

THE SENTINEL FALLS TRILOGY

THE
GIRL

IN THE

FØREST

SUE
WILDER

BOOK TWO

THE GIRL IN THE FOREST

sue WILDER

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Foreword

Here are a few details...

Faille – French, means flaw. Pronounced “Fie-yuh” if you’re in France, or “Fail” if you’re a wolf because it works better with the story.

Metis – Greek origin, means wisdom, skill, cunning. In Greek mythology, Metis was a Titan and first wife of Zeus and had an unfortunate end. Our Metis pronounces her name as “Met-iss,” and is not likely to meet the same end.

Aine – Irish origin, means radiance, Celtic Goddess of Wealth and Summer, and her name is pronounced like “AWn-yuh,” although, as I was writing this book, I pronounced it like “nine” without the “n,” so she’ll always be “Eye-n” to me.

Caerwen – Welsh, means loving wisdom, sounds like “Care-wen.” The masculine version of this name would be Caerwyn.

Effa – origin is “very old” and generally means beauty, grace, creative energy.

Ago – old German – means Sword, could also mean Fear. Pronounced like “Ah-go.”

Set – Egyptian, short for Setepenre, meaning Shine. Set is also a male god of storms, disorder, violence, and using a male name doesn’t bother our Set at all.

Barend – Dutch origin, means Bear Brave, pronounced like Baron with a “d” at the end.

Njal – Irish, Gaelic, means champion, a form of Niall, two syllables starting with an “N” sound, then the “jal.”

Kazamir – Slavic, means famous destroyer.

Cybelle – English, French, Greek depending upon the spelling, means mother of the gods.

For those of you who have read my romances, you know what to expect. The romantic moments are blush-worthy and happen on the page. The violence is what you would expect from werewolves and vampires, and there are words that put money in the swear jar. This fantasy is M/F, one couple, book two in the Sentinel Falls trilogy with a cliffhanger, and is intended for readers over 18.



For all the girls who would rather run with the wolves than do
laundry...

Go ahead and run.

INTRODUCTION

“Then one scholar found an ancient text. He said it confirmed the existence of queens, along with a dire prophesy. A day would come when the old kings and queens returned. Each would battle the other. The kings would prevail. But the queens—their destruction would come through the ancient curse. Because their true sin was arrogance.”

A story, relayed by Laura Porter to Noa Bishop. The scholar’s ancient text has never been found.



“Burn it down, Noa.” Grayson’s advice to Noa.

CHAPTER 1



Grayson

THE WOLF WAS DEATH... searching. Unwilling to stop until the quarry was found.

Ferocity drove him. Frustration. Even regret.

For five days, we'd been covering the territory around Azul, hunting in patterns, each one farther away from the point where Noa Bishop disappeared. We'd raced through the wilderness, past remnants of deserted outposts—the forgotten places where the buildings were dull and charcoaled. We tore through old-growth forests, across valleys with broad meadows thick with grass and thorns. Into the high misty mountains.

Birds squawked in displeasure, whirling from the trees and leaving feathers behind. Woodland nymphs did the same, fled in shrieking flurries each time the wolf approached.

He ignored them, his muscles bunching, his skin hot and itchy beneath the sweaty pelt... and I wondered if he maintained his break-neck pace because of the rage tearing through me.

We were two halves of the whole, the wolf and I. He was emotion, while I was intellect and cold calculation. But each

time his claws tore into the mud or grass or fallen debris, I realized we fought against the same bitter truth.

Noa Bishop was gone, and he'd find no scent, no trace of her because the King of the Forest wanted it that way.

I hated it. Hated it when I'd stood on the upper floor of the ancient stoney watchtower and shouted at the breaking dawn, asking for some other solution—when there was no *other solution*.

No way to alter the fucking shit-show that started eons ago.

It had taken me two days to accept that I could do nothing. We couldn't change who we were, what we'd started the night I inked the runes on her skin. When I'd offered my protection. Only the wolf understood, but then, he'd been her ally from the moment she crossed a threshold neither of us could explain. When she touched him. Soothed him.

And now, all we had left was this shared frustration, the helplessness driving both the wolf's aggression and my refusal to tell him to stop.

Because what happened next wasn't my decision.

It was hers.

I had no control. Noa's fate was now irrevocably intertwined with mine—when I fucking did not want it that way. Didn't want our lives to play out according to some destructive force I could not see or fight.

I wanted to believe we had choices, she and I, and that we didn't dance to a tune sung by fate. I wanted her to be safe, to have the life she deserved. A chance to smile again. Fall in love, have a family and the children she'd talked about.

Forget this nightmare fate had decreed.

And yet... after the rite, when she'd said her goodbyes... when she'd touched the wolf and said... promise me... all I'd wanted then was to tell her the truth. Even when I understood everything that I hoped for her would never be, if she stayed with me.

From the moment I found her in Leo's vet clinic, destroying that pig—I'd known I couldn't give her the peace she deserved. I heard her terrified thoughts. Her heart had pounded with the belief that she'd turned feral, even though she had no wolf and becoming feral was impossible.

She also believed that because I was Alpha, I'd be responsible for putting feral wolves down—putting her down. The idea had sickened me, that she'd believe... but she refused to talk to me. I had no way of explaining. When I searched her mind, she'd shut me out, hiding her fears behind the chants of *liar, liar... pants on fire*.

Fallon said I should treat her like a young wolf, get her back into training. Mace argued for more time. After the shock of battle, Noa needed to adjust. Accept what she'd had to do in Sentinel Falls during the Gathering, then the destruction of Azul. Except that there'd been no time for either solution because the dead couldn't wait.

All I could do was ask Noa to honor Halwyn at the rite, and she agreed, even though it broke her heart. She'd never understood the gift she'd given Halwyn. But by using the talent she hated, she'd eased his silent wolf, lessening the torment for those last few weeks. She'd earned the right to grieve with the rest of us. Earned the privilege of standing for Halwyn, with Fallon and Anson Salas—the Alpha of Carmag—at her side.

But what Noa *had* understood that day—and I hadn't—was how the pack was reacting.

She'd asked for no pity, none for her before the dead had been honored.

Then she did what I'd always known she would do. She put the pack first, like the wolf she was in her heart. And when she turned and disappeared, she made that decision for those she loved.

While I'd made mine for her. I stood there and said nothing while she walked through the passage, through the magic keyed to her energy, knowing that *watching* was the only kindness I had left to give.

The day was too warm for marathons, and all the inner arguments had grown cold. I could do nothing where the King of the Forest was concerned, but I had traitors to uncover. Enemies to kill. And when the wolf panted with his tongue lolling out, we agreed to end the search. He was exhausted. If we were attacked, I doubted he'd be able to fight, although fighting didn't seem likely with Fallon waiting.

I wasn't surprised when I saw her standing beneath the trees. She'd always been able to find me, even when we were kids. But she wasn't here for another adventure. Everything about her screamed impatience. Her stiff posture, the way her arms crossed and tightened.

Frowning at the wolf, she said, "Stop indulging him."

The wolf shook his head and bared his slobbering canines.

"You have five minutes," she said, her voice nearly growling, her hand sweeping tensely toward the trees where she'd stacked my clothes. Then she glared at the wolf's eyes—probably searching for me there. "It's been five days, Gray, and I don't give a gods-damn if you're the Alpha or your wolf doesn't like it. You have to stop."

The wolf growled as he relinquished control. He hated arguing with Fallon, had a soft spot for her. Preferred to let me deal with her anger because he was an obnoxious, fuzzy prick when it suited him.

I shifted, stalked naked to the jeans and shirt Fallon left, while she looked away. Quickly, I sorted through the neat pile. She disliked messes. Drove me crazy whenever she straightened my kitchen. Fallon was one of my seconds in command, one of my best friends, the girl I saw as a younger sister. In her current mood, I considered teasing her, trying to ease the tension. But her arms were still crossed, and she stared at the ground like she was burning holes in the grass.

Besides, I understood why she was here.

I walked back to where she stood, tucking my shirt, straightening the jeans, my body cool and decent because the

wolf's sweaty exertion had been his and not mine. "He wasn't indulging me."

"What do you call it," she demanded.

"Patrols."

My smile snapped with the built-up aggression that hadn't quite eased, and Fallon's laugh turned evil.

"Gods, Gray," she said sharply. "You're so blind at times."

When her gaze jerked upward, the way she looked, with that frustrated hurt, reminded me of when we were kids and I'd catch her following me. She'd always dared me to make her leave, her chin lifting, her eyes flashing in brave defiance. But that was when it didn't matter, what we did or said. When the challenges we'd faced were harmless.

I missed those days, pushed the longing down while flicking her blonde braid. "What am I so blind about?"

Fallon shrugged my hand away. "Remember the Gemini Witches?"

Odd, that she'd bring up that memory, as if she was thinking about what I'd been thinking—our adventures. She'd been twelve. Mace and I were fifteen. Too inexperienced to be sneaking into Alpen territory, wanting to visit the fabled witches who lived in a cave. When the alpha found out, he had us doing double-shifts for a month. We'd never patrolled so much in our young lives.

Fallon tugged at her leathers, then flipped the braid I'd flicked so it fell behind her shoulders. "I thought I'd pee my pants before I went in," she said. "I never told you that."

"I almost pissed mine." I scratched at my jaw. "Mace did it on a tree and pretended it was normal."

"We were standing there, staring at each other, trying to decide who went in first, and do you remember what you said? The worst part with the witches was facing the fear. If we did that, the rest would be easy. And I know we're not supposed to reveal what the witches told us."

"Big secrets." I grinned. "What did they tell you?"

“Nothing you need to know.” Her chin jutted up. “But they probably told Mace he’d be the pretty boy of the pack, and you... I think they said you’d do great things one day. I’ve noticed, Gray. No one else has, but what you have, magic or power, or whatever it is, it’s grown stronger since Noa arrived.” She kicked at the grass. “Laura has a theory about what’s happening.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’ll respect that. For now. But it’s a possibility we should consider. At least be open to the idea.”

A muscle ticked in my jaw. “I’m not open to the idea of *fate* fucking up my life.”

“Maybe it isn’t fucking up your life,” she insisted, stubborn as ever. “Maybe this is your path. And hers, too.”

Then it was a fucked-up path for both of us. But as long as Fallon and Laura were guessing, I could still pretend they were wrong.

“I should have followed your advice, treated Noa like a recruit and sent her back to training.”

“No, Mace was right.” Fallon brushed at my arm as if a leaf was there. “Noa lives in her head. She needs time to decide what to do.”

I hoped she’d decide to go on with her life while she still had the chance.

Fallon tipped her head as she looked at me. “Do you grieve for her?”

An absolute silence fell while my heart thudded.

“No.” My voice rumbled. It wasn’t the truth, but it wasn’t a lie, either. I grieved for what we could have had under different circumstances.

Turning away, I smoothed the shirt I wore, buttoned, with long sleeves, more formal with the black jeans. Black was my choice. What I preferred, without the fighting leathers my seconds favored. Clothes were merely a symbol of authority.

The pack would choose what they wanted to respect. Or doubt at their peril.

“Mace is back.” Fallon glanced toward the hills surrounding Azul, barely visible in the distance, and I scrubbed a hand over my eyes. I’d asked him to visit the settlements, talk to the elders and check on his soldiers. Sentinel Falls didn’t have a standing army. None of the packs did. What we had were wolves who reported to Mace and Fallon every month for training. They understood potential threats. Acted as mentors. But when faced with a threat, both the men and the women were skilled and lethal, respected by allies and enemies alike.

Few packs dared attack us. Until the Gathering.

Fallon slid into her alpha role, scanning the trees while she spoke. “I have squad leaders training the recruits, even those who aren’t sixteen. The men with fighting experience started teaching battle strategies. I’ve increased the patrols, and our best spies are reporting back. Everyone is waiting for you in Azul.”

I’d issued an order as Alpha of Sentinel Falls that none dared ignore. The pack would gather, along with every elder, as many as the meadow would accommodate. I would address them, then open the meeting to comments or complaints. Accusations.

The pack had mixed emotions about protecting Noa Bishop. *A faille*. I’d given her a pack mark. Then I’d marked her wrist with my black wolf rune. Claimed her. Pulled her into my inner circle, the few I trusted.

I was aware of the vicious rumors circulating, and those who started them.

If I lost support, a challenge would follow. I welcomed it. Part of me burned, hoping a wolf would step up, confront me. Face my vow to find the traitor hiding somewhere within the pack. Force him into the open before I ripped him apart.

That traitor had been feeding information to our enemies. He had betrayed the Gathering. The pack. Gone after Laura and Leo. After Noa.

By pack law, by my vengeance, once I found him, I would kill him.

And I'd savor every fucking moment.

To hell with my humanity. With the light.

A part of me was already deeply, viciously, vindictively in the dark.

CHAPTER 2



Grayson

ONCE WE REACHED AZUL, Fallon went ahead to find Mace. I looked for Levi and motioned him to my side. At sixteen, with a lanky build and floppy brown hair, Levi Porter looked too young to be a warrior. But during the shadow wolf attack on Sentinel Falls, he never hesitated. He lived up to his Pied Piper fame, leading dozens of children to safety. When the fighting overran Azul, Levi's wolf protected Noa. Killed the creatures storming through the town. I wanted the pack to see him in a place of honor, walking beside me.

"You did good," I said as we turned toward the grassy meadow. "I'm proud of you."

Levi glanced up, grinned, then dipped his chin to me as a flush pinkened his face. Women threw flowers at our feet—a sign of respect—although I thought about the flowers tossed five days ago, during the funeral rite. Then, the women had thrown those petals toward the drifting boats that carried the dead toward eternal light.

Ahead, white wooden chairs filled the meadow in ordered rows. No trace of the recent violence remained. The grass was lushly green and sweet-scented. Small shrubs were re-blooming. Overhead, clouds drifted on wind currents that

didn't cool the air, and those who hadn't dressed for the heat shifted in discomfort.

Shade was non-existent since the pine trees were too far away, and the single open-sided white canopy beside the dais offered shelter for the old wolves Leo tended. No one else. Not even the dais had a covering. I preferred the open, as most wolves did.

I glanced at the gathered crowd. A few females wore hats. Others fanned themselves, and when their focus shifted from me toward Levi, he stepped aside and stood next to his sister, Laura. He looked like any other of my inner circle, but without the leathers marking a status he was too young to hold.

For a moment, I listened to the hushed conversations between the waiting pack members.

Fallon had been right. After Noa's arrival, my senses sharpened. I did more than eavesdrop through the pack bond. Every alpha required strength to survive. The same magic that chose the wolf and imprinted the tattoo on the man's skin also flowed through the alpha's veins, and the power I had now had increased in recent weeks. The wolves sensed it, and what thrummed from them held concern as much as pride.

Neither mattered, not in the predatory mood gripping me. For over a decade, I'd battled a private war against the secrets and predictions. The first prophesy came from the Gemini Witches when I'd been fifteen. Then a warning from the King of the Forest, when he revealed my destiny, beyond becoming the Alpha of Sentinel Falls.

Another warning came from the old alpha when he'd gripped my hand during the minutes before he died. He'd asked me to lean in so I could hear his whispered, terrified words. Words that, for centuries, one alpha spoke to the next alpha.

Whispered, because he hadn't wanted to believe them.

But terrified, because he feared I'd have no choice *but* to believe.

I still hadn't decided what might be true, although that was another battle I was fighting. The blindness Fallon accused me of having.

A center aisle split the rows of assigned seating, separating the various elder groups. Ahead was the raised dais, three steps up to the wooden platform where Sentinel Falls flags—blue, with a white diagonal stripe—swayed limply in the weak breeze.

Three empty chairs waited. Fallon now stood beside Mace. Their stance was official, legs braced, arms clasped behind their backs, and they wore the black leather as my seconds in command.

I walked toward the front alone. As one, the wolves stood and offered a formal chin dip, honoring the Alpha of Sentinel Falls, and the mood seemed more attentive than agitated.

But for meetings such as this one, the pack followed ancient tradition. I grimaced, mounting the steps to the dais, listening to each scraping thud of my boots. A carved wooden chair waited like a throne on a balding bear pelt. The chair was hellishly uncomfortable, while the pelt stank of mothballs and curdled milk.

Fallon controlled her smile. Mace smirked. I glared at the table beside the gods-awful chair. A ceremonial square of yellowed white silk covered the surface. Small black dots decorated the material—the markings of a faery flag, according to pack lore, dating back centuries. We had no proof the flag came from the faeries, although, during a fight between two rival elders, one corner of the silk had been torn away and disintegrated in a puff of smoke and flame. But what caused Mace's smirk wasn't the flag. It was the relic sitting on the faery flag—a curved, yellowed drinking horn.

Wolf tradition required the pack to remain standing while the Alpha drank a full measure of wine, proving his manhood. But since the wine was always warm and sour from the horn, I'd changed the ritual. Sentinel Falls had three alphas. That meant both my seconds took part in the wine drinking.

Fallon went first. She held the horn to her lips, sucked in a breath, and tipped her head back. Then Mace drank, his throat twitching as he swallowed. I took the horn and drained it, holding the empty vessel above my head.

The cheering both warmed and grated on my nerves. I pushed the irritation aside. The pack would remain standing until I gave permission to sit, and even though the day was heating, with the sun beating down—I wanted them standing while I stared at the elders filling the front row.

Mosbach, his white hair slicked back, had dressed in black. The others wore similar clothes. Good, I thought. Perhaps they realized the gravity of the situation. Soon they would learn more, and how at least one of them had failed.

I studied the overflow crowd. When I found the children with their parents, the young ones Levi had saved—I nodded to them.

To the side of the dais, the old wolves waited in the shade cast by the fluttering canopy. I nodded again, acknowledging the pack members who deserved the Alpha's regard. But I would have honored them even if tradition hadn't demanded it.

Thin blankets covered the legs of those unable to stand, but those who stood did so with an unbending defiance of age. All had faced the invaders. Even the three men—and two women—who were too old to shift. They'd used the weapons at hand: broken poles, knives, gardening tools. Pride marked their faces, something I hadn't seen in years.

Noa had done that. She'd given them what I never could. She was a healer, as I was. But she brought a gentleness I didn't have. She'd offered them hope. Proved strength didn't always depend upon the wolf, and whoever planned the seating sent that calculated visual message. A reminder of what Noa had given to the pack. Even Halwyn's wheelchair sat in the middle of the row, a folded blanket on the seat. His memory protected.

I gestured to the empty chair.

“We honor Halwyn.” My voice boomed loud enough to reach those at the back of the crowd. “He met the fight to protect a friend too frail to move.”

Every wolf in the gathering pressed two fingers to their lips, then against their pack marks.

“We honor those who died, within this pack and without. The nymphs Nia and Ashina. The witch.” My gaze slid to the elders. “Her name was Autumn Paige, a girl of sixteen. It seems cruel to condemn one so young, who was herself used by the Alpen to spell the attackers.”

Mosbach’s eyes narrowed. I kept my attention on the group behind him, members from his mountain settlement who stood stone-faced and rigid.

