned serious. “I trust you. You’ve always stood by my side and if you feel this is the right move, then I’ll stand by yours.” Alec glared at Rion. “As for you.” He jerked his head in Saoirse’s direction. “You’ll bring her back alive.”

Rion nodded. “Understood.”

Saoirse let out an exasperated sigh but couldn’t help the smile that pulled at her lips. Maybe they could reconcile after all. One day. One tiny step at a time.

Chapter Forty-Two

Arianna

Arianna ran straight into the chaos of smoke and flames, tugging at the magic racing beneath her skin. Five unarmed civilians stood against two warriors, pulling the water from the spiraling nooks that ran throughout the city to defend themselves. She launched her magic toward the warriors, encasing their bodies in a wall of ice that left them immobile. The civilians grabbed fallen debris and shattered those warriors into a thousand pieces.

Arianna kept running. She didn't have time to consider the part she'd played in their deaths. Fire burst from a storefront to her left, sending heat and glass flying in all directions. She shielded her face, but shards bit into her arms and stuck. Her ears rang, but Arianna still didn't stop. The panic rising in her chest wouldn't let her.

Ellie. Ellie. Ellie.

Flames consumed nearly half the storefronts and the heat and smoke made discerning her location nearly impossible. She coughed, her throat burning. Arianna tore the bottom of her shirt and covered her nose, but it did little to keep the harsh smoke from her invading her lungs.

Another scream had her whipping around. Three half-breeds fled with one pursuer. She lunged toward them, placing herself between him and the innocents. The warrior's magic roared to life.

Not greenery, as she'd expected, but shadows. Hot, flesh-melting shadows.

Arianna yanked water from the surrounding fountains, wrapped herself in ice, and cringed when the shadows slammed into her magic. Steam rose on impact, but she sent ice running down those shadowy arms, all the

way to the one who wielded them and silenced the weaver forever.

Those who'd been fleeing were gone before she could get to them, already sprinting down the burning street. Hopefully they'd find a shelter or at the very least remain hidden until Móirín's forces gathered to drive the invaders out. Arianna looked all around, struggling to figure out where Ellie could have gone. Where the shopping district even was anymore.

A line of warriors approached from her right, one prowling in their mountain lion form, but they weren't wearing the blue and silver armor of Móirín. Nor were they wearing the tan and green of Brónach. These warriors were dressed in the red and black armor of Fiadh.

But they weren't at war with Fiadh. Right? Talon hadn't mentioned a conflict with another country. So why were they here?

Arianna kept quiet and took several steps back before breaking into a sprint. She moved fast, ducking and dodging around those who were already locked in combat, the sound of steel chasing after her. She had to find Ellie first. From the looks of things, Fiadh had come to kill and conquer. Possibly even enslave.

A memory of chains and whips rose to the surface of her mind, and Arianna growled. She'd never let that happen to Ellie.

Another unit of warriors appeared before her, and Arianna skidded to a halt, ducking into the nearest building to remain undetected. The building itself hadn't caught fire yet, but its neighboring structures were blazing, and smoke was filling the space fast.

Clicking sounded on the tiled floors. Arianna's skin crawled. *Shit.* They'd followed. She held her breath and scurried beneath a shelf, trying to remain quiet, but the scrape of claws drew closer. Then she heard the growl and Arianna bolted. She jumped over a table and through the nearest window, using her shoulder to break the glass. Arianna rolled to her feet. She felt

blood trickle down her arm and a sharp sting in her bicep but she ignored the pain and kept running.

Ellie. What if they'd already found her and clasped her in shackles? How much had Talon taught her while Arianna was away? Ellie was strong, her sister had always excelled, but was she prepared for this level of chaos? Could she act in the face of adversity?

Arianna stopped running. She gulped down air and surveyed the scene. Screaming civilians ran in every direction, those with wings shifting to their animal forms to flee the scene. And everything burned, it didn't matter how large or small. And the bodies. There were bodies in the streets. Bodies in Levea. Her home.

She suddenly understood why so many feared Rion. Because this is what he did. He conquered. He tore through village after village with his warriors and either killed its residents or turned them into slaves.

Arianna shook the thought away.

Maybe Ellie wasn't even here. She knew to retreat toward the estate when the alarm sounded. *Right?* Arianna chewed her lip, her mind running faster and faster as she fought an internal war with herself. Keep looking or check the estate and pray she found her little sister safe and waiting.

Despite how much it hurt to turn her back on the innocents, Arianna pivoted on her heel and headed back in the direction from where she'd come.

A dozen warriors blocked her path.

She braced herself and turned in the opposite direction, ready to flee, but others waited, drawing their weapons. She looked to her left, then right. Surrounded. Black and red glinted in the morning sun, reflecting her frightened gaze.

After everything, was this how she died? In the middle of a burning Móirín with no allies?

Arianna planted her feet at the same moment their shadows erupted. She wrapped herself in a bubble of ice, thickening it as much as she could before those burning shadows slammed into her shield. She gritted her teeth, trying to hold her ground as they did it again and again and again.

Her magic melted faster than she could create it. *Shit, shit, shit.* Right before her eyes dozens of shadows weavers were breaking down her shield, determined to scorch her alive.

Her lips quivered. Rion. She'd wanted the chance to ask him herself. The chance to forgive him. Because no matter how much grief it caused her, she didn't want to die without feeling his arms holding her close again.

Rion.

Water dripped at her feet and Arianna cringed as the first wave of heat penetrated her barrier. She gritted her teeth, ready to feel the searing pain sure to follow when an army of war cries echoed from behind.

Those who'd been attacking her shifted away and she strengthened her barricade. Blades clashed, the muffled echo of metal against metal a song to her ears. Then she smelled their magic and burst from her cocoon, sending spears of ice flying through the enemy to her front.

The piercing scream of an eagle sounded from behind and Arianna spun in time to see Talon shooting through the throng of warriors, his wings tucked tight. He shifted back to his Fae form midair and roared, sending a wave of water out to collide with their enemies.

Liquid danced around his body despite the heat, cracking against itself, freezing and unfreezing as it wound its way around his body. It burst from his limbs with every slash of his blade and retracted with the same ferocity.

Spears of ice flew from behind her, impaling warriors from Fiadh, pinning them against the burning structures. They howled in pain, writhing to

break themselves free.

Once again, Talon had come for her, and when she saw Ellie in the center of their group, she'd never been more thankful. But thanks could come later, because more Fiadh warriors were pouring in, burning everything in their wake.

Talon threw her a blade and Arianna caught it, slicing through the nearest enemy without hesitation. She wouldn't stop, not until every last one of them was either dead or fleeing.

Because this was her home.

And no one was taking it from her.

Chapter Forty-Three

Rion

Rion's lungs screamed, his heart slammed against his ribcage, and his legs cried in protest as he ran and ran and ran. A small group of them, his sister included, set out ahead of Brónach's army intending to announce their arrival to Móirín's High Lord.

But Rion didn't bother waiting for them. Arianna was in danger. He didn't have time to wait on anyone. He'd thought leaving meant protecting her, that Móirín would have the strength to fend off any attack.

Rion knew Levea's defenses better than anyone. He'd infiltrated them once. And he also knew how aggressively the shadow weavers from Fiadh fought. Rion growled, letting the sound echo through the trees. No matter how hard he pushed himself, no matter how much he wanted it, Rion wouldn't get there in time.

He prayed the ten thousand marching on Móirín weren't all shadow weavers, because if they were, Fiadh was about to rule the land of Alastríona. Their magic was wild and wicked, even more so than his. They were said to have once been the royals' defenders, a personal guard to the king and queen of the Fae. But they hadn't had a royal leader in thousands of years and Arianna's identity was still largely a secret.

If their loyalty meant anything anymore.

If they killed her. Rion ground his teeth. If they killed her, he'd rip their country apart.

He'd committed so many sins. Rivers of blood ran at his feet. The names of innocents were engraved on his soul. He had no right. He knew it, but Rion still prayed to the gods. He prayed they'd punish him, torture his

body instead of using Arianna's fate to tear his heart to shreds.

Please. He begged whatever god might be listening. *Please.* Curse him, hate him, let his soul be devoured by the worst creatures imaginable. *Just please don't touch her.*

RION SCENTED the waterfalls of Levea and slowed to a walk. His chest heaved as he sucked in lungful after lungful of air and scanned the perimeter. Fire rose on the western side, the smoke a thick blot against the azure sky. He prayed Arianna was in her family's estate, safe, perhaps huddled with her sister as they waited for the battle to end.

He scented the area, searching for guards, but if any were present, they were well within the capital city's borders. Stupid to leave themselves vulnerable. And unlike Móirín.

Saoirse skidded to a halt at his side and placed her hands on her knees. Sweat dripped down her face and when she stood, she leaned against the nearest tree, struggling for breath. "Alec told us not to run through the night, remember?"

"You didn't have to follow." The rest of their squadron arrived one by one, all bent over like his sister. One even heaved, his face red from exertion. Maybe the male would learn to train harder after today.

"I'm not sure where your head is right now, but if you try walking in there alone, they'll rip you in half."

He smirked at that. They could certainly try. "I hadn't planned to announce myself."

Saoirse pushed off from the tree and wiped the sweat from her brow. "This is going to be tricky enough, we shouldn't do anything to provoke

them.” Rion ignored her and looked beyond the city to the main estate positioned high above everything else. His sister’s gaze followed. “Do you think she’s there?”

Rion’s jaw feathered. “Let’s hope so.” He looked back toward the billowing clouds of smoke. Because if she was in the middle of that...Rion’s throat went dry.

“Let’s get this started then.” Saoirse led the way with Rion and twelve other warriors following. He didn’t know what she’d told them about his presence, but thankfully, none had tried to put a knife in his back. At least, not yet.

Their group approached the eastern gate with its long, white bridge separating them from the island city of Levea. They walked at a snail’s pace, too slow for his liking. His hair stood on end, and he watched the upper towers vigilantly. Even during a siege, he knew Móirín wasn’t stupid enough to leave their borders defenseless. So where was everyone?

The scent of blood and flesh permeated the air, calling to him like an old song. It danced with his blood, along with the faint screams in the distance. Any one of them could be Arianna. Any moment could be her last. If he found her body instead—

“Calm down,” his sister hissed.

“Then walk faster,” he replied through gritted teeth.

As they neared the end of the bridge, a call of warning echoed across the quiet expanse and Saoirse held up her hand for them to pause.

“Name yourselves,” a voice demanded. Rion’s eyes scanned the towers again, then locked onto a male with his back pressed against the far wall. The gate wasn’t high enough to prevent him from jumping it. All he had to do was run, and he’d be through, he could always ask for Saoirse’s forgiveness later.

“We’re from Brónach,” Saoirse replied. “I’m here to speak with your High Lord regarding—”

Rion lunged to his sister’s side, catching the spears of ice with his sand before they could penetrate her heart and lungs. Two in their party weren’t quick enough and fell to the ground, clutching their throats before they stopped moving altogether.

“Looks like we’re doing things my way.” Fury tore from the ground as Rion ran toward the guard. Water formed from all directions at once and flew at him, but Rion’s magic soaked it up, and he launched it far away from his body before jumping the gated wall and grabbing the male by the throat. He caught four others with his magic, suspending their bodies in the air. One wetted himself. Another cried.

Rion growled in the male’s face. “When someone says they want to speak with your High Lord, you do not attack them.”

He whimpered and Saoirse ran to Rion’s side. “Let him go.”

Reluctantly, Rion dropped the male and he scrambled back, looking at Rion as if he were a monster. Because he was. Only Arianna thought him otherwise.

“We heard about the attack and came to help,” Saoirse said.

The male glanced from her to Rion and back to her. “Help? From Brónach?”

“Yes, now take us to your High Lord so we can sort things out before our units arrive.”

He stood, his legs shaking. “I don’t understand.”

Rion stepped forward and the male stepped back. “You don’t have to understand. You just need to obey.”

Screaming sounded too close. A chill snaked down Rion’s spine, and he was moving a second later. Saoirse called after him, but his heart was

pounding too hard to hear. A female. That'd been a female's scream.

Rion's magic propelled him faster and upon seeing warriors wearing red and black armor, he ripped the skin from their bodies without hesitation. If anyone wore the color of his enemies, he was striking first and asking questions later.

The female they'd surrounded fell to her knees, clutching a bundle to her chest. Three children peeked around her skirt, tears staining their cheeks and Rion realized the bundle in her arms was an infant.

He looked toward the billowing smoke again. They'd attacked the western gate, yet there were already warriors circling around toward the eastern side, likely taking advantage of the distraction. Móirín shouldn't be this disorganized. Not so quickly.

"I'm going."

His sister didn't protest this time. "Stay alive."

As if he had another choice.

RION FLEW through the city like a hurricane. He tore through warrior after warrior, ripping flesh from their bones, breaking limbs, and shoving sand down their throats. But he didn't stop moving or pause to ensure they were dead.

The only time he lingered was to scent the air, searching for the one person he prayed he wouldn't find. If she were at the estate, like he hoped, Saoirse would protect her. Then his sister would organize Brónach's forces to wipe Fiadh from the map.

He was of better use out here, where he could prove his worth when he felt so unworthy.

Only a handful of shadow weavers blocked his path, putting on a show to instill fear while those who wielded flame took advantage of the chaos. The strategy was solid, but he saw right through their façade.

A warrior roared, so loud and fierce it had Rion stopping to observe. Fiadh's warriors had broken through a line set up by a young group from Móirín. They fought. Hard, but Fiadh was faster, quicker on the draw. Rion charged.

A snarl ripped from his throat and earth snaked up their legs, wrapping around their bodies so fast they couldn't react. He snapped two necks and suffocated the others, leaving them to writhe on the ground like the vial filth they were.

The warriors from Móirín froze. One fell to his knees.

"Brónach is here to provide aid. Regroup and push Fiadh out." None moved. "Now," he roared then they were scrambling, and he was off again.

He wrapped his magic around a leg in passing and yanked, pulling the knee from its socket. Rion hardened the sand into tiny pellets and propelled them straight through the skulls of six others. He kept moving, kept fighting until—Rion's heart dropped into the pit of his stomach, and he skidded to a halt.

Fear flew through his body when he scented the air again and sprinted west, pushing his legs faster and faster.

Arianna.

Was she fighting? Did Avalon know? Was Talon with her?

He followed the trail of bodies, searching, scenting the area. They'd cut her. They'd cut their queen. His queen.

He moved slower now, his blood strumming in his ears as he listened, searching the bodies scattered across the ground. The dense smoke clouded his senses, making her seem everywhere and nowhere at once. Or was that

his panic?

Rion tried to center himself as he prowled forward. She was close now, but none of the bodies were moving. No one growling or fighting. No one calling his name.

Then he saw her. A vision straight from his hellish nightmares. Rion's body froze, his lungs constricted, and it was only by sheer force of will that his knees didn't give out.

They didn't share a mating bond.

He wouldn't have felt it if she—

Rion took a step toward the limp hand, that once silken hair crusted in blood. He tried to swallow, but his throat wouldn't obey. His hands were shaking too, his soul fracturing with every step.

Rion knelt, but a blade slashed through the air a second later and he barely registered it enough to sit back on his heels. A male, no, a half-breed, grabbed for her, twisting her body so that he cradled it against his chest. The half-breed pointed a blade at him, growling in desperation.

Then Rion heard the faint heartbeat. The shallow breath. Something in the air cleared and he scented the female again.

It wasn't Arianna.

But the similarity, the likeness in both scent and appearance.

“Is that Ellie?” The half-breed growled again, baring his fangs in hopelessness. Rion stood carefully. “Is that Arianna's sister?” he asked with a bit more force.

Her name seemed to break his trance and Rion's nostrils flared. “Where is she?”