Let them worry.

I motioned for the wolves to sit while I settled on the threadbare maroon cushion and waited for Mace and Fallon to sit in similar chairs, less ornate but just as uncomfortable. Mace was on my right. Fallon was on my left.

Chairs creaked. Feet scuffed, and a few children protested amid shushing from their parents. Even those standing at the far end of the meadow, in the shade from the trees, shifted their positions into relaxed postures, all of them waiting.

“The repairs on Sentinel Falls are in progress,” I said. “Azul is recovering. I’ve ordered stronger wards and increased the patrols. Other precautions remain secret. The priority is rebuilding. For those of you in the settlements—if you sustained losses, talk to your elders. They’ll relay the information to those who can help.”

“We appreciate your effort,” an elder said, clearing his throat gruffly. “But our families are more important than things, and they are safe, thank the gods.”

Owen Griffith. I respected him. He was husband to Miranda Kirk, the woman Noa helped in Sentinel Falls. There was a brother, Albert—his wolf was silent. I saw them both, Miranda and Albert, sitting behind Owen. She gave me a careful smile as she patted Albert’s hand.

Perhaps Noa had more allies at this meeting than I thought.

Owen held my gaze, and I nodded to him.

“If I may speak, Alpha?” he asked, rising to his feet. “My mate would like to offer testimony regarding the events on the day of the Gathering.”

“Most of us were there, Owen.” The disgruntled comment came from another elder—Hanley Albion. Hanley was white-haired, boney, more of a figurehead elder. Due to age, Hanley’s son, Pawley, carried out the official duties. But as Hanley prodded the ground with the cane Leo insisted he use, I wondered whether his interruption came from irritability—or an attempt to hide something.

More likely, it came from sitting on a hard wooden chair in the sun. He wasn’t hiding anything. The elder who hid the traitor was someone else, unless the traitor was an elder, or someone outside the pack. A person we would never suspect.

But Miranda Kirk was now standing, reminding me so much of Hattie, preparing to lecture me, that I almost made the mistake of smiling.

“Please, Miranda.” I tipped my head toward her. “Step forward. I wish to hear what you have to say.”

Gripping Albert’s hand, she wove around others seated in her row, stepping past bent knees and shuffled chairs, apologizing until they both stood centered in the aisle. Albert stared at their clasped hands. He had the same intensity I’d witnessed with Oscar, when the silence of his wolf had been at its worst.

“I wish to testify on behalf of Noa Bishop,” Miranda said.

I glanced at Owen. Concern wreathed his face, deepened the creases near his mouth and eyes. The other elders were respectful, with varying levels of interest.

Miranda drew in a deep breath. “I was rude to her during the Night of the Beacons, Alpha. I should have been more welcoming, but I was not, and I’m ashamed of my behavior. Despite my rudeness, she treated me with grace and generosity at the Gathering. When I asked if she had time to meet Albert,

she offered right away. She eased him the way she did for Oscar.”

Miranda turned to the listening wolves, and said clearly, “Noa Bishop sat with Albert for more than half an hour. She wanted to visit him again. But then she sensed something I couldn’t, and became worried. She said I should find Owen right away. Ask him to take us home. We were caught in the open when the fighting started. Albert was too frightened to move. Owen was telling me through the pack bond to get indoors. Everywhere I looked was blocked, and I didn’t know what to do. But Noa Bishop did, and she asked a... a vampire to take us to Leo’s clinic. Then she helped us through the passage. We wouldn’t have gotten far without her. But there was fighting in Azul too, and she told us to stay in the passage where it was safe, and to warn any others who came through. The last I saw of her was when she ran to join the fight. She was trying to help. That’s all she was doing, and Albert and I might not have survived without her.”

“Thank you, Miranda Kirk,” I said. “I appreciate your testimony.”

“I would speak next.” Catrina jumped to her feet, gripping her hands and ignoring her scowling mother, who sat beside her.

I tapped into the mother’s pack bond, realizing she was afraid her daughter wasn’t showing the respect due to the Alpha.

“Catrina.” I nodded in the girl’s direction. “All are free to voice their experiences or concerns.”

I noticed the pink stripe was back in Catrina’s hair. Her chin lifted, as she said, “Noa Bishop saved me too, Alpha. You should have seen her.”

The younger boys snickered, and Catrina spun with a glare—gods, she was already so like Noa.

“I was hurt and bleeding,” Catrina continued. “She got me to the clinic and talked to me until I wasn’t scared anymore. It wasn’t her fault that pig got me. She was getting bandages,

and she left the door open so I wouldn't be alone, and when I screamed, she was right there, throwing that thing off me. I knew she was scared..."

Catrina took a breath. "Scared of it, but more about what she did in front of me... with the scalpel. I never got the chance to tell her I was glad she killed that pig. I would have done it, too. And when all of us in her posse didn't have the pink stripes in our hair, I know she thought it meant we hated her. But our moms told us to wash the pink out because of the rite being a somber occasion. So, if you could tell her for me..."

My throat tightened. "I will."

Catrina dropped her gaze to her feet, then looked up fiercely and said, "Noa Bishop did nothing wrong. Every wolf here would have done the same thing with that pig. Or with helping people. She showed us how to be strong, even if we don't have wolves yet, or if we're too old and think we can't fight."

The old ones beneath the canopy were nodding. Some eyes were bright with moisture.

"And all the bad things people are saying—" Echoes of a young Noa vibrated in Katrina's voice, her indignation and anger. "It's because of those old stories that aren't even true."

Hanley stomped on the ground, and I looked at him long enough for Pawley to dip his chin toward me and put a hand on Hanley's knee. I waited for some other sign of challenge or discontent. Katrina's mother hissed an order to her daughter to return to her seat; she quieted the instant I made eye contact with her.

"Your daughter displayed great courage during the attack on Azul," I warned evenly. "Speaking out today was also an act of courage that I respect."

Both Fallon and Mace nodded their agreement. Katrina's mother offered her apologies, while Katrina tipped her chin and scurried back to her seat before her blush became embarrassing. Murmurs rumbled through the pack. Some of the loudest voices came from the front row, and looking toward the elders, I held Mosbach's gaze for the longest.

He rose to his feet. “I wish to offer apologies for my behavior during the Night of the Beacons. But if I may speak?”

The apology was for show, and by not addressing me as Alpha, Mosbach made his disrespect obvious. The elder would always struggle with his loyalty. I’d killed his nephew in an alpha challenge, a challenge Mosbach had encouraged. The fight had been savage, and his nephew had taken a long time to die. Neither Mosbach nor I would forget it.

With a nod, I gave permission, since the pack didn’t need our animosity.

“My condolences go to the families who lost loved ones,” the elder said. “Although I question adding the witch to your list of those mourned.”

“You don’t care about a girl used by those more powerful?”

“I’m certainly sympathetic,” he said. “However, I wonder how you confirmed the witch’s abuse when the Alpen have denied involvement. We know nothing of the attacking wolves, since the destroyed pack marks concealed their affiliations. They are also dead, with no way to defend themselves, and I cannot see how you determined who was responsible—other than yourself.”

“Fascinating,” I drawled, so coldly amused that Mosbach couldn’t have missed it. “But I’m curious about your theory. Please continue.”

“I’m sure you’d rather not explain how the enemy got through your defenses. Or how they attacked the Gathering after you assured us security was in place. It couldn’t be because your wards were at fault, or your spies, failing to gather accurate information. Your seconds were surely capable of the job, and your dalliances shouldn’t have distracted you to the point of negligence. But perhaps I’m wrong.”

The breeze fluttered along the edges of the white canopy. Bits of grass scattered, while Fallon and Mace studied the fidgety crowd.

I waited.

“We’ve listened to the rumors.” Mosbach’s smile held the clear disdain I remembered from the Night of the Beacons—when he believed I couldn’t touch him since he’d issued no challenge. All he did that night was intimidate Noa, frighten her—and she’d been right, calling him nothing more than the rude, pudgy little snake that he was.

The elder turned and raised his voice. “You’ve heard the rumors, too. How the raiders were after Noa Bishop and Laura Porter.”

Grumbling voices rose and fell. Mosbach spread his hands earnestly.

“And if that’s true, then aren’t we sitting in the ruins of Azul because Grayson Devante is reckless? He offered sanctuary to what belongs to the Alpen, two girls, one who escaped from them in Seattle, and the other who ran from them years ago. If Halwyn, or the other dead wolves could speak today, they’d agree that I’m right and Grayson Devant’s decisions have always been disastrously wrong.”

I leaned back in the gods-awful chair that dwarfed other alphas and stared, deciding how, one day, I would let my wolf loose on Mosbach. And let him take a long, long time with the punishment.

But the pack was watching, and I said, “Stealing a wolf—enslaving her—is indefensible and against our law.”

“But not Alpen’s law, a fact you understood when you adopted both females into the pack. You made us a target. Protecting wolves with no connection to Sentinel Falls. Laura Porter, a wolf from a pack that no longer exists. Noa Bishop, a *faillie* without a pack mark until you gave her one. Perhaps we should discuss your actions instead of blaming the Alpen.”

The wolves were silent. Levi had moved closer to Laura, his expression tense. Laura was pale, but she sat stiffly, her chin raised. The women sitting around her closed ranks, protective, glaring at any wolf who dared to look their way.

With my elbow bent on the ornately padded armrest, I propped my chin against my knuckles and studied Mosbach.

“After our previous conversation, I expected at least the pretense of civility from you.”

“How can you prove the Alpen used the witch?” he challenged, turning to the crowd for either vindication... or support. “How can anyone know who hired dead wolves?”

“I might surprise you,” I murmured.

“But—” In his zeal, the elder missed the shifting mood of the pack, and my warning. “Even if both facts were true, any rightful Alpha of Sentinel Falls would put the pack ahead of his own base desires. Find Noa Bishop. Hand her and Laura Porter over to the Alpen, and be done with it.”

“Careful, Mosbach,” Mace’s tone was not as subtle as mine, and his alpha canines flashed. “While you’re free to think what you wish, if you spread lies that harm others, you’ll deal with me.”

“And anyone *foolish* enough to lay a hand on either female will deal with me,” I added, holding the elder’s gaze. I was tired of his clumsy challenge—if that was what it was.

Mosbach turned away rather than dip his chin, so—a challenge. I breathed in. Waited.

“Grayson Devante refuses to acknowledge the destruction he caused,” the elder said, staring at the crowd, gesturing with an authority he didn’t have. “The secrets he hid in Azul for so long. Why do we accept his explanations? Why do we allow him to remain as Alpha?”

The pack grew restless. They’d worn their best clothes, men and women forming a sea of color, and no one wanted a bloody challenge fight when children were present. Even a hint of one. Some men traded murmured comments. The women exchanged frowns. Most of the arguments ran through the pack bond. I didn’t bother listening because I was thinking about what Julien told me weeks ago.

Someone had provoked the feral wolf, sending him toward Sentinel Falls and into the middle of a crowd. That person hoped to shatter loyalties by forcing me to kill in front of children. Creating doubt in my ability to lead, mistrust where

my wolf was concerned, if he could turn as feral as the wolf he'd had to kill.

I wouldn't overlook Mosbach as being that person, or at least knowing who it was. He'd tried to undermine me, using Noa on the Night of the Beacons. And now this open disrespect with both words and gestures.

It would be interesting to see how far he would go.

"This is a new low for you, Mosbach. Attacking females to protect your coddled comfort." I decided to provoke, if only to see what popped out of a foolish man's mouth. "Perhaps you've lost your morality, and we're all just realizing it now."

"And perhaps we're all realizing your failures, how you've reignited a war with the Alpen."

"You cannot reignite a war that never ended."

"We had a truce," he reminded the pack.

"Which the Alpen broke. I shouldn't have to point out to you the many infractions. They tried to kill Leo two years ago. They went after Noa Bishop in Seattle and trapped Levi. As for the Gathering, the Alpen thought they'd killed everyone with knowledge of their involvement. But Mace found one wolf who was still alive and eager to confess when I questioned him."

Which I'd done with ease, because a wolf without a pack mark had no defense against an alpha like me. I'd used the ability all alphas had to search a wolf's thoughts, his memories, and I'd searched with malice and deliberation, taking my time. Digging until I'd uncovered every bit of useful, sordid information.

"One hopes," Mosbach sneered, "that this wolf is still living and able to corroborate your accusations."

"Did you expect mercy from me, Mosbach? Or are you relieved the man is not here to speak?"

"Forgive me," the elder mocked. "But my responsibility is to protect my people, not your decisions. What concerns you more? The needs of the pack or your personal interest in two

females given unusual privileges, placed in coveted positions demanding trust, with one being—”

“A *faillie*?” I threatened softly.

Mosbach seemed unaware of the peril, or perhaps he was simply too arrogant to listen, because he said, “Considering the superstitions surrounding *faillies*, my concern is natural.”

“There’s nothing natural in prejudice and falsehoods,” Fallon chided, looking down her nose at the elder more than twice her age while remaining above him in stature and influence. “You’ve argued against superstition in the past, so your concern now sounds insincere.”

“My pardons.” Mosbach twitched with malice. “I meant no insult. We all understand *faillies* cannot help what they are. But as elders, we are within the law to question leadership. Challenge the decisions that brought wreckage and death.” His gaze skated back to me. “You promised Azul would remain immune from attack. But we sit in the middle of a disaster caused by your promises.”

Behind him, members of his clan shifted uneasily, and I wondered what they were expecting.

I leaned forward. “I can forgive an elder for protecting his people. We’ve all suffered losses, but if not for Noa Bishop, those losses would have been worse. Do not expect me to sit here and listen to you attack her. Not when she left for the same reason that she stood and fought beside the people here today. She did it to protect the pack, so I would not test my tolerance if I were you.”

“It has always been an honor to have your tolerance,” Mosbach said with a lip curl that everyone watching understood.

“Your attitude has been noted,” I said coolly, although my underlying threat was anything but cold. “If there is a challenge to be made, make it now.”

“I do not challenge the Alpha of Sentinel Falls.”

His smile flashed, a predator who thought he’d cornered the prey—and I knew where the greatest threat hid an instant

before Mosbach said, “I offer the traitors.”

He flicked an imperious hand, motioning toward a group of men standing at the edge of the crowd. They marched forward, dragging two women between them—Jo-Rae Bell and Karla Asper. They’d belonged to Mosbach’s clan before moving to Sentinel Falls. Mace had lectured them on pack etiquette after they insulted Noa and bullied Oscar. The same morning when we’d found the carnage at Leo’s house, and I’d forced Noa into the high mountains.

The pack’s attention sharpened on the fretted breeze. Both women were disagreeable troublemakers. Jo-Rae Bell stood inches taller than her friend—Karla Asper, the female who’d used the worst slurs to insult Noa. They’d dressed in modest clothes, long pants and blouses buttoned up to their throats. Jo-Rae’s red hair was drawn tight against her head in a knot at her crown. Karla’s mousy brown hair hung in a limp braid that brushed her shoulders.

Neither woman nodded nor so much as lowered their gazes as the males dragged them toward the dais. Karla openly glared.

“You’d think they’d be more respectful,” Mace murmured, “considering their elder just called them traitors.”

And considering the punishment—death.

Which explained the anticipation oozing like thick oil from Mosbach. Protocol was to inform the Alpha in private. To allow him—or her—to determine guilt. But by announcing the information himself, the elder circumvented the chain of command, bypassing me as if I was irrelevant.

He’d also defied me without the risk of blood. His blood. Attacking him now would anger the pack, since insults, while unsavory, did not rise to the level of an alpha challenge.

I scanned through the pack bond, catching fleeting thoughts from unsuspecting wolves. It wasn’t my custom to listen in uninvited. But courtesy would not give me an advantage in this game Mosbach played. While I could tap into the pack’s mood, know their level of concern, approval or revulsion

because I had the alpha's privilege—the elder had to go on expressions alone.

Mosbach said, “When Keelan Ross was Alpha, he confided in me.”

Keelan Ross had been my alpha too—until he ordered me back from the front lines. Asked me to sit at his bedside during his last hour. He'd whispered his secrets. Then, in front of witnesses, he held my hand, spoke the ritual words that proved the power of the Alpha had already passed to me. And when the final word faded, the wolf tattoo appeared on my skin, making the decision irrevocable.

I looked at the various elders, restive in their seats. Most were unwilling to give Mosbach their approval. But some remained undecided.

Such a dangerous game he played.

“Keelan warned me of threats coming from within the pack.” Mosbach preached to the crowd, his voice rising with conviction. “Over the months, I've caught details others have ignored. I sent these females to Sentinel Falls because they were untrustworthy.”

His tone dripped with regret while he spread his arms wide. “I submitted my reports. I confided in the alphas—who disregarded my opinions. And I offer my deepest apologies to the pack for not expressing my concerns when I should have, but I respected the alphas. Believed they would follow through.”

He gestured toward the watching wolves—a movement smooth enough to fool those who did not see him as I did. “The error was mine. If I'd come to you, revealed what I discovered, the death and destruction might never have occurred. Instead, I relied on our three alphas, hoping at least one of them would have given my warning the concern it deserved.”

Interesting that he chose to attack all three of us.

I glanced first at Fallon, who was scanning the audience, her expression unreadable. Hard lines creased Mace's face. He

sent a quick question through the pack bond—already a step ahead of me—and I answered with a sharp affirmative.

“We’re eager to know what we’ve overlooked,” Mace said, his tone too amused for the request.

“These two women betrayed the pack.”

“As you’ve said.” I waved an indolent hand, but the Alpha’s order I gave him was direct. “Present your evidence. One can hope it is more compelling than the arguments against my decisions.”

“I have their written confessions. All you offer is hearsay from a dead man. Jo-Rae Bell admits to talking to the Alpen about the *faillie* you allowed into the pack. Karla Asper has confessed to being paid for information on Azul. Alpen is our enemy, but your failings are at fault. You left us vulnerable to attack. Keeping a *faillie* for your pleasure was disrespectful, but excluding wolves from Azul, while your favorites came and went as they pleased, caused nothing but resentment.”

I stretched one leg out, leaning back, curious and darkly entertained by the elder’s strategy. Mosbach had put a lot of thought into his mutiny. By pitting those who knew about Azul against those who didn’t, he could divide pack loyalty while protecting himself. He had confessions, and the women, who stood in front of everyone. All I had was the word of a dead man.

The differences would incite wolves who remembered the rivals I’d had to kill. It opened the door to those who would challenge me now, so Mosbach wouldn’t be at risk. All he had to do was push others in the right direction. Provide a reason to act. Prey on pack emotions and watch while someone else ended up dead.

Which had me reassessing the purpose of Mosbach’s conspiracy. This was more than discrediting me or turning the wolves against Noa Bishop.

I was the Alpha of Sentinel Falls, tasked with judging traitors, and if those traitors were found guilty, the punishment was my responsibility. Death by law and custom.