Chapter Forty-Four

Arianna

Arianna landed another blow, watching the life ebb from the face of her enemy. A comrade collapsed to her left, and she eyed the rest, taking a shaky breath amid the chaos.

There were so few of them now, but those few were the reason she still stood and fought. Because every single one of the warriors surrounding her was battling for the queen who kept healing them, no matter how much her body begged her to stop as they faced off against the largest military force they'd ever encountered.

Talon's blade tore through another of Fiadh's warriors, moving with a precision that hadn't waned since he began. He'd danced through them for what felt like hours, never pausing for breath.

But she saw the consequences of that constant strain. It was only by a fraction, but his movements were slowing. She kept glancing his way, far too often, for someone who should be focused on herself.

But so many bodies already littered the ground and the thought of Talon joining them... The thought that he could fall and there'd be absolutely nothing she could do to stop it was unbearable.

A knife reflected the sun's light, and her cry of warning came too late. The sharp blade plunged into Talon's side, and he roared in pain, twisting to kick in the warrior's knee. Talon followed the movement by shoving his sword through the male's throat.

He stumbled back a step and their unit converged upon their commander. Arianna's hands were over his wound seconds later, his blood spilling out over her fingertips. She panted, feeling the muscles knit

themselves together and willed her magic to work faster. Metal rang from all sides and smoke still filled the air, burning her lungs.

Dread settled in the pit of her stomach. They couldn't keep this up. Over half of their forces had already fallen, and Fiadh's warriors kept pouring in. But if they stopped fighting, Fiadh's warriors would overrun the civilians struggling to escape. Females and children would be taken as slaves or slaughtered. Her country's capital would fall. Everyone she'd ever cared about would cease to exist.

Arianna clenched her jaw and let her gaze flicker between her comrades. Each of them had made the same decision without ever speaking. No matter how much their bodies cried out for rest, no matter how much they suffered, not a single warrior would surrender.

Her lips trembled, tears threatening to spill over. Even if, by some miracle, they survived, she wasn't certain about Ellie. Her little sister could fight, there was no contesting that, but the fear had overwhelmed her, made her forget her defenses and within moments they'd been separated. Talon's second had split off to retrieve her, but then Fiadh's forces had swarmed in, their numbers seemingly infinite and Arianna had lost track of her little sister.

Arianna knew Talon's warriors were some of the best, but she also knew the devastations of war and as much as she wanted to rage against the idea, she might never see Ellie again. Or anyone for that matter.

Hot tears streaked through the blood and dirt caking her face. Help wasn't coming. They'd fight as much as they could, but reality was closing in fast. They weren't going—she startled, Talon's warm hand breaking her downward spiral into despair. He stood and despite the hopelessness that had settled over her, his jaw was still set, his eyes determined. No matter how bleak, Talon wasn't giving up this fight.

She wiped her tears away and took his outstretched arm. It didn't

matter if they wouldn't live. It didn't matter the impossibility. All that mattered was their last stand. These last moments. Because if she, if they, were going to die, then they'd go together. They'd make a final display so grand, the people of Móirín would sing songs about them for centuries.

The lost queen and her warriors.

Arianna settled back into her stance, letting Talon's teachings flow through her. Talon yanked water particles from the air, and she followed his lead. It burned. Her magic burned, spluttering like a stream running dry. But she kept tugging at those depleting reserves, refusing to accept defeat.

The particles surrounding the pair hardened into ice and her breath clouded despite the warm air. Talon rotated his blade, stretching his wrist, and launched back into the fray. Arianna followed.

Her too-large sword slammed into her enemy's shield, and she gritted her teeth against the sound, spinning toward his exposed left side. Her blade met its mark, warm blood rushing from the wound. She withdrew and collided with a second.

Just one more, she kept promising herself. One more enemy and she'd get to go home. One more death and she'd get to see Ellie's smiling face, safe and sound at their family estate. One more and Talon could rest and—

Their entire line stepped back. Another comrade fell, too far for her to reach as Fiadh's forces pushed them back again, their magic like a battering ram against their dwindling energy. Talon gritted his teeth, hardening a shield around his comrades as the flames threatened to break through. She lunged again, sinking her blade deep.

One more.

Another comrade fell.

One more.

Hot blood splattered across her face, and she turned to watch the male

guarding her right fall, his throat wide open. Talon grabbed her arm and twisted her body behind his. He sank his teeth into Fiadh's warrior, returning the favor.

She tried to breathe, to think as fire spun at her front. Arianna barely had enough time to summon a shield, the thin ice melting almost as soon as it formed. Talon twisted away from her then another warrior caught her leg, knocking her off balance.

She hit the bloody ground, her elbows stinging from the impact. On her back, Arianna tried to crawl away from the male stalking toward her, tried to scream Talon's name above the roaring chaos.

Her hand slipped out from beneath her and panic shot through her body when the male lunged. Arianna clenched her eyes, bracing for impact. She was out of magic, out of options—an earth-shattering roar echoed across the battlefield, pulling the male's attention. Grains of earth surrounded her body seconds later like a warm embrace, carrying his scent with it. Arianna hardly noticed the blood that tainted that scent. Hardly noticed anything as she watched auburn hair join the fray, his sand tearing through the enemy with burning intensity.

Her body shook, but Arianna grabbed her sword and struggled to her knees. She panted and watched. Rion's earth had wrapped itself around her comrades as well, leaving just enough space for them to observe and join the fight once they'd recovered. Even Talon took a moment to breathe. His eyes met hers and she gave him a subtle nod, indicating she was all right.

None questioned his presence. None so much as flinched from the earth circling them, the particles never ceasing their movement, and Arianna couldn't help but watch as Rion, this male she'd grown to love, tore through Fiadh's warriors with practiced ease. She'd seen that fierceness before, the gleam in his eyes as they danced from one opponent to the next.

A sob escaped her lips. He'd come for her. Despite everything he'd said, Rion was here. More warriors from Móirín joined the battle, seemingly appearing from nowhere.

Talon broke from his shield first with renewed vigor. Water yanked from the bodies of their enemies and floated in the space between him and Rion. The two males stood back-to-back, facing the numerous warriors who sought to tear them down.

Rion's sand spun in a violent storm and Talon's ice joined it, chipping away at the plating on their enemy's armor until that cyclone found flesh and screams replaced their confidence. The two remained close, relying on the other to guard their back as they whipped their magic from that protective circle over and over again.

Spears of ice from Talon. Chunks of rock from Rion. In rhythm, as if the two breathed together.

They wouldn't fall now. She knew it in her heart. No one else was going to die.

"Arianna!" Her heart jolted at the sound of Rion's voice, and she sucked in a breath when their eyes met. But his shifted and he jerked his chin to her left. Arianna followed his gaze toward a sphere of earth just outside the chaos. Warriors were already hammering away at it and dying as tendrils of earth shot from the cocoon like vipers.

She met his gaze again then every warrior separating her from the sphere froze, their bodies encased in dirt and sand.

Arianna didn't hesitate. She launched from his protective shell and sprinted toward the sphere. His magic caressed her skin, sticking close. Some warriors noted her running form and made to strike, but ice crawled up their bodies and she glanced back to see Talon focusing on her. Arianna didn't pause to deliver any killing blows. She just kept running, heart pounding

against her ribcage the whole while.

The sphere opened like a mouth ready to devour and Arianna leapt inside, darkness converging on her when the sphere sealed itself again.

Arianna fell to her knees, struggling for breath, but a familiar scent had her head snapping up.

She couldn't see but the copper taste in the air mixed with her sister's scent told her enough. Ellie needed help. Fast.

"Kieran?"

A sob escaped him. "He said you could heal her."

Arianna crawled toward his voice, her heart hammering in her chest as she tried to listen. To focus. Her sister's breathing was too shallow, her heart rate slow.

Arianna bumped into her sister's unconscious body and quickly found where Kieran was keeping pressure on a deep wound in Ellie's abdomen.

She tried not to let panic set in at the feel of Ellie's blood.