How easy to confront me in front of the entire pack, put my decisions on trial, not those of the enemy. He'd pre-planned this scenario, pushing a reaction. Trying to force me into proving my authority. Narrowing my options down to violence. Killing two women in front of a pack that was already uneasy. A manufactured repeat of the feral that I'd killed in Sentinel Falls.

That day, my wolf had been forced into attacking in front of children—and there were children here today. Many of them from Mosbach's mountain settlement.

The breeze quickened. Sunlight danced across the restless lake. The wolves waited while I met Mosbach's defiant gaze.

"You were part of that decision," I pointed out. "Azul would remain secret until we could accommodate all the wolves who wished to come. Your fellow elders agreed. Are you saying now that we should have bent to your hindsight?"

"I say that you ignored the resentment instead of seeing the obvious."

And no sign of submission from the elder.

I relished the razor-sharp silence when I ordered the women forward.

"What defense do you offer against your elder's accusations?"

The females stood with hands fisted and lips tight, but heads unbowed, leaving me little choice. Through the pack bond, I dug into Jo-Rae's mind, wading through envy and long-standing resentment. Jo-Rae liked to visit a bar in Priest River, owned by the Alpen, where she met a woman who offered sympathy and a willing ear. Jo-Rae revealed Noa's relationship to Leo when asked, and she'd exposed Noa's location in Seattle.

Jo-Rae was the reason Leo nearly died in the med-van accident, and why Noa's life was now in danger. But while Jo-Rae's actions put lives at risk, the second woman betrayed the entire pack.

Greed drove Karla Asper when she sold information on Azul, providing lists of the wolves who sheltered there. Even where some passages might exist. She was also well-named, since her words held the poisonous bite of an asp. She'd called Noa a *'pu*, the shortened version of *rompu*, and because the intent behind the word meant Noa should be broken, the way some people broke a stick before throwing it on a fire—I would break Karla first.

Without raising a hand or moving from my position, I sent a wave of dark energy toward the woman, forcing my way into her mind, digging in like a scraping claw. Ripping back, inch by inch. Her legs trembled. Her spine arched, the muscles contracting. A grimace twisted her mouth.

Slowly... painfully... I drove her to her knees, watching as her expression changed. Defiance faded with the tightening of her jaw, with her hands clenching as she gasped for breath, perhaps because I held a mental fist around her throat.

The first rippling apprehension moved through the pack when Karla's face reddened. Shock bulged her eyes. Then panic as her gaze darted frantically from wolf to wolf.

The wolves closest to her looked away, unwilling to make eye contact.

No one would help her.

They couldn't, even if they dared. Their fear mirrored hers, although it wasn't over what I would do to traitors. They feared what I *was doing* in front of them. A dark ability none realized I had, or would wield with a lack of compassion. An act of retribution, aimed at Mosbach as much as the two women... and I was just starting.

With a lazy aggression, I pushed through Karla's memories, uncovering her glee over exposing Azul to the Alpen, and how the attackers used that information to find Noa and Laura. When I sent those images through the pack bond, every wolf present understood what had happened, how they'd been betrayed. And as their alarm crested, I shifted my attention to Mosbach, pleased when his face paled. Perhaps he fully

appreciated the danger. Understood how I'd gotten proof from a dying man.

He had no defense against my mental intrusion. I could stop his heart with a thought. A single breath. No alpha challenge needed. No justification given.

A pity, how his heart gave out... but expected at his age...

Sweat became a sheen on his skin. His fleshy lower lip turned flaccid with the realization of how close to death he stood.

Still sitting, still nearly bored, I ordered, "Give her your knife."

Mosbach fumbled with the blade, offering it hilt first to Karla. She refused to grasp it, despite my hold on her mind. Terror left her incapable of moving, beyond tightening her fingers into shaking white fists.

I focused on her hands, forced her to uncurl stiff fingers, straighten them as joints popped. Her mouth stretched into a thin line of agony and uncertain terror. I considered snapping her bones, but not with children present.

I stared at Mosbach.

His game, but my fucking move.

"Since she refuses to take the knife, you will do it."

The elder gaped at his hand. At the blade. Perplexed.

I made it easy and explained, "By law, it's the elder's responsibility to cut off the pack mark."

He would forfeit his position if he refused—a legal detail Mosbach forgot, or he wouldn't have been so zealous in this public challenge.

I would not be doing his dirty work for him.

Mosbach's mouth contorted. He looked feeble as his hand shook. It took two tries to rip Karla's blouse, exposing her shoulder. With swift, jerking slashes, he defaced the crescent moon enough to make it unrecognizable, and as blood ran

down Karla's arm, as she stifled her sobs, I said, "Now the other one. Jo-Rae Bell."

Mosbach hesitated. I sent another set of images through the pack bond, condemning the woman's bitterness. Maybe to some, what I did wasn't enough. To others, suffering was difficult to watch, although a wolf's life had a brutal side and it was better to learn young. The toddlers didn't understand what was happening. A few mothers turned their children's faces away. More fathers stood with hands on the shoulders of the pups, those eight years and older. I imagined the lectures taking place that evening, about pack loyalty and why alphas enforced the rules.

But even if these females had lied, betrayed, stewed in their hatred. Even if the penalty was death, I would not allow Mosbach off the hook he'd created.

Unease ratcheted up as Jo-Rae Bell glanced to the side, her expression bleak. The small mercy Mosbach gave her was to be efficient. Perhaps he realized how his scheme was failing and feared I might not stop with the women.

"Are they mated?" I waited until two men stepped forward, then said, "The sentence is exile instead of death. The women leave now. You may go with them if you wish. Seek medical attention in Priest River because I doubt Leo Bishop will provide it. Take what possessions you have. I won't break your pack affiliations, but do not return unless it is alone."

A gamble, allowing them to leave while their ties to Sentinel Falls remained in place. But I'd searched their minds; both men had been unaware of the treachery, and I wouldn't manipulate them, the way I'd manipulated Karla. Instead, I'd risk their free will, since the pack understood my offer. Being exiled with a defaced pack mark meant a miserable life. It meant constant danger from other wolves, and a lack of pack resources. But they would be alive, and their mates would offer them some safety and financial support. A compromise, when some within the pack would have conflicting loyalties.

But the men surprised me. Producing their own knives, they sliced through the mate marks on each woman's wrist. A

lightning-swift, brutal ending. Then, with a nod to me, to Mace and Fallon, each man returned to the audience—although they did not sit behind Mosbach.

I found it curious that the elder did not have his own settlement's full support. But the betrayal of the women didn't rise to the same level as a traitor on the battlefield. Jo-Rae Bell acted with emotion, pain, while Karla reacted out of spite. She'd deserved to be driven to her knees. But when I'd held her in thrall, sent the images through the pack bond, I'd alarmed the wolves for a different reason.

I'd revealed a power even an alpha shouldn't have, and while I'd won the current confrontation, I'd handed Mosbach—and any elders like him—the opening they needed.

They would argue that the old stories were true. *Faille* energy was dangerous and disruptive to the pack. Noa Bishop had corrupted the alpha, increased his power to an abusive level, and someone else should offer a challenge.

Idly, I waited for someone brave enough to act.

Strong enough to issue a challenge.

Reckless enough to face certain death because, in the mood gripping me, someone would die.

Tension simmered. Minutes passed while I waited and hoped no one would be goaded toward a senseless death through emotion alone.

But no one moved, and without another word, I stood and left the dais, ending the meeting. I had nothing more to say to Mosbach, at least not in public. But as I walked down the aisle, a child wriggled free from his mother. Dashing toward me, he skidded to a halt, his shoes locking toe-to-toe with my boots. I guessed he was five, perhaps six years old, dressed in his finest, although the grass stain smudged on a tan trouser knee told me he'd been impatient.

He tipped his chin the way all mothers taught their children to do, then bent backward until he could see my face.

“*Owl-fuh*. I picked these for you.”

In his hand, he clutched a fistful of crooked stems with the wildflowers dipping down. The muscles around my eyes tightened. I dropped to one knee, down to his level, meeting him face-to-face. “What’s your name, young wolf?”

“Charlie Curra, sir.”

“Well met, Charlie Curra.” I took the flowers and watched as he scampered back to his worried mother. Then I stared at what I gripped in my hand. They were like Noa’s wildflowers, the ones she picked for Leo, ripped from the ground.

For a long heartbeat, then a second beat, I wondered if I’d ever again feel the flicker from her wolf rune, telling me she was safe. Hear her call me *bastard* with every stomping step she took, knowing I was listening.

And when I found the strength to stand, the entire pack was also standing, even the old men and women. All of them kissed two fingers and held their hands out toward me before pressing against their pack marks. Then each one tipped a chin in silence as I walked past.

CHAPTER 3



Noa

FIVE DAYS AGO, THE night of the rite...

The passage I entered was unlike any I'd experienced since learning of their existence.

Most passages were shadowy and blue, illuminated by the bioluminescent creatures and plants that covered the jutting walls. The stone was familiar—obsidian—and the light was bright. I followed a path that seemed blessed by the Green Man because I saw him everywhere—in the green moss. The green of spring grass, and the darker forest green of ivy, twisting around tree trunks.

For the space of a heartbeat, I wondered at the oddity of sunlight in a passage. Then the doubt drifted. Rainbow-colored mist from the waterfall's veil dampened the air. The waterfall spilled over rocks, gurgling into a pool where pink-spotted frogs croaked from between the lily pads. When tiny, wispy sprites emerged from the foliage, I laughed at their many colors, at the way they swirled and danced. I wanted to join them, extend my arms, wait for the tickle of their wings as they glided across my palms... and a shudder passed through me at the recognition.

I was in my nightmare, the one I'd had months ago at Grayson's watchtower house, when I'd been recovering from worm poison. I'd dreamed the night after he caught me out of bed. The moment had been surreal. I'd talked to his wolf, saw him separate from the man, and in the furious aftermath, I'd dreamed of a place like this, with the lily pads and sprites. Until the dream changed, turned frightening.

The mud at my feet had flowed up my body, curling like grasping tendrils, seeping into my mouth and down my throat.

Grayson had been there to pull me out. But he wasn't *here*, and when the passage behind me closed, I stumbled in a circle, blind panic roaring through me when I saw Metis standing there.

"You've finally come," she said. "Noa Bishop, consort to the Dread Lord."

The Lady of the Lake stood before me with her blonde hair gleaming. I remembered the sharpness of her perfect features—although the light softened her cheekbones, mouth, and chin, and she didn't look so bloodthirsty.

Details continued to rattle me. Instead of the icy diamond crown, she wore a fiery wreath made from flowers in every shade of red. Her diaphanous gown flowed with layers of chiffon ranging from the palest yellow to the deepest tangerine. I thought of autumn when I studied her, not the deep ocean, and I thought there was something... peculiar in the color choices.

A feathered, gold-and-orange bird perched in her hair—even more peculiar when the strange creature tipped its head and blinked.

"*Consort to the Dread Lord*," the woman intoned again, although her mouth twitched before she clapped her hands. "Oh, I've always wanted to say that—did I scare you, dear?"

Gold bracelets jangled on her wrists while I moistened my dry lips. The curly-winged bird chirped, then flitted away.

The woman's laugh trilled as she said, "You think I'm my sister." Then her shoulders shimmied into a shudder. "Horrible

woman—Metis. She slanders Fee all the time, says he’s batty as an old coot. A king with no throne or some dribble like that.”

“Fee?”

“Fee—well, of course. He never told you his name, did he?” She blinked the way the bird blinked. “Fee is Felix, the King of the Forest, whom *you* love to call the Green Man, which makes *me* think of moldy cheese.”

“Excuse me,” I managed, “but who are you?”

“I’d be the Queen of the Forest—if such a title existed. Aine will do. That’s my name, and I look like Metis but we’re not twins. Same father, different mothers. She has that awful oceanid bloodline. I’m a woodland nymph.”

She gestured around the wide garden where we stood, the trees, the waterfall, the mossy path. “You’ve dreamed of this place before, haven’t you?”

“In nightmares,” I said.

“Yes... well, I may have misjudged. I thought a familiar image would be comforting. I forgot about the mud and all those creepy, bitey things. Come. Hurry.” She curled her long-fingered hand the way the nymph—Nia—had done at the Gathering. “We don’t want him plunging in here and spoiling all the fun.”

With my pulse beating like a drum, I forced myself to follow Aine when she turned to walk along the path, feeling more like Alice when she fell down the rabbit hole. “Who would plunge in here?”

“Your dread lord, dear. So, so handsome, that one. Don’t tell Fee, but I have a teensy little crush. And we need to move on before she finds us.”

Perhaps Fee—the King of the Forest—wasn’t the only one *a little batty*, although Aine’s manner was endearing, how she wrapped herself in endless inner dialogs that kept our conversation jumping from subject to subject. I wanted to steer her back to the woman who might find us, since it wasn’t

Grayson—the dreaded Dread Lord to the nymphs. Metis called him the same thing. Said he was worse.

Grief overwhelmed me, from the rite I'd performed for Halwyn an hour ago and then my decision to leave. My nerves were scraped raw. Torn apart. When I'd pushed through Fee's magic and felt the power in the runes flicker out, I'd thought I could stand the loss. But then, the last hateful twitch of the wolf rune ended with a silken caress, and the emptiness in my bones and blood ached.

As we walked, Aine's gown fluttered like autumn leaves in a breeze, even though the balmy temperature reminded me of spring. My heart raced each time Aine turned, leading me through a twisty maze made of leafy shrubs that towered over my head. I'd never find my way out if I wanted to leave, not with the turns and dead ends.

But something else concerned me more than finding the way back. "Who else might find us?"

"Metis—that old sea witch," Aine said. "Although she loves water, so I doubt she'll come here. No, she'll send those little fishes who swim back and tell her everything. I detest anything wet unless it's rain or a sparkling stream. They tell me you were kind to that black-haired river nymph, Lorriel. You should be careful around them. My sister has spies everywhere. And I'm sure she'll be angry once she knows you're here."

I worried about that statement, but didn't dare ask. "Where are we, Aine?"

"Our little wrinkle in the world. That's the real sky overhead. The air is the same. Maybe the plants are a tad different, the creatures who live here. You'll meet Effa in a moment. She'll be your companion. Help you get settled. We have a library and a meditation garden. Caerwen gives a wonderful massage. You should ask her to come see you—you look a little stiff. I knew your mother—she was stiff too, so I doubt she would have told you. The book you found in the cave was one I gave her. I thought she could read it, but she

couldn't. None of the other *faillies* have been able to figure it out either. Not in centuries."

Other failles? In centuries?

"No *faillies* here now, other than you," Aine continued. "You're quite rare. We find one every few generations, and not all want to stay."

When I stumbled, Aine's eyes sharpened. I looked away and said, "I won't impose."

"No imposition."

A keen impatience edged her voice, and as we passed a bush laden with red flowers, Aine swept up a handful and crushed the petals between her long fingers, then released the wreckage.

The petals floated like red snowflakes until they covered the ground.

"When Fee finds someone like you," the nymph said, "he tries to coax her into his forests. Oh, those forests are everywhere, although not so many as before. Cycle of life. Old trees die. New ones sprout up. Sort of like you, dear. And you're here now. So exciting. We've never had more than one *faillie* in the wrinkle, not at the same time, and I'd hoped, with your mother and you... but you were so young."

"I was here before?" I should have remembered it.

"No. Your mother refused to let you come, didn't entirely trust us. And she wasn't interested in staying. I let her take the book when she left. I'd hoped... but then she hid it in that ridiculous cave Metis has without even giving you a chance."

"A chance at what?"

"Reading it with her."

Aine's hand swept through another bush, moving in a graceful arc and leaving shattered flowers behind. I stepped around, rather than on the broken, crushed and spiky stems.

"Fee said Andrea forgot where the passage was, the one leading back to our wrinkle, so she hid the book in the one

place forbidden to me. I'm sure she didn't know."

The hem of Aine's gown swished with the same susurrations I'd heard when Metis walked across her platform, dressed in amethyst and starlight diamonds.

"And then you arrived. So, when your dread lord told Fee what you were looking for, I had the perfect answer. In exchange for the book, I'd offer my sister that stupid blade—I stole it from her centuries ago, just to make her crazy. And it worked. She puts such importance on rituals. Don't get her started. It's quite rare, you know."

"The book, or the knife?"

"Both. Only one of each. My sister wouldn't trade for just anything—and I doubt she knew the book was there or she would have searched for it. She wouldn't have found it, though. Books like that aren't found unless they want to be found."

"Why not?"

"The blood magic." Aine glanced back to make sure I was following. "All magic is fickle, dear. Remember that. It gives, and then it takes—oh yes, it takes, a greedy little thing."

She pushed through overhanging branches, flicking drops of dew that moistened my face.

"I'm sure my sister's figured out where Fee got that blade. I'm expecting her revenge any day now. Of course, time in our wrinkle acts differently than time on the outside."

"Differently?" I glanced around, still feeling like Alice down her rabbit hole and waiting for the Mad Hatter, or maybe the smiling cat in the tree.

Surreal.

Aine was several steps ahead and I hurried to catch up, afraid of getting lost in the maze.

"What about time?" I asked because she hadn't answered and I wanted to know.

“Fee should have told you. He’ll be along soon, a formal hello. I’ll send a nymph to remind him. He forgets where he is. Ah... here we are.”

We’d reached another garden, this one with formal clipped hedges—low hedges, I was relieved to see, surrounding beds of many-petaled flowers. A central marble fountain had the mossy patina of age—a faun cavorting with nymphs—and I guessed the statuary was centuries old. But despite the beauty in the silvery threads of water spilling into the shallow pool, I shivered.

Every inch of this garden radiated calm while anxiety crashed through me. I needed to be very careful with Aine. More so than with Metis.

I breathed in, breathed out. Chanted *liar, liar, pants on fire...*

“Aine. I’m very grateful for—”

“Nonsense.” She smiled with a slow guile that might have been a common trait of nymphs. “We haven’t talked. You’re quite special, you know. And to have both you and your mother—a pity she died. Oh, I’m sorry, dear.”

Her mouth tipped down with genuine concern. “I keep rattling on about her when it must be painful for you. Except there’s this rule with old books protected by blood magic. It takes two people with equal ability to read the words, and the two of you together, being *failles*...”

She shook herself as if realigning something. “The spells are all tangled and frustrating with teensy, hidden knots. You need to be careful. One wrong move and—poof. The magic takes your hand off.”

“How old?” Out of everything she said, I keyed in on *how old?* I already knew the book was centuries old. Grayson told me that much. But Aine was talking about magic taking a hand off, and I remembered how the book made me chase it through the pocket, then glued my fingers to its surface.

Maybe I’d gotten off easy and hadn’t known it.

Aine’s smile widened. She was standing in the middle of a white-graveled path as if waiting for me to stop thinking and

pay attention.

“It’s exciting, isn’t it? Realizing you might read a book written by a queen? One of the originals, who’d had a wolf before her king stripped it from her. Not one of those pretenders who followed. The secrets to be uncovered... and with you and your mother, we were so very close... oh, well,” Her shoulders lifted in a show of elegant defeat I didn’t believe for an instant. “No crying over spilled milk.”

“Perhaps there’s another *faille* out there.”

“Wouldn’t that solve our problems? I’ll have to ask Fee.”

She fell silent, as did I, while the tinkling water in the fountain continued with an unchanging rhythm. Ripples spreading across the pool had a perfect symmetry. When I looked down at my empty hand, I could have sworn I’d passed through the magic with my bow, but it was nowhere to be seen. Then I chewed on my lip, pressed down on the sore spot. There was no pain.

As a last test, I picked a flower from a nearby bush. The petals remained supple between my fingers, which meant Aine had deliberately crushed the flowers she’d plucked. Perhaps a sign of anger, or another trait of nymphs. Oblivious to their strength.

Cautiously, I inhaled the fragrance, sweet like honeysuckle... but the minute I thought of roses, the scent changed. Then I thought of pine trees. The scent shifted again, and I wrinkled my nose.

“This is lovely,” I said, as if I’d noticed nothing strange.

Aine beamed. “I’m so glad you like it. I cultivated that species. Took three decades here to get it right. Nearly a century, if I’d tried it on the outside.”

I strolled around the rim of the fountain. “How does that work—three decades being nearly a century?”

“Well, when you first arrive, time is more like what you’re used to. But the longer you stay in the wrinkle, the faster time moves on the outside, and if you wait long enough, everyone you know will be dead when you go back.”

I flinched.

Her mouth formed a perfect pout. “There I go again. Forgive me. I don’t mean to hurt, but who doesn’t want the chance to start over? Make better choices? It’s worth thinking about.”

I gazed up at what she’d told me was the real sky, but I wondered at the perfection. “I’ve lost track of time since everything is so beautiful. How long have I been here?”

“An hour or so.”

I started to relax.

But Aine put a hand on my arm. “I’m sorry, dear, but they’ve already moved on, the pack, your dread lord. While we’ve been talking, five days have passed. They agreed you were innocent where the creatures were concerned, so there’s no need to go back to defend yourself. Everyone’s gone home. Gone on with their lives. But maybe we can get Fee to ask your dread lord to give him the book. Magic like that is too dangerous to be left with wolves so close to the human world.”

I turned to hold Aine’s gaze. Her eyes were nymph-black, tilted at the outer corners, and I felt more wolf-like than ever in my life.

“I’m not sure if the book survived,” I lied, surprised by the ease. But I was part of the alpha’s inner circle, and I plucked at the leathers I wore. Inhaled the lingering traces of smoke clinging to my skin. I remembered the fires. Arrows arching through the air. Flaming funeral boats floating on a starry lake. My goodbye to Halwyn. Catrina.

The darkness that still churned inside me.

I held on to those scents, memories, sensations when I said, “Grayson stored it in some archive. He didn’t say where. But I thought it was in Azul, down in a basement with all the other dusty books. Creatures overran the town. Buildings burned, others were plundered, and fighting caused significant damage.”

“A pity if the building was damaged.” Aine’s smile was quick and tight-lipped, as if she knew I knew the book was

indestructible and had lied about it. “We can always hope for a miracle. Ah... here she is. Effa... come and meet Noa.”

The Queen of the Forest clapped her hands with enough innocent excitement to make me doubt my caution. Perhaps I was seeing normal nymph expressions, but thinking in human terms, because when she turned, her face glowed with the warmth of a setting summer sun.

“I know you two will become fast friends. Come, come.”

CHAPTER 4



Noa

EFFA'S MAHOGANY SKIN TOOK on a rosy glow in the light, while her hair was the color of coal, bound at the crown of her head with a string of smooth pink stones. From there, her black hair became a wild fountain of dyed-red curls that bobbed every time she moved. She was a meadow nymph, she said, and she'd lived in the wrinkle for a time longer than two centuries on the outside.

"Don't mind Aine. She and Fee... they've been together for eons. One rubs off on the other, if you know what I mean. They're both a little fracky."

"Fracky?"

"Fish-eyed? Squid-spittled?"

Her curls bobbed, and Aine was right. We would become close friends if I stayed long enough.

"That sounds more like Metis," I said, "with all the water references."

"I stay far away from that one." The nymph smoothed her clothes—she wore a style I'd never seen before and could not describe other than it was a ballet dress fashioned out of green leaves, and a white ruff collar that made her head look like it was the center of a flower.

“What you should know about Aine,” Effa continued, “is the way she handles magic. Like... if you think of magic as food, Aine is picky about what she eats, while Metis consumes everything, bones and all. Remember that, if they ever ask you to dinner.”

I thought of the warning Metis gave me, about being invited by a friend to a blood feast. Then my throat tightened when Grayson’s teasing answer flashed through my mind.

“I’d never invite you to a secret blood feast, Noa. I’d order you to go.”

What did he think of his weapon now? I was no use to him where I was, or the *way* I was. Grayson understood me better than anyone. He had healed my bruised body when I needed it, but he couldn’t heal the dark, feral thing I’d become, and every time I woke screaming and covered in sweat, I knew I was broken. He’d never be able to heal that part of me.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed how perfect everything is,” Effa murmured as she looked away.

“Hard to miss.”

“It’s Fee. He wants everyone happy. Aine’s the same way. I guess this wrinkle is all about making a choice.”

“About what?”

“Going left or right.” Effa bent to touch a small butterfly that flitted away. I’d never seen a color like that on a butterfly’s wings—dark purple and glittering silver.

“They’re both bound by the magic,” Effa said. “I mean, they can’t tell us what choice to make. But they can still use magic to help a person go one way or the other.”

“That sounds more like manipulation than neutrality.”

“The magic believes in providing clarity. It finds your secret fears, what you desire. Reminds you of the details maybe you forgot. Or the pitfalls you overlooked.”

As if to prove the point, she led me along a gravel path. Our shoes crunched in unison. The air turned fragrant with forest scents—earthy, piney—refreshing after the heady floral

garden. I glanced to the side, and in the shade from tall trees, I recognized the purple mushroom waterfall I'd admired during the first hike to the old watchtower. Months ago, now. A living waterfall tumbling over a moss-covered slope, made up of hundreds of delicate mushrooms, all shades of white, pink, lavender.

The domed mushroom caps touched at the edges, and I'd thought of a mob of faeries hiding beneath their umbrellas. All of them scurrying in the same direction. Never seeing who was next to them. Until Grayson hiked along the path. Then, they'd turned in unison, honoring the Alpha of Sentinel Falls as he walked past before rippling in a pink wave, moving back into place.

Effa smiled when she saw me gaping. "See?"

"Absolutely."

But I couldn't stop the sting in my eyes. It was stupid, of course. I didn't understand Fee's magic, and I didn't want it to know my secrets, then offer clarity. How would I even wrap my mind around the concept?

Before the magic clarified anything, it would need to read my mind, the worst form of privacy invasion. Finding where the pain lived and dragging it out into the open. Where I'd need to face the details I'd forgotten, or the pitfalls.

If I said that made me happy, then I'd be lying. I wanted to forget, and I thought about asking Effa how the magic worked, if defending myself against it was even possible. But then I couldn't remember why I wanted to know, so I let the question go.

"You're over here." Effa nudged my shoulder, pointing. I hadn't even realized I'd stopped walking. But I had.

Because in front of me was a rocky cliff.

My skin dampened. Effa's white ruff bobbed. Her corkscrew curls matched the movement.

She grabbed my hand and locked it between her two mahogany ones; her fingers were smooth and warm while mine were cold. "Don't you just love it?"

Earnestness creased her forehead before she looked back at the door.

I supposed a door in the rock was a necessity in the wrinkle, since the door didn't match the memory. No door had existed for that cave. Instead, a veil of magic had shimmered when I'd raced through the opening with the wolf at my heels and the reek of battle still thick in the air.

Effa clicked the door open, widened it so I wouldn't miss a thing—and the pain was so real, it felt like she'd hit me in the chest.

I took a step back. I could have handled anything except this.

Effa hopped, birdlike, as she entered the cave. Her feet left indents in the sand, and after a heartbeat, then another, I followed, mute while she rattled on about the what-and-that—she had such a peculiar way with description, and I wondered at her cheery tone, as silly as the clothes she wore. Wondered at the magic.

At the brief, sharp flare of hope I hated.

I followed the rock passage, knowing it would turn and widen into a cavern with pale mushrooms covering the walls, ebbing, flowing with a soft blue light that brightened as we entered.

The stones around the fire ring were exactly the way Grayson left them, with one stone out of place; he'd kicked it when he'd stood. There—the enameled pot he used for the tea waited, filled with water and ready for use. And here—where the sand still bore the imprint of his body. I stared, remembering how he'd lounged like a waiting, predatory cat, watching me.

Carved into the rocky wall were the niches that held stacks of his clothes.

Other niches held soft blankets. Food supplies that must have been there because the magic pulled them from my memories.

This had been his private place, he'd said.

The place where he inked the runes on my skin after our first battle with the creatures.

Left his mark on my wrist.

And I realized the real danger in this magic.

How easily it recreated images locked in my mind, the way the Green Man's magic made me forget the scent of roasting coffee and the sounds of the city.

Creating an emotional lure. A trap where I'd never want to leave. Instead, I'd linger in the delusion, lost in the touch of his hand against my skin. The puncture of the bone needle each time he marked the runes. Our rising scents had been unforgettable. Even now, I squirmed with the memories. The remembered ritual. How I'd thought it meant something more.

My hand drifted, my fingers pressing against the inked wolf on my wrist. But no warmth remained because, somehow, coming into this wrinkle had broken the connection.

For a reason I couldn't explain, I wanted to cry.

Effa wrapped her arms from behind, her warmth revealing how chilled I'd become.

"The magic sucks," I choked out.

"Is it too much?"

The crush of her ruff prickled my back. I shook my head. Words escaped me, and I stepped away, swiping at my face.

"Is there a bed? Or a kitchen?" I forced a tight laugh, tipped my head and shouted at nothing but the magic. "And there gods-damned better be a lavish bathroom with hot water and my favorite shampoo. Fresh towels every day, heated. And clean linen on the bed."

And I swore that the magic answered, brushing invisible fingers against my cheek. As if wiping at tears that weren't there.

CHAPTER 5



Noa

AS IT TURNED OUT, the magic was remarkably eager to please. Effa described it as an excited puppy prone to slobbering over a new toy.

After venting my frustration, the magic went to work. I listened to the tortured sound of grinding rocks, then the meadow nymph walked me through another door, out of the cave and into a perfect replica of my house in Azul.

Sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows; beyond was the view that always caught my breath, the hills and the azure lake. Wildlife photographs hung on the walls, my photographs, the ones Laura had framed. The table in the dining room was where I'd shared a meal with Hattie and Oscar. Leo had been there. Mace across from Fallon. Grayson—that day, he'd given me a gift I never expected, confronting my stepfather, defending both my mother and me. He'd threatened the man who abused us and proved he meant it when he'd said: *blood in, blood out.*

I was pack by birthright.

I'd never come closer to having a normal family than that night, and perhaps the magic recreated the memory because it would comfort me. Each chair was in place, as if expecting

guests for another meal, even the chair Grayson used; it was still at the head of the table. He'd lounged there, leaning back, his indulgent smile not quite hiding the loneliness.

We had that in common, the loneliness... his, threading in and out of mine... and I thought about the special kind of awful in duplicating life. Living in the past while believing it was the present. I'd done it for most of my life, living through my camera lens. But I supposed wanting to escape had been more important than paying attention.

And didn't we all have reasons for hiding from the world?

I certainly did.

After Effa left, I tried to settle in, finding it too easy to believe nothing had changed and I was still at home in Azul. When I entered the bedroom, the rumpled bed was the same as I'd left it that morning. In the bathroom, a mere thought had water gushing into the elegant marble tub. Steam fogged the air. Flowers floated in the water and the towels were fluffed and heated.

I knew that every flowing, gorgeous dress hanging in the closet would fit. I'd look beautiful, or elegant. Whatever style I wanted and whenever I wanted it. Even the casual clothes mimicked old favorites.

But my mother had known of this wrinkle. How the magic would soothe the ache of separation. And she'd been smart enough to see it as the lure it was, the *faillie's* delusions, wrapped up in luxury and fondness and longing, using memory and not the dark to trap me.

I made myself remember that when I tried to sleep in a bed softer than a cloud. When I looked toward the half-filled water glass sitting on the nightstand, in the exact place where I'd left it. Beside the glass were the wildflowers I'd picked for Halwyn's rite, then left behind because I couldn't think about Halwyn or any of the others without crying.

The flowers looked wilted enough to remind me that not everything in the wrinkle thrived. And as the hours passed, then the days—what became hard was dealing with magic that

met every demand. I'd never prepared myself for food appearing on the table whenever I was hungry. Music drifted through hidden speakers the moment I disliked the silence.

I told myself there was a benefit. The magic would control the uncontrollable, give me what I wanted without the risk. And perhaps this was a better ending for me. Safer.

I could have Azul without the chance of turning feral, hurting those I wanted to protect.

I'd be alone, though.

Which didn't seem so bad, not with the lazy monotony of blended days. I woke up and went to sleep. I was okay. I was fine. Until the morning when I found Hattie's pancakes waiting on the table. Perfect, down to the maple syrup dripping off the plate.

But Hattie and Oscar weren't there, and it made me angry enough to change the memory. I thought about cold cereal, and standing at the counter eating because the one kitchen chair I had in my Seattle apartment rocked on the uneven floor.

While my dingy kitchen did not appear, a bowl of cereal slapped down on the counter hard enough to slosh the milk. Then the pancakes disappeared, along with all the chairs.

Magic is like a puppy, Noa, slobbering over the toy.

Magic was also easy to offend, and I closed my eyes. Said I was sorry. The chairs reappeared, sliding into place as if the magic was sorry too.

We started over. I asked for coffee, cream, the croissants I'd eaten on Grayson's glass deck, and then I took the food outside and didn't stop walking until I was standing on the wooden boat dock.

The Adirondack chairs were there. I imagined Leo, sitting in one while we talked about the *faillie* magic choosing me. How I wanted to reject it, and how Grayson was the same way when the alpha magic chose him.

The dock edge was beyond Leo's chair, and my thoughts drifted to the night when I sat beside Grayson, telling him

about the thing that hid in my dark abyss. How it responded to his energy.

I could almost feel his warm hand rubbing circles on my back while I talked.

Almost hear his voice, telling me how much trouble I was in. How he would protect me.

And the *almost* in that memory was shredding. Along with the sameness in this wrinkle, where the lake water lapped, and the birds sang on repeat. Where the grass looked dewy but never dampened my feet.

Magic is an illusion, Noa. Like the images through your camera lens. And believing the illusion is as pointless as wishing at midnight, with no one to hear but the restless wind.

I was like a shabby sweater fraying at the edges, lost and small, too afraid to wonder about the outside, to think about the lives going on without me. Or worry about how long before the wolves forgot me.

Before they all died of old age, and *no one* would ever remember.

Effa arrived while I was standing on the dock. It was well past noon, but I still gripped the coffee that had gone cold. Beneath my clenched fingers, the croissant was a collapsed mess. I brushed off her concerns, told her I was thinking, and lost track of time.

“Time loses meaning here,” the nymph agreed. Her dress today looked like a sunflower with a yellow petal hem. The brown leggings and green ankle boots reminded me of the stems I’d yanked from the ground in Grayson’s garden, and as we walked toward the house, the magic keyed in on that image, spreading wildflowers in great swaths.

I hated them. Instantly, they disappeared, and the suffocation in having every idea materialize edged a little closer to unbearable. If Effa hadn’t been holding my arm, I would have kept walking, past the house, back through the flawless, manicured gardens, searching for a way out.

Instead, I allowed her to lead me inside like an invalid, then to the chairs and the table where lemonade waited. And I wondered if that wasn't a magical apology for the wildflowers, because I hadn't thought about lemonade since I was ten.

"You get used to it after a while," Effa said. "The way things appear out of nothing. It's a little fish-eyed until you stop noticing."

"Why do you stay?"

"I'm a nymph. There aren't many of us left on the outside, and it's safer in the wrinkles now. We're too vulnerable to those creatures—that's why Aine is fracky over that book. She thinks if you had the chance to read it, you'd find the answer we need to fight back. She's protective, Noa. Not evil. In case that's what had you worried."

As the nymph filled our glasses, I listened to the sloshing waterfall of crushed ice and lemonade, searching for a memory. But when Effa slid a glass toward me, all I asked was, "Do you have a meadow here?"

"A small one."

"Is that why you dress like flowers?"

"No." Her laugh trilled. "I'd die of boredom if I didn't dream up different things to wear. That's why I was so happy to meet you."

It seemed right, confiding in a meadow nymph, although that might have been the magic, anticipating my need for a confidant. A sister.

I still said, "Running seems to be what I do best. Leaving behind the things I don't want to face."

"I can understand that." Her red-black curls bobbed like funny little corkscrew stems. "But whenever you run, you leave nothing behind. All you do is blind yourself to what's dragging in the dust."

My gaze drifted toward the framed photographs hanging on the walls. My camera sat on a table. Above was the empty rack for my bow—everything was flawless, exactly as I

remembered. I could almost believe this was reality, and if I imagined myself as happy, the magic would make it so.

Just for fun, and to see if I was right, I inserted an odd detail into the Azul house memory, and a framed photo of Grayson appeared on a side table near the lamp. A photo that never existed in real life.

We were hugging, and he was smiling with so much joy, his lips barely brushing my forehead. And I was...

A shudder passed through me, both dread and sorrow. I could wish for what hadn't been. I could change the outcomes to what I wanted. But not all of them.

There were unspoken limitations to the magic's illusion. I was alone in this Azul house. No wolves. No one I'd once loved. There'd never been that look on Grayson's face. I'd never felt his lips on my skin like that, or known what it was like to be cherished by a man.

Was that the question being asked? Which way I wanted to turn—left, or right?

To live in reality, or illusion?

“Can I ever leave, Effa?”

“Your mother left. But she didn't stay long. And she had you to worry about.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Would you ever leave?”

“No, but I have no one outside waiting for me.”

“I'm not sure I do, either.”

Other than the chitinous, corrupted nymphs—did Aine know I'd killed them? Was that why I was here? As some punishment where I went fracky with the sameness? Forgot what was real and walked around with a bird in my hair?

And what of the hairy, yellow-tusked pigs I'd left dying in the open meadows? Had I summoned them? Or had someone else sent them to me? Before the rite held for the dead, I'd been dreaming of the monsters.

I hadn't dreamed since coming here—but that brief thought was enough to summon the nightmares, and I woke that night, sweat-drenched and screaming as pigs raced through the bedroom doorway, then disappeared like puffballs in the wind.

After that, I couldn't sleep in a cloud-soft bed, and I dragged a blanket from the closet, walked through the silent house, down the hall to the door that led to Grayson's cave. Mushrooms glowed like a night light, keeping the monsters away, and when I curled on the sand, wrapped in my blanket cocoon, I stared at the fire guttering in embers that never burned to ash.