Her lips quivered and Arianna begged whatever god had granted her the gift of healing to allow her just a bit more. Just enough to save her sister. Her beautiful, alive, little sister.

The light in her palms flickered to life, spluttering as if it might give out any moment. It illuminated Ellie's grimaced face and all the cuts and bruises forming down her arms. Arianna's magic found a broken rib. Two.

The magic worked, far too slow for her liking, but little by little, the wound closed, and Ellie's blood stopped flowing. Kieran loosed a slow breath, but his hand never released Ellie's. Time seemed to crawl. The clashing of steel faded. The battle cries stopped echoing and finally, finally, Ellie took a deep breath. Her eyes cracked open a fraction, eyes so much like her own and Arianna gripped her hand, kissing her knuckles despite the blood covering them.

Kieran let out another sob and Ellie parted her lips.

“Don’t try to talk,” Arianna’s voice cracked. “You’re safe now.”

Her little sister smiled. “Your Rion doesn’t seem so bad.”

THEY SETTLED in a ruin, carrying their injured inside the charred remains of someone’s home. Those with the ability put out surrounding fires but most collapsed against the structure in exhaustion, sending up whispered prayers of thanks.

But Arianna couldn’t rest. Not yet. She kept healing, kept moving from body to body, no longer caring who knew and who didn’t. After how hard they’d fought to protect her, she refused to let any of them die.

Talon barked orders to those with enough energy to move and set up a perimeter, instructing the able bodied to check for survivors in the surrounding rubble. She didn’t want to imagine the funerals or the cries of pain when those in shelters discovered their loved ones weren’t coming back.

Rion settled himself in a far corner and Arianna watched him carefully before kneeling at her sister’s side again. Ellie had fallen asleep before the battle even ended.

But she was alive. Thanks to Rion, her little sister was still alive.

So, what did that mean for her?

Arianna stood with a heavy sigh and walked away without a word to anyone. She knew all eyes followed her, as they likely would for the rest of her life, but she also knew they’d give her a minute to herself. Because they understood exactly how she felt.

Arianna hid behind the nearest structure and leaned her head against the crumbling stone. She tried to take a deep breath, but the acrid air burned

her throat and she coughed instead.

Her vision blurred and Arianna tilted, but strong arms pulled her against a warm body, and she let herself fall into him, knowing exactly who stood beside her by his scent alone.

Arianna's body trembled but for the first time in over a month, her heart felt whole. He'd done so much in the span of an hour. He'd eliminated their enemy, he'd saved her sister, then he'd help secure a place for them to rest.

But how much good would it take to erase a lifetime of sin? How many lives need to be saved to replace one stolen?

Arianna pushed away from him and Rion let her, but his hands remained lightly on her shoulders as if awaiting her next move.

"I need to know," she rasped. "I need to hear it from you." His heart pounded. "Did you—did you kill—" Arianna couldn't finish the sentence.

"No." She searched for the lie, trying to scent it in the surrounding air, but she only tasted fear. So much fear. "I swear," his voice shook. "I took her, I won't deny that, but I swear to you Arianna, I never hurt her."

Arianna tried to calm her breathing. "And the rest?" It all came crashing back.

I don't want you anymore.

"Lies," he whispered. "All despicable lies."

She didn't move. Couldn't as she tried to process his words and the truth in them. She didn't have the courage to meet his gaze.

Her father believed Rion had killed her mother, yet Rion claimed innocence.

And neither male was lying.

"I—"

"Arianna?" Her head whipped toward Talon's worried face. He

paused mid-step and took in Rion's hands on her shoulders, but before he could speak and before she understood why Arianna found herself running into Talon's arms. He held her close, and she finally let the last few hours come crashing down. The pain, the hurt, the fear. And when she turned back around, Rion was gone.

Chapter Forty-Five

Saoirse

Saoirse studied those seated in the small room, a gathering she'd never thought to see again in her lifetime. Avalon, Móirín's High Lord, sat in a chair with his hands folded, rage pouring from his body. Ten warriors, six male and four female, surrounded him, each standing with their weapons drawn, eyeing her younger brother. And three of his council members sat at the very back with wary expressions.

Saoirse had ensured her sentries kept their weapons away. Tensions were high enough without provocation. She eyed Rion, oddly the calmest among them.

She was certain the female was alive. But had he spoken with her? Had he explained himself?

“Your assistance was the last thing we expected,” Avalon began.

Saoirse cleared her throat. She didn't have time to prepare a speech, but blunt truth had served her well in the past. “Before the war, our families were allied for centuries. Upon learning the truth, we felt the need to rekindle that alliance.”

Avalon's hateful gaze locked on Rion, though her little brother didn't seem to notice. “And you claim, after all these years, that this—creature had no involvement in my mate's death?”

Saoirse stiffened at the word ‘mate’. Not a wife. Not a lover. His mate. She never wanted to experience the depth of that loss.

Rion answered for her, his voice steady. “Brónach's High Lord ordered her kidnapped for negotiation purposes. He wanted to force your hand with a difficult arrangement, but I never—”

Avalon slammed his fists on the table. “I saw you!” Saoirse held up one hand to steady her guards. “I was there that night and I saw you standing over her.”

“And yet my hands were clean,” Rion replied. “I wasn’t covered in her blood.”

Avalon scoffed. “With that magic of yours, what need do you have for a blade?”

“And I suppose you’ll say my magic can cut like a blade, too? I don’t think I need to remind you about the circumstances of her death. A shadow weaver from Fiadh took her from me. Had your mate remained at my side, she would have lived.”

Avalon snarled, his hands curling so tight that his fingernails bit into flesh. Rion had been right. Convincing the High Lord of his innocence was going to prove difficult, but she hoped not impossible. Avalon relaxed his hands, but his rage remained. “I’ll grant your alliance on one condition.” He inclined his head toward Rion. “You let us execute that demon, then we can discuss terms.”

“He’s innocent.”

“Innocent?” Avalon gave her an incredulous look. “What about the other mates he’s slaughtered? The comrades we’ve lost and innocents that fed his insatiable thirst? Don’t they deserve to be avenged?”

Saoirse stood. “This is ridiculous after he just sa—”

“Do you swear it?” Rion asked. All eyes turned to him. “You’ll make peace at the cost of my life?”

“Rion.”

Avalon’s eyes hardened. “You have my word.”

SAOIRSE GROWLED. As soon as Rion agreed, Avalon had him in chains, shackled at the wrists and ankles.

Saoirse followed the guards guiding her little brother to the dungeons and snarled at any who dared pull the chains too hard. “Rion, you don’t have to do this, there’s always another way.”

“Not for Avalon.”

“I’ll find something to offer him, you just have to give me time.” He didn’t respond, so she ran to his front, stopping both Rion and the guards eager to get him below the surface. “Tell me why,” she demanded. He’d been so adamant about finding this female and now, all of a sudden, he was willing to die?

“Because life isn’t worth living without her.”

The guards tried to push forward again, but she hissed at them. “What are you talking about? Just go talk to her, you have centuries to work things out. There’s always a—”

“No, Saoirse. There’s not a way. Not this time. She’s The Divine. She’s royalty and I’m,” he laughed to himself, “nothing. Absolutely nothing. I’ll always be nothing and I don’t have the strength to watch her from a distance.” His sorrowful gaze met hers. “I’m tired of fighting. So tired of fighting. It’s all my life has been, just one impossible battle after another.”

The guards started walking again and she stepped aside. “But there are other things worth living for.”

Rion didn’t look back. “Go home, Saoirse.”

She stood rooted to the spot, her heart breaking as it’d done when her mother had disappeared. As it’d done when she’d killed their father and for all the years she’d spent regretting the decision to hide behind her little brother.

Go home? Leave him to suffer again? How could she possibly do that now?

Chapter Forty-Six

Rion

His sister stopped following when the guards led him past the thick iron doors of Móirín's underground dungeon. Braziers were lit every few feet. The sentinels sneered at him as his escort led Rion deeper and deeper into the cavern's winding depths. Not many who ventured this far ever saw light again.

But Rion would. Because Avalon had plans for his execution. Plans, he was sure, would involve a very painful end.

Arianna...

He couldn't pinpoint exactly when he'd come to need her so much. Maybe it was the first time she'd shown him an ounce of compassion. Maybe it was the moment she'd entered his cabin. Not that it mattered now. She'd run to someone else. Someone who wasn't a monster. Someone she trusted to hold her bleeding heart.

She no longer needed him. Not in the same way he needed her.

Water dripped down the walls as they descended further, and the musty scent of decay overtook the other prisoner's stench. He ignored those who called to them in passing, ignored the guards who tugged on his chains.

Rion no longer cared because, just as he'd told Saoirse, he was tired of fighting. He was thankful to his sister. Really. She was the one who'd convinced Alec to aid Móirín and now that more people knew Arianna's secret, he didn't need to worry about her safety.

And he'd be out of her life forever.

She'd find her mate and live happily ever after without The Demon to haunt her.

Rion entered his cell, and the guards slammed the iron door behind him. He walked to the far corner, leaned against it, and sank to the cold floor.

Forgotten. That's what he deserved to be. And eventually, his memory would fade from the world and all would be right again.

Rion closed his eyes. Despite his longing for solitude, heavy footsteps sounded minutes later with male voices echoing down the corridor. He sighed when those boots slogged through the puddle outside his cell.

"You're really going to just let them kill you?" Was that disappointment in his voice? Rion looked at Talon. He stood with his arms crossed, a long sword strapped to his back, and countless blades hidden between the folds of his clothing.

"It was bound to happen, eventually."

"And Arianna?"

Rion's jaw clenched, remembering Talon's arms around her. "She'll be safe in your care."

"She'll mourn for you." Yes, she would, because that was Arianna and though the thought pained him, it hurt far more to imagine a life without her.

"I never realized you were so easy to kill."

Rion smirked. "Jealous?"

Talon ignored the jab. Trickling water filled the silence, then the male sighed. "You realize what Avalon plans will hurt a great deal."

"Good."

Again, silence. "I want to know who killed Lillian."

Rion stretched his legs out. "Ask Avalon."

"I'm asking you. I no longer serve Avalon, I serve my queen, and I will bring Lillian's murderer to justice."

"Justice. People's definition of it is a funny thing."

Talon growled. "Tell me."

Rion allowed himself a sarcastic smile. He'd miss riling this male up. "I hunted him afterward. Not out of any love for the Lady of Móirín, but because another stole my charge and thought he'd get away with it. However, I didn't calculate how much time the new war would steal from my personal vendettas."

"So you never found out?"

Rion flashed him a look. "I made time. I tracked his warriors to the border of Fiadh and after a bit of convincing, they gave me a name."

"Spit it out."

"The estranged son of Fiadh's High Lord. From what I gathered, he's a shadow weaver himself and a powerful one. He acted outside his father's influence and concocted a plan to divide Móirín and Brónach for his country's own glory." Rion leaned his head back against the damp wall. "There's also rumor that Pádraigín is involved though it's unclear how deep their alliance runs."

"Pádraigín? I thought the two countries hated one another."

"The countries, maybe, but sometimes individuals make their own plans."

Talon shifted on his feet. "I knew to keep an eye on Fiadh, they're warmongering dogs, but I never expected them to pit our countries against one another."

"Nor did I expect to be the pawn that started it."

Talon turned but paused. "I wanted to be the one to kill you."

"So, you are jealous," Rion smirked. "Sorry to disappoint."

"The only disappointment is discovering I no longer want to." And damn him, it sounded like he cared.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Arianna

Arianna hid in the shadow of a large oak, clutching her knees to her chest as she stared into the calm waters outside her family's estate. There had been a time, before iron and captivity, when the gentle sound of the trickling falls would have calmed her racing thoughts. But not today.

She gritted her teeth. A coward. That's exactly what she'd become. She'd overheard her father mention a meeting between Móirín and Brónach. One that she should likely attend. But she'd hidden instead, unable to face the male that caused her heart to race.

He'd saved her sister. Kieran had told her as much. Without him, Ellie would have been another forgotten body on a bloody battlefield. Without him, she and Talon might not have survived at all.

Even so, she'd run and the regret was like a heavy stone in her heart.

Arianna angled herself so she could stare at her reflection. Dark circles hung beneath her eyes from days of restless sleep, but it wasn't just the nightmares that kept her awake at night. It was the thought of him returning to Brónach. The knowledge that once he left, she'd be hard-pressed to ever see him again.

I swear.

Her throat tightened. What was she supposed to believe? It wasn't as though Rion was a saint. He'd admitted that much himself, but would he twist the truth to ensure they stayed together? Would her father do the same to keep their countries at war?

But their scents...

She hadn't smelled a lie on either male, not so much as a hint behind

their anger and desperation. Arianna dropped her head in her hands.

A cool breeze rustled through the bare branches above, carrying a strange scent that had the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end.

Magic.

And death.

She stood, heart racing as she stared through the freshly budding bushes toward its origin.

She'd never scented anything so cold before. Not on the battlefield. Not in the long months she'd been kept as a slave. Not during the attack. So why was she smelling it now, in her home country and so close to her family's estate?

Tentatively, Arianna stepped away from the crystalline pool, moving toward the stairs that would lead her closer to that wretched scent. The air seemed to pulse with an electric current and her skin crawled in response.

Her heart hammered faster and faster, then something hit her in the chest so hard it sent her backpedaling.

Arianna sank to her knees on the stairs, clutching her torso as pulsing pain racked her body. It felt as though someone had thrown a javelin straight through her heart. She took shallow breaths, but each one felt like a million shards of glass grating against her lungs. She wanted to cry out but couldn't catch her breath.

That scent increased tenfold, and her stomach dropped as if she'd leapt from a cliff.

Something was wrong. So very, very wrong. Her body urged her toward the scent as if her life depended upon it, and despite gasping for air, Arianna forced herself to stand.

She took one shaky step at a time breathing, breathing, breathing, and somehow made it down the stairs. Desperation crawled through her veins in

an icy torrent as she stumbled along the stone walkway, toward the dais where her father had hosted the celebration for her homecoming.

But the scent kept going, pulling her toward the rear corner of her family's estate. It was a place her father had forbidden them to play as children. A sacred space, he'd called it, but she and Ellie had always found it eerie. As if angry spirits haunted the grounds.

That pain lanced through her again, stealing the air from her lungs and she leaned against a pillar to catch her breath.

She kept moving. Drawn by an invisible force.

Arianna found herself at the top of another staircase, looking down upon a shallow, sparkling pool of water. Twelve white pillars surrounded the area, all a head taller than herself. In summer, ivy would be crawling up each one, green, alive, and vibrant. But the brown husks only added to the eerie air surrounding the place.

A dozen Fae stood in a circle, each waist deep in the water. They wore Móirín's blue and silver ceremonial robes with the hoods pulled up. All except her father. He stood with his arms outstretched and head tilted toward the heavens as if in prayer.

And at their center stood a single individual.

The water before the Fae had frozen solid, stretching all the way to what Arianna finally realized was their prisoner. *This place...* Her hand flew up to cover her mouth.

This was where the High Lords and Ladies of Móirín performed their executions.

No, not just executions. This was a place where the worst of the worst came to be punished. Where they suffered slowly, their bodies freezing one cell at a time. She'd thought the practice banished long ago.

Arianna studied the figure at their center. The wind blew away from

her, carrying their scent with it. Ice had already crawled halfway up their bodies, but whoever it was hadn't started screaming yet. She knew the way cold burned, and wondered if anyone could deserve such a brutal fate.

The crippling pain in her chest pulled again and before Arianna realized it, she was at the base of those stairs.

Their chanting filled her ears, an ancient, hollow sound that made her skin prickle as she continued to circle, her mind desperate beyond reason to see who stood at the center of this dreadful magic. It echoed in her bones, screaming at her to *hurry, hurry, hurry*.