In the silence, the loneliness, I waited, hoping for the sound of his breathing. His voice. I heard nothing, other than the popping sparks leaping from the fire.

When water in the green-enameled pot began to boil, steam rose like curls of ribbon in the air, but without the scent of Grayson's spicy tea. And when I missed *him*, the magic summoned his reeking shirt. But the shirt held no reek, no warmth, and I realized that while I wished for the memories, only the tastes and scents existing in this wrinkle were real.

What I remembered, or imagined, would remain tasteless. Scentless.

The beautiful lure, Noa. Forgetting what you left behind.

But I continued to sleep in the cave, and when I missed Hattie and Oscar. Levi or Laura. Leo. When the thrill on the Night of the Beacons became too hard to recall—I would wish. And the magic would wipe the mushrooms away and project images on the cave walls. Faces of those I loved. People hugging, laughing, sharing tea. The beacon lights, flickering from hilltops, flaming with the stars.

Other times, I remembered what it was like to belong, before realizing belonging had been impossible. Because *not belonging* was the way I'd always been. Like being not human, not wolf. Wandering with no place to call home. Those were the nights when I closed my eyes and wished for nothing.

But there were days when I talked to the magic like a friend.

“How are you today? Know any good jokes, magic? No?”

Effa would find me and *tsk*, mutter how I was shell-spunked—whatever that meant—and urge me back to the house and into the bath. More days passed, but on the day Effa came dressed like a pink tulip, she wasn't alone. Another nymph was with her, flighty as a butterfly and just as transparent.

Caerwen, Effa murmured. She'd once guarded a sacred grotto in Wales, destroyed long ago, during a battle lost to the mists of time. She'd moved from wrinkle to wrinkle over the centuries, and as I stretched out on the bed, waiting for Caerwen to begin the massage Effa insisted I needed, I thought the grotto nymph was a warning—of what could happen if I stayed here too long.

I'd become like Caerwen, little more than a shadow in certain light, or the flutter of a passing bird in flight. A caress that was nothing more than breath.

“Let me know if it bothers you,” she murmured. “I haven't wanted to feel my weight in centuries.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because weight connects me to the earth, where the memories are.”

Although, as Caerwen pressed her slim-fingered hands over the bones of my shoulders, I felt the weight and warmth of living flesh. She touched each pale moonstone rune decorating my spine, then my arm to the wrist. Across the curve of my shoulder to the rise of my breast.

“These keep you safe. But they cannot heal your heart,” she said, her voice more breeze than sound. “Not here, lady.”

“Caerwen.” Her name was sweet on my lips. “What do you know of my heart?”

She said nothing more, pressing the heels of her hands against the tension that gripped my body, while I thought of the earth, where the memories lived.

Caerwen came more often. My body eased beneath the pressure of her hands, and I asked how she did it. “Like you,

lady.”

“I don’t understand.”

Her long fingers curled around my shoulders, then stroked the length of my spine, the way Grayson once stroked.

“Your gifts are considerable,” she murmured. “*Failles* draw the life force from everything. The rocks, trees, water. Living beings. What I am doing is what you do with silent wolves. Something goes wrong for the silent wolf, and if he cannot release excess energy, it builds up to a dangerous level. It is the same for you. Energy builds until it becomes volatile, and while you can help ease the silent wolf, you cannot help yourself. You need someone else to do it for you.”

“How do you know this, Caerwen?”

“I have offered this service to many *failles* over the centuries,” she said. “They entrusted me with their journals, the writings they left behind.”

Tension whipped back into my body and I jolted upright on the massage table, ignoring my nudity. The nymph had brought the table into Grayson’s cave, since I seldom left, and I supposed I looked fracky with my hair in disarray and my collarbones pressing whitely against thinning skin. I’d lost muscle tone. No one remarked about it because the mushrooms kept the light low.

My bare feet sank into the soft sand while I searched for the clothes I’d been wearing, jeans and a tee shirt, both of which hung loose on my body when I dressed.

“Lady.” Caerwen placed her hand on my arm. “No need to rush. I’ve brought them for you.”

Caerwen’s concern deepened as she watched me, and I breathed in, breathed out. “Can I read them here? Is there not enough light? What about the sand? Will it damage the pages?”

Leaving the cave had become abhorrent when I thought of the rock walls as a shield. They blunted the magic. The sameness. I wanted the small pleasure found in feeling hungry or thirsty without having dozens of choices thrust upon me.

And with the comforting glow of the mushrooms, my fear of the nightmares eased.

But now, my hands twisted, child-like, and I hid them in the folds of my shirt. “It’s just that... I’m running out of time.”

“There is time,” Caerwen said. “You need to learn before you can decide.”

Over the following days, Caerwen sat with me, helping to decipher the ancient languages, the scrawled handwriting. *Failles* who sheltered in the wrinkles left testimonies for those who followed, and I learned that what I had, instead of a wolf, was a gift. A skill I could understand and use for good or ill.

When heat flowed into my hands, I was syphoning energy, what I’d done for the silent wolves. But also, I’d done it to the pig in Azul—the first one that deflated into mush beneath my clawing fingers. And the second, the one I’d left unrecognizable in Leo’s clinic, when I’d melted the scalpel.

I hadn’t turned feral. With my emotions so high, the desperation so great, the *faille* part of me took control. I couldn’t stop syphoning until there was no life force left. Not in the pigs, at least. And there was the risk.

If I couldn’t learn to limit what I absorbed, and then release it safely, I would become like my mother, slipping deeper into the headaches, the delusions, finally losing myself in the dark depths of my mind. The one fear I’d always had above dying. The fear Grayson had used to gain my cooperation, months ago. But my mother had been both right and wrong about avoiding wolves—the danger wasn’t in being exposed to too much wolf energy, but in not knowing how to release the pressure.

Tears stung my eyes long after Caerwen left, and I gazed at the embers, losing myself in the fire’s soft glow. I thought of the many times I’d resented my mother’s weakness, when I had to be strong for her. How she’d said I should not ask questions she wouldn’t answer.

So much of what I’d believed about my mother had been wrong. I was ashamed, and wished now that she’d had the

chance to learn what I was learning. She might not have suffered, if she'd known.

But the truth remained hidden in this wrinkle, and she hadn't wanted—no, because of me, she refused to stay here.

I had no doubt now that my mother hid Aine's book, along with the tarnished necklace, so that I'd find it one day. Learn to read it... and the thought trembled like a dewdrop at the edge of a leaf... *had she found a way to read it?*

Was that why she'd been so desperate when Stewart buried the book in the backyard?

No answers, Noa. Not yet.

Time passed. Caerwen taught me more about the energy. How to sense the ebb and flow and use it, let the pressure build, then release it without destroying myself. I blew up a foot of sand the first time I tried, coating us in grit.

I tried again in the bath and soaked the entire room. When I pelted the cave with the remnants of an exploding rock, I doubted if I'd ever figure it out.

But Caerwen thought my skill was improving. Then she would run her hands along the runes Grayson inked on my skin, pulling the tension from my body. When I asked, she said others could ease the pressure for me. But when I asked who those others were, she fluttered as if she would disappear, and I debated whether it was because she wouldn't tell me... or because I wasn't ready to hear what she would say.

We kept reading the journals, often by firelight. One night, I wasn't able to sleep, so I read until dawn. The tears were still on my face when Effa arrived, and when she asked why, I told her about a *faillie*. Her mate died in her arms from battle wounds that were too grave to heal. "She suffered for years, Effa. Their bond... she said she wanted to die with him."

"She was one of the lucky ones," Caerwen said as she sat beside Effa. "I knew her, but I was unable to ease her grief. Her mate was a dread lord, and their love had gone too deep."

"Tell me about the dread lords, Caerwen," I asked. "Did you know them?"

“Some of them. They were not always kind. They were the sons of the kings, and the sons of the sons. They did not fear what the old kings feared. They thought the *failles* were weapons to be used.”

I shuddered, and tears still haunted me, a lingering grief from the story in the journal—a last bloody battle against corrupted pigs not unlike those Grayson and I battled in a meadow. Then, in Azul.

“Some say the dread lords were driven by hate,” Caerwen said. “Others said it was ambition, a thirst for power. A *faille* and a dread lord fueled each other—he used the energy she syphoned—and *failles* were coveted for this reason. Wolves went to war over girls who had the silver streaks in their hair, by nature and not by the curse.”

“It was rare,” Effa said, “for the dread lords to find authentic *failles*.”

“When they did?”

Caerwen said, “The dread lord and *faille* became mirrors of each other, light against dark. They grew stronger and more destructive. The dread lords were known for devastation, but the *faille* learned to ruin just as easily. Together, they were balanced. He eased the pressure building in her. She calmed his demons. But when they were at odds, the dread lord would mis-use the *faille*, refuse to syphon her excess energy until she lost control and became his weapon.”

Something in the nymph’s tone made me smooth the journal and set it aside.

Caerwen continued, “What the dread lords did not understand was that the kings had a curse of their own. If a dread lord found a *faille* and she asked for protection... or if he offered it and she accepted... he would have no choice but to ink his sigil on her skin. Promise to protect her with his life. Give up a part of himself.”

She drew a half-circle in the sand. “But once his sigil was on her skin, he could demand her promise in return. And if he

demanded protection, or if she offered the same to him and he accepted...”

Caerwen drew the other half of the circle. “She, too, would have no choice. The circle would close. Fate would lock in place, and they were forever bound. It would not matter if they loved or hated each other. This was what the King of the Forest decreed as payment for sins of the kings and the queens. That the dread lord would repair what the kings destroyed, and the *failles* would learn what the queens did not—compassion. And love.”

A chill ran across my skin. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Grayson Devante is descended from the kings. And this...” Caerwen gripped my hand and brushed her fingers over the black rune on my wrist. “This is a dread lord’s sigil.”

I tried to snatch my hand back, but she held on with more strength than I expected from someone so insubstantial.

“The night you asked for the Green Man’s runes,” she said. “A wheel began to turn. He had to ink this sigil on your skin, draw the first half of the circle. Now, fate waits for you.”

“I have no sigil.”

“It will appear if he asks you for protection—or if you offer it and he accepts.” Effa’s eyes were hard upon me, but dark with concern. “You’ll have no choice.”

“You can’t know this.”

I looked at Caerwen, and she gentled her expression.

“Many have come and gone, lady,” she said kindly. “The pretenders. The ones who wanted the gift. Those who tried to give or receive this mark and failed. He is a dread lord, because his sigil remains on your skin and only a king’s sin can keep it there. You are a *faille*. Your abilities are emerging. Strengthening by being around him. The things you’ve been able to do frighten you, confuse you—but you cannot forget what happened in a cave like this, the night when he inked the runes on your skin. And you already know the truth.”

The ritual—that promise and acceptance Grayson warned me about, and how once it was done, it could not be undone. He'd been an approaching storm, someone who would remake me...

Do not believe in fate, Noa. Do not, do not, do not!

“A sigil is also a mark of hope,” Caerwen said. “He can teach you, lady. You can help defeat his enemies. He is connected to you through this sigil. He protects you with his life, as you may want to protect him.”

I pulled my hand back, folded my fingers to hide the tremors. Perhaps, at one time, the sigil had been a connection. But the instant I pushed through the magic and entered Aine's world, the wolf rune fell silent. There'd been no wicked little twitch. The ink wasn't warm or cold. At times, I thought the black was fading.

Maybe we were pretenders after all, and I'd broken the sigil. Ended our bargain by coming into the wrinkle, the way Grayson offered to cut through the rune—such a simple ending.

He wouldn't have said that if it wasn't true, would he? To get me to leave? Go on with my life?

I clawed my fingers through the sand, not drawing circles but wiping them away, the way I wanted to wipe away everything the nymphs were saying. I wasn't foolish enough to believe in fate, or dread lords and *faillies*, tied together because of ancient sins. My mother warned me not to believe in fate, no matter how seductive or inevitable I thought it was. I didn't want to think Grayson Devante believed in fate, not when he was the Alpha of Sentinel Falls. He would be above superstitions...

But his sigil was inked on my skin.

He'd said he could not ink the Green Man's runes without adding his mark, and I should have asked about the cost of magic before ordering him to do it.

He'd also said he did me a favor, but he resented doing it, and I thought he'd been as trapped by the Green Man's

motives as I was.

Then I thought about Mosbach, sitting on that darkened glass deck, telling me the Alpha of Sentinel Falls would face challenges if I didn't convince the elders that we hadn't lied. I needed his scent on me. In me. And that night when I'd tried to seduce Grayson, I'd been thinking about his enemies.

I'd *offered* to protect him. And he'd said, "*Convince me.*"

Bits and snatches of our conversation flew through my mind.

"I'm not sleeping with you because of something that old man said..."

"No... we are sleeping with each other... because we have a bargain. Let me give this gift to you..."

He'd said Mosbach manipulated me, and I was too naïve not to wonder if sleeping with him would make it worse for me. Then he'd walked away, leaving me in the watchtower house as if his abandonment didn't hurt.

But now I realized. His sigil had already been inked on my skin, which meant that if he'd accepted my offer to protect him, the circle would have closed. We would have been permanently bound.

Dizziness made me feel funny. I crawled on all fours to get away from the fire and find my blanket nest. It took so much effort to move, the way I'd been with the worm poison, trying to crawl away from him.

I looked weak. I *was* weak, while the turmoil in my mind made it hard to think.

"Are you alright?" Effa asked.

"I haven't eaten." And I wouldn't believe what they'd said.

Effa touched my arm. "Your fate is up to you. You can return to that world—a world you weren't sure was yours. Or you can remain here, hidden with the nymphs until enough time has passed and his life has ended. You'll be free to start whatever life you want. Be happy. Have a family. Put everything behind you."

Be alone. Everyone I loved would have also died. Was it too high a price to pay to thwart something I shouldn't even believe in? Old stories of kings and queens, told to children to get them to behave?

I should have control over my own life, shouldn't I? But just then, the cave flickered with light. I pushed upright, moved away from Caerwen, from Effa, although they followed me through the narrow passage, bending around and leading to the entrance in Grayson's cave. Not the entrance from the wrinkle with the door—but the opening leading back to my world. I recognized the shimmer of magic. Through the translucence, I saw the shadows, some moving, some not. Effa put her hand against my back.

“The magic is offering you a way home,” she said.

But home was the last place I wanted to go. Too many thoughts tangled up into knots impossible to untie.

If what Caerwen and Effa said was true, then what I'd done to Grayson would always be between us. I'd condemned him. Asked for protection. He'd had no choice when I ordered him to finish the last rune, and if the day came when he resented me for it, decided I wasn't cooperating... if he became my enemy and demanded my protection in return, I'd have no choice.

The way he'd had no choice. Each of us, forced to give up a part of ourselves. Closing the circle for sins committed eons ago.

And then what?

Do not believe in fate, Noa!

I turned my back to the light. Told the nymphs I wanted to be alone. They had to know I was upset over what they'd shared, but they granted me privacy.

The magic did the same, although the veiled entrance remained in place. And I wondered if the slobbering puppy magic, meeting my every need, was the same magic demanding payment from Grayson for the sins of the kings. And if it was...

The cave quieted. I sat with an arrangement of water bottles in reach and an open journal on my lap. Sleep seemed unnecessary. I didn't wonder why. Time was not my friend, but by watching through the veil, I had some sense of how fast time passed on the outside.

Not as fast as I'd feared. The sun rose and set. The translucence would clear and time would slow long enough to notice a wolf pacing in circles.

His pelt was dark brown, but around his muzzle was the gray of age. The steady pacing reminded me of Oscar sorting fishing lures.

Perhaps the wolf was so aged it had wandered into the forest, unable to find the way home. I remembered a friend of mine from high school, talking about her old dog, who would wander into a corner of the room and stand there for hours, unable to figure the way out.

"Go home, wolf," I whispered, looking down at the journal in my lap, and when I glanced up again, time had jumped and the wolf was sleeping on the ground, exposed to the pouring rain. I shouted at him to go, to find shelter, but doubted the wolf could hear me.

The sheeting rain lessened. Light faded to dark gray, then night for what might have been four hours. Brightened again. The wolf was still there until the time when I glanced up and he was gone. I was relieved, but also missed the companionship. As if realizing that, the magic thinned the veil until details came into focus. I could see the trees, and the grass, still trampled from the wolf's pacing.

I hoped the wolf made it home. That he wasn't still pacing where I couldn't see him. But when my heart cramped with concern, the light outside shimmered as if inviting me.

Come out, come out, come out.

Instead, I pushed to my feet and wandered deeper into the cave, where every morning, I'd find a basket of fruit and cheese waiting. But today, the magic brought flakey croissants and a sealed carafe of coffee that steamed when I lifted the lid.

“Thank you,” I said, because the magic appreciated gratitude, and I was grateful as I gulped down that first cup of coffee, with the cream already added in the correct amount. The little touch of cinnamon I liked.

The flakey, buttery layers of the croissant tasted particularly good, not like the heavy yeasty crescent rolls so often passed off as croissants in the human world.

After a sigh of pleasure, I told the magic, “This is wonderful. You probably think I don’t eat enough. Or sleep enough. But I’m not tired or hungry. I’ve been reading the journals every night, so don’t worry about me.”

Flames wavered upward around the wood in the fire ring, then settled down, which was as close to answering back as the magic came, other than whipping chairs away or slamming down bowls of cereal.

But when the mushrooms on the walls pulsed, I remembered Grayson inking runes on my skin, and the memory hit hard enough to make me angry.

“What?” I demanded. “You can’t say it?”

The firelight danced, tinting the sand with a rosy glow.

“You’re supposed to be neutral.” I tore into a second croissant. “You say I have choices, but then you pout if I don’t pick the one you want.”

When sparks popped, I rolled my eyes. “Oh, I see. You know better than I do, but maybe you’re the same magic that came up with all these ‘sins of the kings and queens’ and decreed it as fate.”

When the smoke curled upward in lazy ribbons, I thought it looked smug, and I tore another piece of croissant, waved it in the air.

“I don’t believe in fate. Neither did my mother. And I loved my life before, you know.” I shoved the food into my mouth. “I loved being that girl in the forest, taking photographs. It was a good life.”

A slab of burning wood broke apart in a sea of sparks.

My teeth clenched. “Okay, fine. Argue every point, but it *was* good, and I know I’ll never go back to who I was then. That doesn’t mean I’m believing everything Caerwen and Effa said.”

No flicker from the flames or pulse from the mushrooms this time, making me wonder if I wasn’t already fracky, standing there with my loose hair, arguing with a cave, lost in a delusion. How much sense did it make anyway, thinking I could talk to the magic and it would listen—when it was the same magic that condemned people for the sins committed by people they didn’t even know?

I could talk to the nymphs. They would listen. But they were like sisters who didn’t agree with me, and I didn’t want to be angry because of their point of view. Silence was better, and I turned my back to the fire, wandered toward the light again.

Sitting by the veil had become a compulsion, as if some revelation waited, and as I settled cross-legged on the sand, a curious movement on the other side drew my attention.