She could hear the prisoner's ragged breaths now. Male. Definitely male. The ice had solidified up to his chest, and he'd clenched his fists as if holding in the pain, refusing to give in to its demands.

Arianna took another step, but no one in the circle seemed to notice her.

She caught a glimpse of auburn hair beneath the hood. Another step and she saw his angular face, his lips tinted blue from the cold. Another step and the wind shifted, carrying her scent toward her father's prisoner.

Arianna's heart clenched as emerald eyes slid to meet hers and that cord, that bond she'd been denying sprang to life.

It braided itself together, weaving between her and the male until it was so strong, Arianna was certain no blade could ever sever it.

All doubt, reason, and grief left her, replaced by a rage she'd never experienced. It burned like wildfire, pulsing, humming as if alive.

And Arianna roared.

Those nearest to her leapt back, their spell broken, and Arianna plunged straight into the freezing water. Steam rose up around her body as she fought her way through the ice, breaking it down chunks at a time. She snapped her teeth and tugged at her magic, using the water from that cursed

pool to throw the Fae away from him.

Waist deep, she wrapped her arms around Rion's torso, desperate to bring warmth back to his frozen body.

He didn't move.

"What's the meaning of this?" Her father was the only one left in the water. All others had fled to the stone bank, watching and waiting as they observed their Lady's feral rage.

Her father. He hadn't insisted she come to the meeting because this is what he'd been planning. He wanted Rion gone. Dead.

She turned to him, growling so low and deep she didn't recognize her own voice. And her father, her strong, courageous father, the male who'd declared her too weak to lead, yielded a step.

Rion's body shivered, but she didn't remove her arms. Her magic flowed through him, both water and healing. She thawed his blood, warmed the muscles in his legs that had been completely frozen, then set to healing the tissue.

So much damage and she wasn't sure she could repair it all. Wasn't sure he'd be able to walk again.

Another growl reverberated from deep in her chest as her father regained his composure and stepped toward them.

He didn't stop and every fiber in Arianna's body screamed at her to protect the male in her arms.

To protect her mate.

The water to her front solidified and shattered into a thousand shards. She tugged on those spears of glass, surrounding herself and Rion in their protective embrace before launching half at her father. Avalon pulled at the particles in the air and shielded himself from her blast. He growled in warning at his eldest daughter, but Arianna wasn't finished. No, she'd make

them all realize, make sure they knew that no one, absolutely no one, was going to take her mate from her.

The water around her body reacted, solidifying all the way to the bank and she yanked the liquid from her father's grasp, leaving him standing on bare stone. The ice towered and circled her and Rion like a giant serpent, cracking and refreezing as she shaped it to her liking.

Her father froze, mouth gaping, but she could feel his magic prodding, searching for any scrap of moisture to fight with.

She didn't give him a drop and once again, her father took a retreating step back. Vulnerable. That's what she'd just made the High Lord of Móirín.

Rion's body shivered, and Arianna poured more heat into him, praying and praying that he wouldn't collapse right there. His skin was still ice cold, but his body was healing, slowly, it was healing.

A female standing on the bank lowered her hood and took a tentative step forward. Arianna's eyes shot toward her, though she didn't take her attention completely from her father.

"She's healing him." All eyes turned toward the female.

Rion stepped back, balancing his body and his breathing came deeper. Thank the gods he was standing. She could do this. She could get him to safety.

"Avalon, your daughter is healing him."

Arianna didn't release her grip and slowly Rion's arm came to rest on her shoulders. Chains rattled and she snarled at the iron around his wrists.

The ancient texts were wrong. Everything they had ever taught her was wrong. He wasn't anymore cursed to his magic than she was to hers. Magic was magic, having a different sort didn't mean you'd bring destruction upon the world.

Avalon collected himself but she could see the uncertainty in his gaze.

“Step away, Arianna. This crea—”

“Mine,” she growled. “He’s mine.” Her father’s eyes flew open wide, but if he understood, she couldn’t tell, Arianna only knew one thing. She needed to get Rion out of here. Away from these Fae. Away from danger.

She stepped back and Rion followed, his legs near buckling. Another step and her father yanked at the magic again, trying to tear it away from her body.

Arianna growled and solidified ice around Rion in a protective cocoon then launched herself at Avalon. She pinned him to the ground, pressed her hand against his chest, and let frost crawl across his torso. “You will not touch my mate.”

He froze and for the first time, she tasted fear. Genuine fear. Those surrounding didn’t move as she challenged each in turn. “If anyone else comes after him, I *will* kill you.” Her words didn’t sound like her own. They were words of command, of threat.

Arianna returned to Rion, melting the surrounding magic without thought before wrapping her hand around his waist. He leaned into her.

“Arianna.” His voice was so low she barely heard it.

“I’m here. I’ve got you.” His hand clenched her shoulder. Weakly, as if he couldn’t quite get his muscles to obey.

And they kept walking. Until they were out of the pool. Until those dressed in ceremonial robes were far behind, rushing to tend to her father. Until the pair were up the stairs and across the landing, her magic still a raging storm around them.

Rion sank to his knees and Arianna sank down with him.

“Just a little further,” she promised, voice cracking. “Please, Rion.”

He ground his teeth and placed one foot on the ground, crying out as he stood and leaned against her. She frantically searched the area. They were

in the middle of Móirín, a country that was supposed to be her home but right now felt more like a death sentence. Any minute now those with her father would sprint up those stairs and she'd have to face them on her own.

She just needed—her eyes landed on the guest house across from the estate. It wasn't much, and she wasn't sure what she would do, but she needed shelter, maybe she could form a perimeter. Stand guard.

But there were stairs and Rion's body was giving out. And the shackles around his ankles—

Tears of frustration pricked at the corners of her eyes. Voices sounded from behind, those with her father now daring to ascend the stairs. Just a little further, just a little further, just—

“Lady Arianna?”

Her head snapped toward the voice. Eoghan stood at the base of the stairs they'd been approaching. He stepped forward, one arm outstretched and like something had possessed her, another growl echoed from deep in her throat.

Eoghan paused and scented the air before turning his wrists up. He placed one knee on the ground, but his eyes never left hers. “I'm here to serve you, my queen. Whatever you need.”

Panic swept through her body as the voices behind grew louder. “I need help.”

Eoghan was at her side a second later, his wrists and throat still exposed. “Tell me how.”

“I need him in there.” She tilted her head toward the guesthouse and his gaze followed. He eyed those behind then positioned himself to Rion's other side, glancing at her for permission to touch the male he'd once called a demon.

She pressed her forehead against Rion's. “I'm sorry,” she whispered.

Because someone else was going to touch him.

Rion's voice trembled. "I trust you."

Eoghan grasped Rion's other arm and draped it over his shoulder, taking the bulk of Rion's weight. They took the stairs one at a time, too slow for her comfort, and turned down the short path that led to the front door.

Calm water surrounded the guesthouse, flowing in circular patterns carved into the stone. The setting sun glinted off the surface and Arianna counted step after agonizing step. Rion's body was moving now, but his limbs were still too cold. The danger hadn't yet passed. And those damned shackles. Every sound from them set her on edge.

Arianna threw ice at the door, splintering the wood as it crashed open. She focused her energy on the swirling lines of water in the stone and shot it skyward, freezing the liquid midair to create a barrier separating them from the outside world. They entered the safety of the small front room. She let Eoghan take Rion's full weight, and she ran for blankets, tossing them onto the floor in giant piles before returning to keep her magic flowing.

"I can light the fire," Eoghan said.

She nodded and pulled Rion's shirt from his body, the material dripping as she tossed it in the corner. Eoghan had the fire roaring moments later. He bowed to her. "If there's anything else you need, I'll be right outside." Guarding her door as he'd always done.

"Keys," she said.

Eoghan glanced at Rion's bound wrists and ankles and bowed. "You'll have them shortly." Arianna didn't stop to think about how he'd convince her father to hand over those keys. Nor did she think about what the female had revealed about her abilities. Rion was all she cared about now.

When Eoghan closed the door, Arianna stripped off Rion's pants then removed her own clothes. She guided him toward the fire then helped lower

him to the floor and wrapped them both in the blankets she'd piled there.

His skin was too pale, still too cold to the touch, but his blood was moving, his body warming with each passing minute. And his heart had started to beat right again. Was starting to race as she wrapped her body around his, desperate to keep him alive.

Those voices approached, but one growl from Eoghan had their scents retreating, or at the very least, keeping their distance. Another growl vibrated through her as she thought about their hands on Rion and the ice they'd made crawl through his body.

They'd been so close. Had she arrived a few minutes later, she might have lost him forever. And then she'd have nothing, absolutely nothing.

Rion's hand shifted, the chains rattled, and her head snapped toward it, watching his trembling fingertips as they moved toward her face and cupped her cheek. He drew her eyes to his and Arianna's heart fluttered, that unrelenting anger melting to a deep ache.

Tears formed in her eyes again. She'd almost lost him. Almost lost her mate before she'd even realized she had one.

She gripped his icy fingers with her own. "Can you feel it?"

Those once fierce, green eyes misted over. "This isn't possible."

She gave him a small smile, not quite believing it herself. "Apparently, it is."

"And you're," he paused, choking on the words, "you're okay with this?"

Arianna nuzzled his neck then captured his lips with her own. Rion gasped, returning her vigor, and pushed her down into the pillows she'd scattered around them. He wrapped one leg around hers as if he couldn't pull her close enough.

Mate.

Had she always known? Is that why she'd been so drawn to him even during those first frightening days? Was that why she could never seem to get enough of him?

Rion broke their kiss leaving her breathless and wanting. He propped himself up on one elbow and wiped her hair from her face. "I swear to you. I never hurt her." His voice cracked, but somehow, she felt his words and the truth in them.

Her gaze traveled to the iron around his wrists. "I don't understand." Had the meeting turned into a fight? Had they caught him? And if so how?

He looked away and swallowed hard. "I couldn't bear living without you."

Living without—

"You," she began, her throat going dry. "You let them?" He truly felt so unworthy, so unloved that he'd allow himself to be taken from the world. And after she'd ran from him. They hadn't even had a chance to talk. Not really.

Arianna reached for his face, but he gripped her fingers, pressing them to his lips instead. "I need you to listen to me for a minute. The bond," his voice shook, "it takes time to settle. Sometimes as long as a year." His eyes closed. "I might not have killed your mother, but I've killed others. I'm not—I'm not a good person, Arianna."

"It doesn't—"

"Please, just let me say this." She fell silent. "The severing of the bond is painful, but if it slowly dissipates, it won't hurt like that." He took another unsteady breath. "I can run. I can do whatever you need me to do so you don't suffer."

"I thought you said you could feel the bond?" He could, couldn't he? "Would—would it not be as hard for you?"

Rion's lips were over hers then, consuming her with such desperation she thought she might split in half. She moved with him, the ache in her soul wanting to claim him in every way. Rion trailed kisses down her neck and to her ear where he whispered, "The time I've spent without you has tormented my soul."

Arianna's hand traveled up his back, wanting to feel more of him. "Then why would you say—"

"Because of who I am. You're The Divine, Arianna. You're meant to do so many things and I—"

"Don't talk like that."

"I'm cursed," he finished. "I have more blood on my hands than your father's entire force put together. I've done things that would make you sick. That would make the strongest Fae run in the opposite direction."

Arianna pressed the whisper of a kiss against his neck, and he shuttered. "I don't care." She pressed another along his jaw. "I don't care what you've done." She nipped his ear. "I don't care who you were." Her lips grazed his mouth, dragging a moan from him. "I only want who you are now."

He pulled back from her then. "Just like that? Without me having to confess my sins?"

Arianna let out a low growl. "You're mine and there is nothing you could ever say that would change that."

Rion rolled off her entirely and turned to face the fire, those damned chains still rattling. The blanket pooled at his waist, revealing his muscled lower back. "I want you to know. I want you to know the whole story so that you're never surprised."

"You want to make me run." Arianna moved to sit beside him and rested her head against his shoulder.

He leaned into her. “I don’t want you to, but I don’t want you learning about my past and then looking at me like the monster I am. I don’t want the bond to settle and then face your regret.”

Arianna sighed, fed the fire, then returned to the blankets. She never stopped pouring her magic into him, probably wouldn’t until she was beyond certain he wouldn’t die. Because the thought of living without him hurt too much.

“I wasn’t born with my magic. No one usually is, so I lived the first ten years of my life like a normal young lord. I attended parties, festivals, went to school, drove my parents crazy.

“I watched my friends awaken their magic one by one. Most around five years old. A few a year or so later. I saw the way their parent’s eyes lit up and naturally, I wanted the same thing. To have my father tell me he was proud of me. To watch my mother celebrate by hosting one of her many balls.

“But as the years went by, my power didn’t surface and my father grew distant. Then my mother disappeared.

“It was my sister, Saoirse, who took over raising me. It might sound crazy, but the kids would often tease me back then, claiming I’d be magicless like the half-breeds so when those first particles of earth appeared, I didn’t question the fact that it was different from everyone else’s.”

Rion shook his head. “My father’s eyes didn’t light up. They turned cold, glaring at me as if I’d done something terrible. He struck out at me. Cut my face and arms. Saoirse pleaded with him, begging for my life. I was young, so I didn’t understand what was happening. I wonder now if my father missed on purpose. That maybe he had an inkling of love for his Demon child and just couldn’t stomach killing him.

“But I never found out. Saoirse put a hole through his neck before he

could decide whether I was worth keeping. Then the guards entered the room and she was screaming. Screaming at them to let her go, screaming my name for reasons I couldn't grasp. And my magic...It just—reacted. I can't explain it, but the next thing I knew, those guards were on the ground, blood everywhere and my sister was reaching for me with tears in her eyes.

“I don't know how long we ran, darting between buildings, moving as fast as we could toward the rear of the village. She took me to her teacher. A male she trusted with her life. I remember feeling the need to protect Saoirse, and he suggested I take the blame for my father's death to do just that. My sister didn't like the idea, but she agreed.

“I spent several summers with him, Caol. He treated me the same as anyone else. Usually. Sometimes I'd catch him looking at me with an odd expression. Like I was some kind of animal that would revert back to my feral nature given the chance.

“And as any rebellious teen does, I left the mountain despite his warnings. I knew what I'd done to my father's guards was wrong, but it'd been an accident. In my naïveté I thought someone would understand.

“I found my old friends in a field, playing ball. They took one look at me and I tasted their fear. Even my best friend, the one who promised we'd grow up together, took a step back, pulling at his magic as if to protect himself.

“Then we were attacked. I tried to fight them off, but protecting others wasn't something I'd trained to do. I wasn't faster than those three males before they killed two children.”

Arianna's hand covered her mouth.

“I killed the warriors who'd attacked us and fled.

“I don't know why the boys blamed me. Maybe they thought the males were my allies. Maybe they assumed I was there to take over

Brónach.” He shrugged. “I returned to Caol. He lectured me but after that night, something in him changed. I don’t know if he didn’t believe my story or if he had other reasons, but less than a month later he took me out into the forest and put four holes in my gut.” Rion glanced down at his scars. “He apologized and said it was for the best. I remember the anger rising in me as I pushed him away and realized too late that I’d pushed too hard. He didn’t get back up.”

“Who treated your wounds?”

“Saoirse. I spent an entire summer learning how to control my magic after that then entered Nàdair with my head held high. I was done being branded an outcast.

“Alec raged when he saw me, but Saorise intervened. At the time, they were losing a battle with a nearby territory. Some Fae had taken a stand and decided they wanted their own country.

“Caol had been the strategist. He taught me everything he knew. The rest I got from his books. I swayed Alec to give me the chance to prove myself. I think he just wanted me out of the city.