Was the wolf back? I almost hoped he was because I’d grown lonely. But what I could see through the mist wasn’t a wolf. I guessed he was male, young, but not a child. Perhaps an older teenager. His arms crossed, dropped to his sides, crossed again. His attention was on the ground—he was staring at the matted grass where the old wolf slept.

Perhaps that was why he was here, hunting for the wolf. Who was gone, now.

But scattered pebbles edged the turf, and the man-boy bent down, scooped enough to fill his palm, tested the weight.

Then he pulled his arm back, threw the pebbles as hard as he could toward the cave.

I skittered backward when the stones bounced against the magic, clattered to the ground. But the veil held, then cleared enough for me to see it was Levi, standing there.

He was shouting. “I know you’re in there, Noa! Oscar found you. Don’t ask me how. He shifted into his wolf, and he came

here and wouldn't leave for days. Hattie finally got him home."

Levi picked up another handful of pebbles, cocked back his arm and pitched them. They fell harmlessly on his side of the veil.

"He's not doing well."

My throat tightened.

"It took both Mace and Fallon to get him to shift back because Gray isn't here. But he wouldn't settle down until I promised I'd come and talk to a damn pile of rocks if it made him feel better."

I opened my mouth, but the sound that came out was a croak.

"Are you gonna' come out or what?"

Levi braced his fists on his hips before he half-turned and scrubbed a palm across his eyes. The veil shimmered, turned crystal clear. Tension creased around his lips. Brown hair drifted recklessly across his forehead. He shoved it back, bent to pick up a final pebble.

My heart pounded.

Do not believe in fate, Noa!

"It's my birthday today." Levi's voice choked. He stared at the small rock on his palm, and this time, when he threw the pebble, the magic let it bounce through the veil and roll toward my knee.

No fate, no fate, no fate.

I picked the pebble up and threw it back.

CHAPTER 6



Noa

AS THE VEIL VANISHED, I breathed in the piney air that smelled richer, fresher than the air in the wrinkle, despite Aine telling me it was the same air. The grass carried the summery scents that came from long, warm meadowy days. Levi stood across from where I sat, and his first words to me were, “You look like shit.”

“Happy birthday,” I said, shoving my fingers into the sand beside my hips. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen,” he sneered. “Did you forget already?”

“No. Time is different in the wrinkle.” And for Levi, months might have passed while I’d been hiding. He could be any age by now.

“What the hell, Noa—you’re in a wrinkle?”

He was yelling at me, and I couldn’t defend myself against him, when—from Levi’s perspective—I’d been the one who disappeared. Without saying goodbye or telling anyone where I was going. When I’d be back. No one knew if I was safe or not. I’d been sitting on my side of the veil without answering him—when, after I had saved him, and Laura, all he wanted was to save me from something he didn’t understand.

I glanced over my shoulder to see what Levi saw. Both Effa and Caerwen were gone. My cave would look ordinary to anyone but Grayson, who would recognize it on sight.

But I wasn't sure how much I could tell Levi, or how secret Aine's wrinkle needed to remain. The easier path would be to let him think I'd created a hiding place with the same magic I'd used for my grand exit.

"I'm... comfortable."

Levi sucked in a tight breath. "Is the Green Man helping you?"

I picked up a water bottle, worked at opening the cap. "He's protecting me."

"Can you leave?" Levi demanded. "Or are you stuck in there? What's going on?"

Telling him was a thousand times harder than I thought it would be. But as calmly as I could, I explained how I'd needed time away from everything. I was learning about *failles*, something that ought to be important, and I didn't have a lot of time to do it because a day in the wrinkle was like a week on the outside, and if I waited too long, I might not come out at all.

He didn't understand, not completely, because I left out so many details. Where *not coming out at all* meant coming out after he and everyone else who knew me had died of old age.

But he was also wolf and understood enough about the King of the Forest, nymphs, and witches, so he probably understood magic.

"Tell me about Oscar." I should have asked about Oscar first, but Levi's distress hit me the hardest, and I'd feel guilty no matter who I put first.

"After you left." Levi had his arms crossed, and the way he rocked back into a braced stance broke my heart. "We thought he'd be alright. Everyone was worried about Leo when he turned out to be the strongest. Then Gray called a meeting—ordered the entire pack to Azul. That A-hole Mosbach

revealed the traitors in front of everyone, and you won't be surprised. Jo-Rae Bell and Karla Asper."

My flash of anger didn't fade until I forced it down—but I didn't rage for myself. Those two women hadn't hurt me with their hateful words. They hurt the families of the dead in Azul, the children who would remember the terror for the rest of their lives. The grief. I raged at two women who tormented anyone weaker than they were.

"I guess they'd been feeding information to the Alpen for years." Levi's crossed arms tightened. "Gray made Mosbach cut off their pack marks before he sent the women into exile. Even their mates rejected them—it got bloody, and they deserved it."

Disgust curled Levi's mouth, followed by satisfaction—and I didn't allow myself to think about it.

"Then, one day," Levi said, his voice hoarse, "Hattie came running. She was screaming about Oscar, shifting into his wolf and running off into the forest. Gray wasn't around. There'd been trouble in the Carmag territory. Anson Salas called for help, so he'd gone. Took men with him. Fallon had her hands full, but she searched for Oscar. Mace did the same, but he had all these demands. Hattie had to go on her own and found him waiting..." Levi jabbed toward the crushed grass. "Right. Here."

He glared at me. "You never even saw him, did you? Sleeping in the rain? Or if you did, then you didn't care. Hattie managed to get him home, but it took her a few days."

Levi turned away while a ripple of guilt left me shaking. My mouth dried, but when I tried to drink water to ease my throat, it dribbled down my chin. I needed to wipe it away with the back of my hand and hope Levi didn't notice.

"Leo helped," he said after a moment. "But like I said, Gray was gone, and it took Fallon and Mace to help Oscar shift back. He didn't remember much, but Leo thinks that, because you helped heal him or something, maybe Oscar sensed his own energy on you and tracked it. He kept rocking back and

forth, so I promised I'd come and see. Like... if you were here."

The last dagger to the heart—Levi, coming to look for me on faith. Throwing pebbles at a rock wall because he cared enough about Oscar—who'd cared enough about me to somehow shift into his wolf and search through the forest. Sleep in the rain when he was too old. After his wolf had been silent for so many years and I'd stopped helping him because I was afraid.

When I spoke, my voice came out choked. "How long has it been?"

"It's September, Noa. The fifteenth."

"Your birthday," I murmured, feeling sick. While I'd been in the wrinkle, three months had passed. "And you came here instead of celebrating with your friends."

Levi glanced over his shoulder, held my gaze. "If you were here, there's no other place I wanted to be."

The full impact of what I'd done hit me. I swiped at my face. My fingers dampened. I had abandoned those who loved me. Not intentionally. I wanted to keep them safe from the feral creature I'd become. But I left them. And if I remained in the wrinkle for another few weeks, months, they might never know why I did it.

Never know it was because when they loved me, I loved them back. They were *family*.

Glancing at the *faillie* journals I hadn't yet read, I shook my head. Looked up and hoped the bleakness didn't show in my eyes. "What happened with Carmag?"

"Creatures."

I kept my gaze on Levi.

"They swarmed a small settlement," he said, his voice tight. "Not Westvale. That's Anson's seat of power, like Sentinel Falls was ours, only now it's Azul. We're rebuilding. You'd never know there'd been fighting. Your posse misses you. The

pink is back in their hair. I guess the parents made them take it out because the rite was a somber occasion, and...”

He shoved the lock of brown hair from his forehead; I braced myself against his growing frustration mixed with anger and concern.

“What’s happened to you, Noa? I can see your bones from here.”

I pushed to my feet, brushed the sand from my jeans to keep my hands from trembling. Moving helped with the pretense that I was fine. That I’d be okay.

“I’ve been reading journals.” I forced a confidence into my voice I didn’t feel. “Written by *failles*. Sometimes, I forget to eat.”

“Shit. If Gray finds you like this—”

“He isn’t going to find me. Like this.” I said the words with a biting snap, but it was to cover the trembling of my lips and not really from anger.

Except that Levi’s expression froze, and I wanted to go to him, hug him because he thought I was staying in this cave when I’d already decided to leave. I couldn’t run from this. Couldn’t blind myself to it, either. Oscar needed me, if it wasn’t already too late. And he’d gone downhill because I hadn’t thought enough about the cost to others if I left. Only the risk in my actions, if I stayed.

I couldn’t leave Hattie or Leo on their own. I wasn’t even sure why I thought for so long that it didn’t matter what I did. As if the magic had offered more than one solution until it perceived which one I needed.

Or deserved.

Because the choice didn’t matter when the outcome was the same. Either way, I’d always be the catalyst. The differences were in where I was and who I hurt or helped.

I couldn’t change being *faille*, a girl without a wolf, but with more power than anyone understood. Even me. And maybe Grayson was the one person who could understand what it

meant to cause havoc no matter what you did. He'd sensed the potential months ago, when I told him he wanted a myth.

And he'd told me a weapon that did not recognize itself was harmless.

I hadn't understood what he meant, but I did now. I'd be harmless as long as I drifted through my pretend, no-wolf world. The view I framed through a camera lens. Or wished for in the wrinkle. I could lock myself in a numbing sameness, accept the slow slide until I was fracky.

But once I saw the real world as it existed. Once I faced evil charging across a meadow. Fought against it. Killed it. Smelled death. I could not look into a mirror and refuse to see what I was. Not realize that I *wanted* to be what... I... was.

Because I'd always stood up for the weak, faced bullies even when I hated doing it.

And I remembered what else Grayson said to me that day.

"You are a savior, or a weapon."

I'd asked him which one I was to him.

And he'd said, *"Both."*

That answer meant more now, knowing Grayson was a dread lord—and I was his mirror energy. He was one of the most destructive, dangerous alphas to exist, descended from kings, but I could soothe his demons—if I believed Caerwen and Effa. He was cursed to heal what had been broken, the way I was cursed to learn love and compassion. We'd already stumbled halfway into a circle made of magic. He'd marked me as his own, and be it myth or fairytale, what we were was... singular.

He'd been right when he said I couldn't hide from what I was. I had to either find out what that meant, use it—or give up. And the enemy would win.

But I wouldn't leave without first speaking to Aine. To Effa and Caerwen. To the magic that tried so hard to please.

As I hesitated, Levi's posture changed, and then Laura stepped into the sunlight, walking to Levi's side, not intending

to startle either him or me. Her brown hair fell in waves, sliding forward as she hugged her brother, who remained wooden and braced.

“Noa... how are you?” She sounded casual, as if passing by on her way to somewhere else and had stopped long enough to say hello.

I called her bluff, but without heat in my voice. “Levi told you through the pack bond.”

Laura shrugged, brushed at her brother’s hair, and it was touching... the way they cared for each other.

“Levi thought he was alarming you,” she said, protective—of him, and not me. Was I still a worrisome threat to her?

No, not when she smiled and added, “He called in the big sister reinforcements.”

“More than one?” I glanced around, knowing from the humor in Laura’s tone that someone else was lurking nearby.

Fallon stepped out to where I could see her. “You’re out of shape.” She’d braced her hands against the fighting leathers she wore. “When was the last time you ran the lake circuit?”

“I don’t remember.” I tipped my chin toward her. “Are you here in your alpha role or sister role?”

She grinned. “Sister, because an alpha would be running your skinny ass off right now. It takes a sister to see that’s not what you need.”

“Noa.” I turned at the sound of Aine’s voice. The Queen of the Forest wore the colors of spring today, flowing pinks, roses, palest yellow. A crown of silver lilies glittered on her head. Beside her, Caerwen stood, wreathed in soft lavender chiffon. Effa also wore yellow, with little bees that buzzed around her corkscrew hair.

“I have to leave,” I told them, but I looked at Aine. Tipped my head.

“We understand.” Aine gestured, and Caerwen flitted toward me the way sunlight flits between moving leaves. She held

several unread journals, and the most recent ones I'd been reading.

"We picked the most insightful testimonies," Aine continued. "Take them with you. Keep them safe."

I accepted the gift, stared down at the ancient leather through misty eyes. "Thank you." Then, meeting Aine's gaze, I said, "The other book... I'll try to read it for you."

"I know you will." Aine looked up at my friends. "Godspeed to you."

Both Fallon and Laura nodded, using the slight head bow I'd used, while Levi turned bright red and bobbed his head several times, once he realized who he was facing.

"Visit anytime, Noa," the Queen of the Forest trilled. She turned to her companions. "Come, come."

And with a final shimmer, the magic brushed against my cheek, then withdrew like a fading breeze through an opening that turned into solid rock.

CHAPTER 7



Noa

I NEEDED HELP DURING the hike home. Mace provided it, appearing without a word, just scooping me into his arms and carrying me back to Azul. I admired his strength since he never tired—or perhaps I’d lost more weight than I thought.

At least he hadn’t thrown me over his shoulder like I was potatoes and he didn’t care—the way he’d carried me when I’d been sick with worm poison. Of course, I’d vomited down his back that time, so maybe he’d learned his lesson.

Still, it was awkward, having the alpha who stalked me through a grocery store now treating me like I was precious. He’d said he couldn’t trust me because I wasn’t committed. He’d accused me of the arrogance in failure and here I was again... failing. I couldn’t even walk by myself.

When more wolves joined our procession, my awkwardness turned fretful. I thought Grayson might be one of them, but he wasn’t there, and when wolves gathered along the streets in Azul, silent and watching, I started trembling and couldn’t stop. They threw flowers beneath Mace’s feet, and I tried to scramble from his arms like a terrified fawn.

Or the rabbit. Remember her? How the sun turned her ears translucent, a blend of yellow and rose?

A sob choked when I remembered what Grayson said: *She was beautiful, wasn't she, Noa? Innocent, young, with golden light all around, and all you wanted was to photograph her, preserve that moment of life.*

He'd been angry then, but the remembered anger grounded me, and when Mace stood me on my feet, I turned to Levi and hugged him.

"Thank you for saving me."

"You saved me." His face flushed. "Thought I'd return the favor."

"Happy birthday." I hugged him again, a little too hard as I asked if they were celebrating. Laura said with chocolate cake, offering to bring me a slice, but I countered and asked if they'd be willing to bring the whole cake, with candles, and the three of us could celebrate together. Levi nodded while Laura smiled. I hugged her before turning to Fallon, who laughed, put up her hands in protest, then came in for the count.

"Thank you," I mouthed as she pulled away. She winked, said something about my "skinny ass."

Mace had wisely disappeared when the hugging started, and as I mounted the stairs to my upstairs bedroom, I reminded myself this was real. No more illusions. But for fun... for nostalgia... for the *magic*... I thought about a steaming bath with flowers floating in the water.

While I was disappointed when I entered the quiet bathroom and found ordinary water waiting—I was also relieved. I didn't need the perfection. Wouldn't be numbed by it here.

That evening, the birthday celebration was a boon with its normalcy. Levi and Laura laughed. I managed a smile, and I held them both a little longer when we said goodbye. Then I slept in a bed that wasn't cloud-like, but I loved the nubby texture of the sheets, and the cozy blanket was a luxury after the perfect temperatures of the wrinkle.

Leo arrived in the morning and did a thorough exam, prodding, frowning, and *tsking* until I glared at him. "I'm not

six.”

He harrumphed, which sounded strange because he also tried not to smile. “You’re scrawny enough to be mistaken for seven.”

“At least nine,” I shot back.

“Sassy as ever.”

“How’s Oscar?” The question was heavy on my mind.

“If you’re up to it, we can visit him together.”

Twenty minutes later, Leo and I walked into Hattie’s Azul kitchen, a replica of the one she’d had in Sentinel Falls. I sat at the oak table and held Oscar’s hand while warmth moved up my arm, and I welcomed the flow the way a desert welcomes the overdue rain. His color returned. The spark brightened his faded eyes. Small signs, but they brought tears to Hattie’s eyes.

To my eyes.

Not every fear, Noa, hurts. Some heal.

That evening, I carried a blanket outside and curled in an Adirondack chair, watching, minute by minute, as the sun sank behind distant mountains. The dusk moved in with imperfect yet indescribably beautiful shades of pink, orange, lavender. Then the symphony of blues followed until a mere thread of light remained. There were no croaking frogs—the mating season was long past. The chirping in the shrubs came from the crickets. Stars blinked on, one by one. I searched for familiar constellations. Picked them out in the late summer sky. Wondering if the ancient queens had looked at those same stars, making the same wishes I made.

And if those wishes ever came true.



My first week back in Azul followed a pattern. Hattie would knock on the front door every morning, holding a basket of food. I’d invite her in. She’d decline like a clucking hen. It

became our game until the awkward disappeared and she accepted my offer of coffee.

Of course, we ended up drinking tea—chamomile, Hattie’s favorite when sharing confidences. I told her about Aine. How I’d thought she was Metis. Hattie clicked her tongue in sympathy, then laughed when I told her about the curly-winged bird in Aine’s hair.

I described the magic, trying so hard to please, and Effa’s outlandish outfits.

“Oh, I wish I could have seen those dresses.” She laughed, clapping her hands while my smile wavered. I couldn’t forget about Oscar’s wolf, sleeping in the rain, and Hattie coming to find him. I’d thought he was wild and lost in the woods. Had I truly not cared? Been so absorbed in my life that I never even wondered if I knew him? If he’d been looking for me?

I felt lost without connection—like the wildflowers plucked out of the meadow. Effa’s meadow, where she’d nurtured *failles* over the centuries.

I missed Caerwen and her marvelous massages.

Missed the mushrooms in Grayson’s cave, and asking, “*Know any good jokes, magic? No?*”

During the day, when I was alone, I read the *faille* journals, but each night, I trained.

I ran at midnight because I wanted no one to know—to see how weak I’d become.

Fall had barely begun. The weather hadn’t changed, so the days were still warm and the nights crisp and invigorating.

I didn’t dare follow the lake circuit in case Fallon was holding night drills, but I thought the forested hills around Azul were safe enough if I kept within sight of the clustered lights. I savored the woodsy scents of pine needles and damp wood, loamy leaves and late-blooming flowers—all of it natural and not manufactured by Aine. The night birds hunting in the dark became my companions, the soft whooshing of their wings a comfort. I was not alone. I was part of their moon-lit world, where the silvered streak in my hair gleamed

like polished silver and the runes on my arm glowed. But the black wolf rune remained silent, and the irritation drove me hard up an incline.

What was the point in having a dread lord sigil when it wouldn't work? Wasn't he supposed to be this all-powerful descendent of kings?

Then I thought maybe I hadn't broken the wolf rune by going into Aine's wrinkle. Maybe Grayson could turn the rune off or on, because a dread lord could reach anyone he wanted whenever he wanted.

Unless he didn't want to.

I hated those doubts. And that I couldn't turn them off, or forget the sound of his voice. I remembered his scent late at night. The press of his hand against my back. He was still in Carmag territory. No one would tell me anything, not that I asked, and I trained harder. Longer. Pushing myself toward exhaustion because everything felt *off*... as if I'd forgotten how raw my nerves would be, overloaded from energy syphoned from Oscar. Even from Leo. But I wanted to help them, and remembering how I could heal offset those nights when my thoughts swirled around how I could destroy.