“When I returned successful, Alec begrudgingly accepted my presence. I was sent on all sorts of missions. Then the assassination attempts started. Some came from civilians. Others from seasoned warriors.”

He flexed his fingers and swallowed hard before continuing. “Two years after my initial mission, Alec sent me out with a group. He claimed this task was sensitive and required a team regardless of my abilities. That’s when I met her. A beautiful female who treated me like a living being instead of an abomination.

“I thought I was dreaming the first time she kissed me. Thought I’d fallen into some kind of fairy tale. Then she put her knife in my back and I realized I *was* their mission.

“I think something broke in me that night. Something even Saoirse couldn’t fix. Alec and I never spoke about it. I accepted the silent challenge. To see who would win in the end. Me or his warriors.

“I marched to the borders fulfilling every mission for about a decade. I’d organize their troops, disband those who were failing and kill those who disobeyed. It was an easy existence. I knew where I stood.

“But one evening I returned and a group came after me. By this point, I didn’t care who it was, I killed them without a second thought. I—I relished in their leader’s final breaths, at least until Saoirse rounded the corner. I’ll never forget the look on her face or the overwhelming despair when she knelt before his bloody corpse.

“You see, that male had been someone she’d grown up with. Someone she cared for. And I knew I had to leave.”

“That’s when you went to the mountains?”

He nodded. “The knowledge that I’d hurt my sister after everything she’d done for me was my undoing. I won’t say I went there expecting to die. If anything I thought the monsters would present a challenge, maybe help me work off my anger. But the creatures I encountered weren’t anything like the ones in my history book.

“Looking back, part of me wishes I would have stayed on that mountain. Maybe I missed my sister. Maybe I was lonely.” He shrugged. “The moment I crossed back into Nàdair, I realized nothing had changed.

“Everyday was a power struggle. I avoided Saoirse for her own sake, to make sure I couldn’t hurt her again and took on any job my brother threw at me. Occasionally I’d disappear back to the mountain. Sometimes for days, other times months or years. At some point I guess I just stopped caring.”

“But you helped the slaves.”

Rion lowered his head. “If you knew how many innocents I’ve killed,

you wouldn't use the slaves as a way to excuse my actions. Looking at the slaves felt like looking at myself. I saw that ten-year-old boy who didn't have a choice in the magic he received. But the Fae from my country? I've looked civilians in the eye and robbed them of their lives because I thought—no, I knew they'd do the same to me.”

“Civilians—” She scented a spike of fear from him. “All of them?” She'd assumed he had some level of restraint since he cared about the slaves. But if he didn't. What if—

“Children. That's what you want to ask me about.” She didn't move. “I never hurt them physically, but I'm certain the mental anguish they suffered will leave a scar of its own. I sent the orphans to Saoirse and never inquired about them afterward.”

“Even those from Móirín?”

He nodded. “From any country. But the others,” he continued. “I showed no mercy.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Some I do, others I'd put down again without a second thought.” His voice trembled. “Part of me wonders how many were unnecessary. How many could have been someone like you or Saoirse?”

Arianna swallowed hard. A child. He'd been a child the first time he'd had to defend himself. The atrocities he'd suffered would be enough to tip anyone toward the edge of madness.

She knew he'd never be able to repent for all the lives taken and that there would always be a stain, but she was willing to endure that with him. She'd accept the shadows that came with her mate, as he would accept hers.

Silence followed and the fire crackled. Footsteps approached from outside and Arianna snarled. They slowed and a tendril of magic slipped beneath the front door. A slender vine appeared, trailing across the

floorboards in serpentine movements. It carried a single metal key. He'd done it. Somehow Eoghan had gotten her exactly what she needed.

Arianna left the warm blankets to retrieve it and removed the dreadful iron from Rion's ankles and wrists. "You should let me go." He choked on the words. "You know it's for the best. I'm thankful Arianna, so very thankful, but I am the monster they claim me to be and no matter how much time passes, there is nothing I can do to change that."

"Were." His brow furrowed. "You were the monster. You're not that person anymore."

Rion bowed his head. "You're important to them."

"And you're important to me."

Arianna pushed him back into the pillows and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I love you, Rion. I will always love you, no matter what you've done." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You will never, *never* have to spend another day in this life alone. I won't allow it."

His body trembled then Rion flipped her over, devouring her mouth all over again. He tasted of salt and passion. Of fire and earth, but the hands caressing her body were gentle. Familiar.

"Promise me something."

"Anything," he breathed.

"Never leave me again." He pulled back to look at her. "No matter what you might think is best. Promise you'll never leave."

"I promise. So long as you don't order me away, I'll stay by your side for the rest of my existence."

She hummed and Arianna entwined her fingers in his hair and lost herself in his embrace. She'd never order him away. Because Rion was hers and she was never letting go.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Talon

Talon marched through the city with his bound captive dragging behind. Five of his best warriors surrounded the bruised and bloody male, snapping their teeth and growling whenever he tried to resist.

A male from Fiadh.

But it wasn't the male that had his undivided attention. It was the hum in the air, the hearts that beat just a little faster, and the excitement coursing through their bodies.

Talon studied the Fae in passing, inclining his head to listen.

They spoke of an execution. A demon in their midst. And a legend.

He bowed his head, trying to hide the smile that crept across his face. Talon didn't know what she'd done, but Arianna had taken matters into her own hands. He figured she would. After all, despite what she said, he knew she loved the male. No matter how much he hated it.

Talon was sure Avalon would be in a rage when he arrived, though once he discovered the secrets Talon had pried from his captive, Avalon might change his mind about Brónach's demon. Because just as The Demon had claimed, he wasn't the one responsible for Lillian's death.

But that didn't excuse him from the others. Even if she was The Divine, Arianna was going to have a hard time convincing the Fae of Alastríona that she'd tamed The Demon.

He continued walking, scenting the air for the male he'd almost killed. Talon wasn't sure Avalon would let the creature walk down their streets or even let him stay in the capital city. But what choice would he have? If Talon knew Arianna as well as he thought he did, she would give her

father an ultimatum. And if Avalon denied her request, she'd leave and Móirín would lose their hold on The Divine. Or the illusion of a hold.

He ascended the stone stairs, his captive tripping as he struggled to keep his balance. The guards stationed outside the gate didn't stop him this time. And despite usually knocking, Talon marched straight through the main doors and into Avalon's office to find his High Lord pacing the floor, surrounded by his council.

He remembered his manners enough to bow.

"Where have you been?" Avalon growled.

Talon yanked on the iron chain and forced the Fiadh male to his knees. "This one tells me interesting stories."

Avalon grabbed the front of Talon's tunic. "I don't care about stories."

Talon kept his gaze locked with The High Lord's. "You'll care about this one."

Before Arianna, he would have backed down. Knelt even. He had never dared to challenge the High Lord of Móirín. Until now.

Avalon studied his changed demeanor and let him go, shifting his gaze to the male kneeling on his floor.

The male's wrists bled from the metal biting into his skin. Deep cuts were still healing all over his body and he still had a black eye from spitting at one of them that morning. Talon hadn't tolerated it well.

Avalon clenched his teeth. "That Demon Arianna is protecting—"

"Isn't the one who killed your mate," Talon finished. Avalon's lips parted, and Talon yanked on the chain. "The shadows are gathering. I hope you're prepared for another war."

If you enjoyed *The Divine and the Cursed*, check out Reed's first novel:

Running with the Wolves

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To my readers: Why would I write if not for you? For fame? For glory? Sure, those are nice, but it's the reader's reactions I live for. I hope to see you all on social media posting your love for this story. It truly comes from my heart.

Author Bio

J.E. Reed is the award-winning author of *The Divine and the Cursed* and *The Chronopoint Chronicles*. She lives in Cincinnati with her husband, son, and two cats. Reed works as a Licensed Massage Therapist in the quiet town of Anderson. She graduated massage school in 2009 and has spent the last seven years building her small business. When she's not writing, Reed enjoys swimming, yoga, and the occasional mud run with friends.

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