Out of caution, I kept my training secret. I still could not control the syphoned energy, so I practiced. More often than not, my efforts failed. Tree branches sagged like empty hoses instead of snapping. Pebbles flopped across the ground. The closest I came to exploding anything was the bush I destroyed, although it looked close to dead, with the leaves already brown.

But as my strength returned, I challenged myself, searching for downed logs and leaping over them. I raced across moss-covered rocks, slippery in a stream, and ducked beneath low branches. Until the night when raised tree stumps blocked my path; I recognized them from the lake circuit, set in a pattern to test agility and strength, and I leapt from stump to stump without pausing.

Night after night, more barriers waited in the dark. Mud pits beneath crossed ropes. Low wooden walls. Hidden snares

meant to catch my ankle before I could react.

I was euphoric. *Alarmed.*

I questioned whether the King of the Forest was doing it, or if I was—creating the obstacles the way I'd created things in the wrinkle. Just by thinking about them.

Perhaps it was Fallon. Or Mace, testing me. If the alphas were aware of my midnight training, they could be watching.

But as my muscles burned and my feet skidded over various surfaces, a different worry worked its way to the surface. I'd read enough testimonies to know some *failles* had gloried in their ability to destroy. They'd craved the power, and after the way I'd slaughtered the pig... it took mere seconds of drowning in the heat and gore and stench before I realized I was doing more than protecting Catrina.

With the boar between... beneath... *on* my hands, what lived inside me had snapped its tether, flared like a bright bloom feeding on the violence. I'd delighted in the flow of heat, addicted and unable to stop. I hadn't *wanted* to stop, and a sharp, awful laugh caught in my throat. Caerwen said the queens were cursed to learn compassion, and in that frenzy, I'd been so far gone I hadn't even understood the word.

I'd been the weapon Grayson said he wanted. The weapon a *dread lord* said he wanted, and he'd never been honest with me, not about what he was or what he expected. We'd never talked about the Gathering. About Azul. There'd only been a few days between when Grayson inked his sigil on my skin and when the carnage began—then a few minutes after the rite. Neither of us had wanted the conversation.

But now, three months had passed. We could never go back to the way we were before, not when he'd kept me in the dark about the sins of the kings. He let me believe the Green Man's magic was benevolent when it wasn't. What else had he lied about? Hadn't he told Leo to fake his own death, to lure me back? And when that hadn't worked, he'd come up with the idea of a will, leaving Leo's house to me. A spider spinning a sticky web.

But would he do that? The thoughts were hateful and not like me. I'd always been willing to trust. To believe in people. Could I be that naïve? To fall for him because he seemed... lonely? Because he could be kind, and funny, and he was sexy as hell?

I'd never fallen for a man because of his body. But I couldn't forget the first night I saw him, standing alone in the vet clinic, bare feet, bare chest, wearing blue scrubs that hung low on his hips. His stillness had been alarming, but his isolation continued to haunt me.

I'd seen in him someone I understood. Pain beneath that monstrous beauty. Honor beneath the dark dominance that should have been terrifying.

I'd felt him in a way I'd never felt anyone. As if the world had waited to breathe.

A low wooden wall blocked my path, but this time, what I saw wasn't a challenge. I saw a reflection of my life—always facing a new wall, no matter what I did. How hard I worked. Mace said it was the arrogance in failing, and maybe it was. Or maybe failing was just easy for me. A habit I'd had all my life.

I curled both palms over the wooden edge. Let the anger run free. The bitterness. The night after the rite, when I'd asked Grayson why he held so tightly to hope.

He could have told me the truth. Told me who he was, and what I could be. But he let me walk away. Stood there silently while I chose *easy*.

The one way out that would cost me the most.

Not my life—although my life had changed. The cost was in forgetting about the lives of those I loved.

Because the wrinkle offered the biggest trap of all. A place where I'd find comfort in the familiar. My memories, the lake that soothed with an easy rhythm. The house Grayson offered me. I'd never have to decide anything. The magic would do it for me.

But I'd gradually sink into a numbing tedium. I'd go fracky and not know it. Be perfectly happy. While the people I loved drifted from my thoughts. While they went on with their lives on the outside, and died without me being there, holding a hand, whispering a last, "*I love you.*"

I'd repeat a pattern without realizing it.

Losing Leo. Hattie. Oscar. So many others.

Without realizing it.

I'd be like my mother, lost in her mind. Worse, I'd be like the queens, lacking compassion, and the weight of that sorrow was a stone that crushed me. In a perfect world, people were honest with each other. They ended up making the right decisions when the time came, even when those choices were hard—because they'd been told the truth.

"I told you the truth, Noa."

Grayson's voice stabbed through my mental ranting. He stood beyond the wall, his face a sharp blade in the moonlight, and I wanted to throw up. How had I not known he was there? Was I still so numb?

I'd been oblivious to his energy, while he'd been in my head, listening to my thoughts the way he always did. "Does privacy mean nothing to you?"

"Not with you." His tone reminded me of the day in Leo's destroyed house, when he'd faced me. A lethal alpha. Unforgiving. Breathtaking.

His beauty was destructive; I would never get over the impact. His hair was nearly black, his features compelling. Both blue and green flashed in his eyes—eyes that could see the truth I tried to hide. The grace and strength in his body meant love and war, dominated by mystery. No other man could reach the hidden parts of me, touch the way he did, where I was most vulnerable.

Even now, I leaned into the tug in my chest. The hook he'd anchored so deeply that I'd never get it out.

For a heartbeat, I struggled against who I was now. Tied to him through his sigil. At risk, if he asked for mine in return.

But I would always see his shadows, fight against easing his pain.

So when a thousand emotions crossed his face, the one that hit the hardest was his anger when he said, “You should have stayed away.”

A truth I already knew, that he didn’t want me here. But I was done with blindly trusting him.

“You could have told me about your sigil before you inked it.”

“I could have.” A muscle flexed in his jaw. “But then you would have refused, and I needed the ritual to protect you from Metis.”

He was blaming this on Metis? “You lured her with that blade,” I pointed out. “You wanted her involved.”

“Because your mother’s book was too important to leave to the nymphs.”

Only the Lady of the Lake could approve our request to search the pool and sacred cave, hidden behind the waterfall, halfway up the cliff.

And only a relic like the Blade of Nereus—the blade Aine had stolen from her sister centuries ago—was a persuasive enough lure.

I remembered how Metis tried to crush me, and the fear in her eyes when she couldn’t—fear from a queen descended from an ocean god. A woman worshiped by every nymph in the world. A legend the Alpha of Sentinel Falls did not want as an enemy.

When she’d held my gaze, the ice in my spine had become something endless, the glacial cold of a distant star. Deadly.

Until the dread lord’s sigil drove the ice back.

The power needed to do that nearly stopped my lungs. But everything about this situation was wrong for so many

reasons. Grayson said he did it for me, and yet he withheld the truth, and still expected me to trust him—when I didn't know how to trust a man like that, not after everything he'd said. And not said.

“You don't have to trust me,” Grayson ground out. “Trust our bargain. It means what we say it means.”

And having him answering a question I'd only thought about was worse than the magic granting every wish—it was suffocating. “You said you'd break our bargain if it was too much for me.”

A taunting smile flashed. “I didn't stop you from going into the wrinkle, Noa. You could have stayed with the nymphs. That was your way out.”

“I'd be giving up everyone I loved.”

“So, you came back for them?” His canines flashed. “What about me?”

What about *him*? Agitation hammered hard enough to weaken my spine. I didn't know why I kept arguing when I always lost. Why I didn't realize everything about Grayson was a threat, a warning in the dark clothes and the edge of the alpha tattoo, glaringly visible near the collar of his shirt?

“You're a dread lord,” I hissed. “I'm a means to an end for you. Nothing more.”

“And you're angry,” he hissed in return. “I need you to breathe, Noa. To think. You're too intelligent to believe what you're saying.”

Did I believe what I said? Or was it bitterness forming the words?

My reaction to his wolf energy was stronger than before. Everything he gave off I absorbed, a rush and a danger that I couldn't stop.

Heat flared through my veins in an escalating tumult, and that concerned me.

I tightened my grip on the low wall. Focused on the press of my fingers against the sharp wood edge while my gaze darted

from the path to the shadowed pine trees beyond.

I didn't know what I was looking for... the Green Man's face, wreathed in ivy?

Caerwen, coming to help me?

"Convince me," I managed, my knuckles cracking beneath the force of my grip. "Tell me why I'm not a means to an end."

"If you were, I would have demanded your protection by now. I would have turned you into a bigger monster than you think you are, and I would not have let you leave."

The truth in what he said had me gritting my teeth. "Was I ever something more than what you could use?" My pitch rose. One more thing I couldn't control. "Did you ever *see* me?"

"I've seen you from the moment we met, Noa. I can't stop seeing you. I've never lied about that."

His sincerity almost earned my trust, but I was breaking into a million pieces. The energy he gave off was overwhelming. The expressions on his face sent my heart racing. Being this close to him, seeing him—that was all it took for my body to betray me. For my memory to flash back to the night when he'd inked the runes. Firelight had bronzed his skin. I remembered his hands against my arm, my hand, my breast, the warmth of silk covering steel. The prick of the bone needle. The brush of his mouth against my shoulder.

His muscles were taut and straining beneath his skin. "Listen to me, Noa," he said. "I didn't want you drawn into this mess. I'd hoped you could go on with your life."

"I am going on with my... life..." The words came out strangled. "Just here and not... there."

Tension had him jerking his head to the side. Sucking in a deep breath.

"The decision to let you go to Aine was never mine," he said. "Or yours. The King of the Forest wanted you in the

wrinkle. He wanted the nymphs to tell you the truth, teach you, prepare you for the consequences if you came back.”

My teeth chattered. “Why?”

“The destruction of Azul was nothing compared to what those creatures can do now. They’re evolving. And yes, I inked my sigil on your skin, knowing I was drawing half a circle. Triggering magic. I’d do it again if I had to, but I’ll never ask that of you.”

My heart beat hard enough to make my voice unsteady. “Why didn’t you tell me this before I went into the wrinkle?” At least, I would have been warned.

“Fee insisted.” Grayson shoved a hand through his hair. “He can’t change what happened between the kings and queens, or how we’re tied up in it. But he agreed to let you decide for your own reasons. Whatever this is, the attacks coming from the north, they’re connected to that old shit-show. I wanted you safe with Aine until all this was over.”

“Until you were dead, Grayson.” I thought about courage, making hard choices, and pulled in a stuttered breath. “That’s the only way it will ever be over. When you’re dead. And I won’t value my life over that of everyone I know.”

I wouldn’t value my life over *his* life, and the anger aroused by his expectation—that I should put my safety above all others—hollowed me out, down to my bones.

I was furious... for him. For us... not that there’d ever been *us* beyond a bargain... and a moment on the glass deck during the Night of the Beacons, when I’d wished for something more.

The futility in that wish surged through me, white-hot and cresting like a wave intent on destroying everything in its path. As I breathed, the air turned scalding, and I thought I would explode at any moment.

“Noa,” Grayson ordered. “Let go of the wall.”

His tone made my stomach drop. I eyed my hands, still clenched around the top of the wall. The wood smoldered. Curls of gray smoke slithered between my fingers.

“Breathe.” His voice was heavy with an Alpha command. “Flex your hands.”

I could do neither. Heat sizzled painfully. Blue lightning danced down my arms, leapt from the wall to the ground. The closest shrubs exploded.

I whipped my head toward the swirling, crackling flames—so greedy. Leaves burst into bright sparks and then dull ash, whirling upward like birds fleeing a disaster.

The trees were turning into flaming candles in the billowing smoke, glowing red, and I had the vague understanding that I was doing it, burning everything, and I couldn’t stop. Couldn’t pry my fingers from the charring wood.

The pain bent me over. I waited for the scream, rising in my throat.

But Grayson was there, his arms a constriction around me. “Let it out, Noa. Let it go.”

He asked the impossible and it stifled me—the knowledge. The truth of it all.

I’d been standing on the *faille* precipice since I was sixteen, afraid of the monster that lurked inside me. I’d been afraid to let it see me. Find me. I’d waited, year after year, fearing the moment when the monster rose up and I became what it was... I’d wanted to fall into the dark and keep falling until I disappeared, because at least it would be over and I’d be gone.

But then Grayson held out his hand. Offered hope.

And I’d fallen, anyway.

CHAPTER 8



Noa

“SHIT, GRAY—SHE’S BURNING THE forest down!”

Mace’s voice. And if he was right, I was devastation incarnate. Worse than the monster I thought I was.

I shuddered so hard my teeth bit into my tongue. Around me, smoke and ruby flames spun in a pagan dance, leaping high into the blackened pine trees that swayed and moaned. As if trees reacted to pain.

When I inhaled, grittiness made me choke. Heat seared my skin, and all I could see through my slitted eyelids was red.

“She can’t turn it off,” Grayson growled. “She has to blow through it.”

“I warned you not to rush her.” Mace’s tone had gone taut and low. I could imagine the fury creasing his face.

Grayson’s voice. “I’m not fucking coddling her the way you do.”

He was so... cold. Tight. I was ruining everything between them, if they were fighting like this. The fire cracked and whooshed like a living thing. A feral creature, like me, out of control because I could not control what I was.

But then the destruction of a dread lord touched... overwhelmed. This man who had willingly tied himself to me. The one man who could ease my pain. Temper the anger.

He was the chill before the storm. The silent scream with no beginning, no end, only pure, rushing, striking strength. Rising power.

I closed my eyes and still—still I could see it, the beautifully brutal wave of energy as it swept from him and over me. Churning, a perilous eddy that wrapped around and around, draining oxygen from the fire until only smoldering embers floated in the midnight sky.

Grayson's control was exquisite. Pure, and far beyond mine. He stood at my back with his hands on my wrists, his grip hard, possessive, containing what he owned. While all I had was another wave of heat barreling through me.

My back bowed with the effort to suppress it. My fingers were splayed, the tips curled like talons while Grayson held tight.

Every joint had locked in place.

I was a bitter scarecrow in a field of dead ash.

But his body pressed against mine until I fit every ridge and dip. I was... him. Form against form. Mirror-images. The runes on my arm lit up the way they had the night of our ritual. When I'd felt like his lover... consort to the dread lord.

He broke what tethered me to the past, the person I'd been.

In the space of a single heartbeat, I became something new, leaning into him, reveling in the freedom. Inhibitions dropped away. I luxuriated in the relief. Soaked up whatever he gave me.

He was the ice melting on summer-scorched skin, and I craved the sensation. The cooling trickle across my breasts, the taut nipples. Down to the clenched muscles in my stomach.

My head fell back. My body throbbed with every breath. Only I wasn't breathing. I was panting. Sucking the air in through parted lips, hissing it out as every part of me pulsed—

the way an orgasm pulses through a woman lost beneath her lover's mouth.

A soft cry trembled on my lips. He was ecstasy, consuming me... with just his hands around my wrists. His body anchored to mine.

"You're a prick, Gray," Mace snarled. "Putting her through this."

"You'd do the same thing."

"Not torture her. Take her. Get it over with, because sure as fuck, this frenzy of yours is dangerous."

What they said made little sense, and the following silence probably meant an argument through the pack bond that turned nasty. The Alpha of Sentinel Falls and his second. Did Mace know he was second to a dread lord?

Well, of course he did. Packs had their own form of politics and rivalries and secrets. Mace would be a good secret-keeper, and a dread lord would have his hands full making judgments and throwing wolves into dungeons to remind them who held the power.

Odd, those thoughts, flying off like a Ferris wheel that broke free from the struts. The way my mind spun was maddening. My focus hit a limit at five seconds before jumping to something new. My muscles stretched and cramped. I wondered what the "this" was that Grayson was putting me through.

But... the heat was dampening. I dared to breathe in and did it without choking. Through slitted eyes, I gazed at the graying smoke, the last glowing embers at the branch-tips where pine needles looked like burning incense sticks.

Grayson's fingers wrapped around my wrists, a heated brand against my skin. The harsh rumble of his wolf was more vibration than sound in his chest.

But when he stroked his thumb against the wolf rune, there was nothing. No hint of life, not even when the dread lord stroked his own sigil—the part of himself the magic required. The cost I hadn't considered.

When he lifted me like a child, I silenced an inner sob. Turned pliant, weary while he carried me away from the path, the smoldering wall and cindered bushes. We could go anywhere and I wouldn't care.

But I should pay attention, since a nagging part of me refused to slip into the numbness again.

Stars glimmered overhead, looking down while I stared upward. And I wondered, *is this what you wished for? What the queens wished for? Relief?*

Did the dread lords ever provide it?

Grayson's stride was bold. He'd changed during the months I'd been away, but his scent was the same, rolling over me. Rain-washed pine and spice mixed with the smoke from fires I'd started. My breathing ratcheted.

The ghost of grief brushed through me, over wishes that would never come true.

I wondered what was next for me.

Wrenching in a tortured breath did little to cool my throat, even with the misty air. My parched lips were cracked and tinged with blood. Then I was flat on my stomach in the mud while Grayson plunged my hands into rushing water colder than a glacier.

My fingers clenched around nothing. The skin on my palms tightened. The stream became a flowing river of moon-shot silver, while my body crushed reeds that looked black.

But Grayson's body was a heavy weight on my back, and my pulse quickened. Mud oozed beneath my chin, over my cheek and between my breasts, but what alarmed me more was the weight of his hips. The flex of his fingers around my wrists while he restrained me. I noticed the lift of his chest each time he breathed, and the intimacy in our positions. He'd splayed his legs around mine, his body aroused by the contact.

His hard erection pressed against my thighs, and even with our clothes on, all I had to do was lift my hips...

I tried lifting my head instead, but he was right there, his arms, shoulders caging, enclosing... comforting.

I hated admitting that.

Hated how he dampened the energy the way Caerwen did with her massages. Allowing my body to release and realign.

Which made me furious again, over the ease he had, controlling what I couldn't. I bucked against him. Dug useless toes into the damp ground and tried to throw off his weight. Curled my fingers to draw heat from the water, wrap it in a flaming ball and aim it at his head.

"Noa," he growled against my ear. "Stop shouting so loud."

I wasn't shouting. My teeth were too gritted for sound to come out. The bastard had been in my head again. Eyes clenched, I let him see all the turmoil, the secret fears. What I could become... willingly, eagerly. Welcoming the darkness in power. Letting go of control because I wanted to let go.

His grip on my hands gentled, although he still held my arms outstretched, immersed in the rushing water.

"Listen to me," he said. "I know what you believe. But being feral means becoming mindless, beyond control. There's no hope of ever coming back. You can control this energy. Learn to use it, release it. The energy doesn't have to control you. I can teach you."

"But I can't trust you."

"I know how hard it is to fight fear. You aren't alone."

His wolf had struggled with the same fear—turning feral—and Grayson spent months in the wilderness, working through it.

"There's a dark side to *faillies*," I argued. "I've read enough journals. We're not all sweetness and nice. We destroy things, and the way I killed that pig—it was horrifying and I reveled in it. I didn't want to stop. I wanted to find something else to kill."

"I don't believe it was the killing you loved. You were puking your guts out all over me."

“I was not.”

“Stunk worse than the pig. Hot and—”

His deep laughter got to me, and I elbowed him with more force than I realized. He rolled to the side, shifting his weight and pulling us both upright until we sat facing each other. I swallowed, curling my wet fingers. An overwhelming sense of uneasiness dried my mouth.

Grayson was a healer and a dread lord. His power tugged in my chest. But could he heal someone as broken as I was? Would he?

“You aren’t broken,” he murmured, shamelessly answering what I merely thought about.

I forced air into my lungs, dared to skim my gaze across the hard planes of his face. Something like a soft caress brushed against my skin. My hand lifted. I wanted to cradle my palm against his cheek. Gently push the hair from his temple. In his bi-colored eyes, the colors I thought of as both man and wolf, I thought I saw the sorrow that hadn’t existed before. Shadows clouding over the loneliness.

I shifted more fully around to study his expression.

He scowled. I focused on the downward curve of his mouth. “What did I love about killing if I wasn’t turning evil?” Both hope and fear in that question.

“You’re a crusader, Noa,” he said. “Evil must be punished. Bullies. You worry over the injustice you see in the world, and what provoked you was the chance to do something about it.”

I felt the tiniest bit better after he said that, but so many unresolved questions hovered between us. My mind made the leap to something I hadn’t thought about since the moment I’d found logs blocking my path. “The obstacles—the walls, the traps—you put them there.”

“You needed to test yourself, find the confidence you’d lost.”

He stroked a grubby finger over my cheek, probably pushing a strand of my hair into the rest of the muck covering

my head, thanks to him pressing me into the muddy stream bank. But a spark jumped from his skin to mine, igniting the impulse to coat goo on my fingers, smear it over his face so we'd match.

His lips quirked, boyish, the way he'd been in the watchtower the day I'd tried to play sword games and discovered the passageway. Was he waiting for me to do it? Spread mud on his face? Did he want to play?

My heart thudded. "What happened with the Carmag?"

"Anson suffered casualties." From the grim look in Grayson's eyes, the losses were worse than those in Azul. "He can rebuild."

"You said creatures."

"What we fought in the meadow—pigs and corrupted, crab-like creations. They came through splits in the air, overran a settlement in Anson's northern section. He had no warning. More creatures swarmed our joint western boundary, and he couldn't handle fighting on two fronts. We defeated them this time, but if a larger invasion happens, or if anything changes with those creatures, the fighting will be worse."

"What could be worse?"

"They're starting to think and react, not mindlessly charge into battle."

I shuddered, remembering Azul.

"They're protected by magic, more than before. Harder to kill. I think they've been testing us. Changing the strategy."

I plucked at a green-black blade of grass. "Did you know I was back?"

"Yes."

But he hadn't come immediately. I supposed it was arrogant of me to expect it.

His expression turned neutral. "I had to choose, Noa. Carmag needed me. You were safe with Mace and Fallon."

Leaning forward, I plunged my hand into the stream, letting the rushing current wash the grime from his wolf rune. “I didn’t feel your rune twitch.”

“Because it didn’t.”

I swished my hand, stirring up little eddies where bits of grass were caught in the current and floated away. “What good is your stupid mark if it doesn’t work? It would have been nice to know you were still alive.”

He glanced at me. “You were worried?”

“No.” I splashed water before withdrawing my hand. “You didn’t deserve my worry.”

His mouth twitched. “What did I deserve, Noa?”

I narrowed my eyes at him and thought about my favorite word. I thought about it more than once.

He dropped the relaxed pose and rose to his feet, holding out a hand to me.

Deliberately, I stood without his help.

“The Green Man changed the rules.” Cool disinterest in his voice now. “The rune doesn’t work like it did before, and I’m not stupid or arrogant enough to ask him why.”

I chewed on my inner lip. “Then what of our bargain?”

“Nothing’s changed. You’ll live in Azul. Train. Help Leo when you can. Be ready when I need you.”

“How am I supposed to support myself? We never clarified that detail.”

He scowled. “As part of my inner circle, you’ll be paid the same as Mace and Fallon. I’ve already set up accounts for you.”

“And my duties?”

“The same.” He tipped his head as if stretching tight neck muscles—still so easy to irritate. “You’ll train with Mace and Fallon. Hand-to-hand tactics, fighting skills since you can’t

shift, and until you can control that power you have, you can't be the weapon I need."

"You know, Grayson..." I bit back a sad smile and brushed past him. "In all the times when I imagined my perfect life, I never once thought about a man asking me to be his weapon. Kill things for him."

"You've never lived among wolves, Noa."

CHAPTER 9



Noa

SINCE I WAS PART of the team, Grayson expected me at a formal meeting, to be conveniently held in my dining room. Arguing about it wasn't worth the effort. But as I walked through the forest before the meeting, I couldn't ignore the scent of charcoaled wood lingering in the air. I hoped the wolves thought it was a camper's fire. The obstacles were still blocking the path, but all other signs of our mutual destruction had been obliterated.

Mutual, because Grayson had also taken part—and what he'd done was worse than setting a few trees on fire. He'd summoned a storm, breaking branches, sucking all the air from the flames. Nearly from my lungs. So much power... I was still in awe. Possibly terrified.

I pushed the hair from my face, returned home for my laptop, then went searching for Laura. She'd told me there was an internet connection at the archive, and I hadn't checked email or my photography site in months. Banking was another concern, and it took only moments before I was sitting at one of the long tables in the archive, logging in with passwords I'd thankfully not forgotten. Fallon dropped by and offered to help with the account Grayson set up. She whipped out a cell phone, and within minutes, she'd connected with a gregarious

man who spoke so courteously that I glanced at her, my eyebrows raised with a question.

“He’s wolf, for one,” she teased. “And the Alpha of Sentinel Falls is what they call a valued client.”

Which meant Grayson had enough wealth to warrant a private banker. I spoke with the man, who offered me the same courtesy he’d offered Fallon, walking me through the transfers, moving the funds from my small bank account into the new account. The amount Grayson paid was staggering. I double-checked to be sure. But the banker assured me the balance was correct. Then he helped me change the banking account on the photo website. When we finished, he put in security protocols and guaranteed no one could trace the funds or track them to my location. I was officially off the financial grid. I thanked him, still shocked by the efficiency. And the abundance I now had.

I shook my head, vowing to confront Grayson, but Laura merely laughed and said, “Go ahead and try, Noa. If you’re into lost causes.”

Fallon agreed, slapping my shoulder when she rose to her feet. “You’ve got two days before you’re back on my training schedule, no-wolf,” she warned. “Better take advantage of the time off.”

Laura and I decided the best time off included sharing coffee beneath a red umbrella, sitting at a circular table outside Azul’s most popular café. I tipped my face toward the sun, relishing the breeze on my skin, savoring the scent of honeysuckle and grilling meat—which was an oddly comforting kind of normal.

When a woman stopped at our table, Laura glanced up. “Noa, this is Theta Blake. I think you’ll want to talk to her.”

Then Laura excused herself, and the woman sat down. I was too surprised to object, although Theta posed no threat. She was my mother’s age, with gleaming auburn hair hinting at gray, calm blue eyes, and a cautious smile.

But when she set a wooden keepsake box on the table between us, my pulse bobbed.

“Yes, Noa. It’s your mother’s box.”

Theta spoke as if she’d known me for years, while I didn’t remember meeting her.

“Andrea left it with me the last time she was here. She worried that if something ever happened to her, the box would be... lost.”

Stewart. He would have thrown the box into the trash, along with everything else my mother owned.

“She asked me to keep it safe,” Theta continued. “To give it to you if you ever came back. And to... tell you about your father.”

I counted my breaths, leaning back for additional space between us—between what she wanted to say and what I was reluctant to hear.

“Andrea and I were childhood friends—and you’re so like her, Noa. Quiet. Introspective.”

Theta gave a sideways laugh and swiped at her eyes as if the sun was too bright.

“She would climb trees and read for hours, hidden in the leaves. Called it her secret place. People thought she was shy, but she wasn’t. Not if you’d ever heard her sing. She danced, too, but never did in front of anyone here in Sentinel Falls. She always did it at midnight, in the forest. And she dreamed of a better life for you. Someplace safe.”

I reached out to trace a fingertip along the carved wooden box, feeling the ridges. Flowers, with twining vines, and a small, gold-rimmed keyhole in the front. A small key was wedged into the opening.

Theta slid the box another inch toward me.

“His name was Bronson Dade.” Her smile softened. “She called him Bron, and I’d tease her and say she meant *brawny*. We were kids still, eighteen. What did we know of the world?”

Theta paused while a server delivered steaming coffee, although Theta didn't seem interested, while I lifted my cup to unsteady lips.

“He was passing through. That part is true. The attraction—love—was instantaneous. You were conceived on the night they met. Bron—he was alpha to a smaller pack, hundreds of miles from here. He had to go home and begged her to go with him. But she was afraid because she was a *faillie*, and the packs back east were less tolerant. Leo was ill, and she didn't want to leave him. So Bron left that morning, and when Andrea realized she was pregnant, she sent word. He promised to come back. Never did.”

I turned to stare at the distant trees. My voice croaked. “Did she...”

“Regret you? Never. You were conceived in a love that could never be. As for why he never came back... I think she knew long before the letter came. It's in the box. And after she read it... the life inside her died. Eventually, it was too much, staying here. She took you away to start over.”

Silver hair drifted against my cheek. I pushed it back. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Your mother wanted you to have these things, Noa,” Theta murmured. “I'm sorry if they're painful. Perhaps a day will come when it feels more like comfort.”

After Theta left, I rubbed my trembling fingers and turned the key. Lifting the lid, I found treasures. Tiny pink shoes with the laces neatly tied. Crumbled flower petals. A book of nursery rhymes. When I opened the cover, my eyes burned. On the first page, circled with pink hearts—*Noa's favorite*.

Hush little baby, don't you cry...

The song I'd sung to Laura. To Levi.

I breathed through parted lips until I could close the book and open the letter in a white envelope.

My darling Andrea, if you are reading this, then the trouble I warned about has come, and I am...

I sat in the warm sun until the shadows lengthened,
wondering if I'd ever get used to it.

The pain that would... one day... become a comfort.

CHAPTER 10



Noa

“NOA KILLS PIGS, YOU know.” Fallon elbowed Mace—who was digging through my refrigerator like he was twelve and on a midnight raid, looking for the fried chicken Hattie left because, “*Noa’s too skinny to have eaten it all.*”

“I’m not that kind of pig,” he said as he moved another plate around. “Besides, she likes me.”

“No guarantees on liking you,” I warned with a half-laugh. The talk of killing pigs kept me off balance. I wasn’t sure if I should tease or stay quiet. But after watching the sibling rivalry between Mace and Fallon, I decided their bantering was normal, and including me was a sign of acceptance. I’d never had brothers or sisters, and I smiled when Mace changed his stance and Fallon took advantage of it, reaching in front of him to pick up the veggie tray.

Earlier, I’d asked Laura what I should do as hostess for an inner circle meeting. She’d suggested food, probably because she understood Mace, and I’d stopped at the farmer’s market and bought the celery and broccoli that—obviously—was not the best choice when hungry wolves were involved.

Mace crowed in victory, and as he straightened with the prize, I snatched the plate of chicken away from him.

“Mine,” I said, laughing as I twirled toward the table. Mace padded after me like a hungry puppy—this spiky-haired, sometimes scary alpha who was Grayson’s second. The alpha who sent Levi on fifty-mile hikes and had recruits struggling to keep their knees from shaking when he barked orders at them.

“Come on, Noa,” he pleaded. “You know I like chicken.”

“So do I.”

“She’s also territorial,” Grayson said, while Fallon laughed evilly, blocking Mace with a celery stick when he reached for a second chicken leg. “And you just invaded her space.”

“She invaded mine that first day,” Mace shot back. “You keeping score?”

“Your risk.” Grayson reached for a bottle of cognac, then filled a squat glass to the one-inch level, capped the bottle, and returned it to the cupboard with sharp precision.

I frowned.

Mace grinned as if he’d just scored a point, and I realized I was watching a family, people who had known and trusted each other for years. I didn’t know how I fit in with a history like that, if there’d always been a space waiting for me to fill. More likely, they would make room for me, and just as easily form back together if I ever left.

Both Mace and Fallon dressed casually—I’d so rarely seen them that way. Mace wore paint-splattered jeans and a tee shirt that loved his hard abs. He’d shaved his blonde hair close to the scalp at the sides, revealing small tattoos I’d never noticed. A beautifully lethal warrior, I thought, a golden glimmer in the shadows.

Fallon’s hair was free from her usual braid, falling in a blonde cascade around her shoulders. But the permanent kink remained, and she kept flicking the loose strands as if they bothered her.

“Do something with your hair,” Mace rumbled around a bite of cold chicken. “Looks like you’re swatting flies.”

“Keep stuffing food and twelve-year-olds will burn your ass in any race.”

They were at it again, good-natured, but oblivious to the nuance I heard beneath the words. Curious, I lingered by the dining table, rearranging the food. They were opposite reflections. Mace—always on the front line, never completely at ease. Fallon, her arms tight, reading his every mood. I wondered if he ever saw her as a woman and not a rival. Wondered if that wasn't why her hair was down tonight.

Even if she *had* smiled at the Alpha of Carmag during the Gathering. And he'd certainly smiled back.

Looking outside, I could see how the evening slid into soft purple. Distant lights were a glorious proof of life returning. I'd never seen anything as hopeful. The sounds of laughter carried from children running when their mothers called them home. The rustle and chirping from birds roosting for the night rattled from the trees.

Yet in my house, Grayson stood, lost in thought. Mace paced, but Fallon turned away. When she searched a jeans pocket, then braided her hair and fastened it with whatever she'd pulled from her pocket—my throat ached.

I'd been lonely in crowds before, when the pretending was hard. Ignoring the hurt in standing alone, listening to the evening settle. Having no one who could reach out and touch my hand. Breathe the way I breathed.

Fallon wandered back to the couch and curled on the cushions, picking up the *faillie* journal I'd asked her to read because I needed another female's perspective.

“What's that?” Mace asked, peering over her shoulder.

Fallon pulled the journal close. “Go away.”

“You're reading one of those journals from Aine?”

“Yes.” She pressed the worn pages to her chest so he couldn't see the words. “Noa asked for my opinion.”

“Please don't give it to her. She's trouble enough as she is.”

Mace's grin told me he was teasing, but he was also covering the silence from Grayson, and when Fallon rebounded, playing her role, I thought the two of them—Fallon and Mace—were the light against Grayson's dark. I was so used to seeing Grayson in black that his clothes seemed off. He wore a tan, buttoned shirt with the sleeves folded to the elbow. Faded blue jeans fit his hips and long legs. Perhaps he'd dressed casually because this was his inner circle. He didn't need to impress.

But it was more like a different uniform, same purpose. To isolate himself.

I tossed him a wary glance and said, "Glad to see you have color in your wardrobe. I was tiring of the black."

"I like black."

Mace smirked. "His wolf likes black."

"My wolf has nothing to do with clothing choices."

A dangerous detachment in that tone, and I frowned at the undercurrents this evening, leaving too many questions.

"This is interesting, Gray," Fallon said to quell the edginess. "The ancient *failles* called their sigils *slave* marks. I guess they got tired of the dread lords bossing them around."

Grayson snorted, staring at his glass.

Fallon closed the journal and rocked to her feet, setting the book aside as she looked at me. "Why did Aine want you to have the *faille* testimonies?"

"A bargain. If I learn enough from the journals, maybe I can read that book my mother hid. Aine could be as batty as Fee, but she thinks an original queen wrote it, one who fought in the war and lost her wolf." I shrugged. "She's hoping I'll find some clue she can use to protect her nymphs."

"Find something everyone can use," Mace said. "Those creatures broke through our wards and we haven't figured out how."

"Any ideas?" Fallon sorted through the broccoli before lifting a small fleurette to her lips. "On reading your mother's

book?”

Along my spine, the Green Man’s runes pricked, shards of ice beneath my skin. I’d grown more sensitive to them without the wolf sigil always dominating. But Fallon was waiting for my answer, and I said, “Aine said it took two people to read the words. Some rule with books protected by blood magic. She’d hoped my mother and I could do it.”

“Meaning two *failles*?” Mace wandered back toward the table. Lines creased around his mouth, but I suspected he was thinking about the problem and not the food.

“She was vague about it,” I admitted. “Two people with equal energies.”

“Then it could be anyone.” Mace glanced at Grayson—who hadn’t turned from staring rigidly through the windows.

“We’d have to be careful.” Fallon returned to the kitchen; the cupboard door squeaked, then clapped as she found the glasses, filled three with cognac, handing one to Mace. He set it aside, but I sipped my cognac cautiously.

“Careful... why?” I asked, thinking about a book taking off a person’s hand.

Fallon held a glass to her lips. “Someone in Carmag died trying to mess with blood magic.”

“Pillow-talk with Anson?” Mace asked.

Deliberately, Fallon sipped cognac again. “Jealous?”

“Just curious how accurate the information is.” His eyes were now hooded as he stared at her. “Maybe he needed another way to impress you.”

His tone was neutral, but Fallon’s tight smile flicked upward. “You’re a pig, Mace.”

“Noted.”

“She’s right,” Grayson said. “Blood magic corrupts over the centuries.”

“Then ask the Gemini Witches,” Mace countered. “They should know how to break the magic safely.”

“I don’t trust those witches any more than I’d trust something written by a queen.”

“An original queen,” I pointed out. “According to Aine.”

“Someone you said was as batty as Fee.” Grayson’s dismissal annoyed me, and not only because he stared into the night instead of arguing face-to-face. I thought he was provoking the argument because he wanted a fight.

Mace did, too, judging from his challenge. “Afraid they’ll give you another prophecy?”

Grayson’s snort was sharp and brief, while Mace seemed ready to argue. Fallon’s professional mask was back in place. Her glance slid over Mace with only a passing hesitation before she centered on Grayson. “The witches never bothered you before.”

“They don’t bother me now.”

“It’s information, Gray.” Fallon set aside her glass. “Coven records go back centuries. If anyone understands ancient magic, they do. Just ask the right question.”

Grayson glanced toward her and asked, “You’re volunteering to go?”

Fallon picked up a broccoli fleurette, snapping it in two before she tossed both pieces back. “I’m not you.”

“You don’t need me to ask questions.”

“Maybe we need you to hear the answers.”

Tension swept through the room, squally and uncertain, telling me this was an argument that started long before tonight. But for some reason, Grayson’s seconds wanted to settle it in front of me while he definitely considered it already settled.

Grayson turned his back.

Fallon switched to sorting through celery as if looking for the right stalk, while Mace crossed his arms.

The cognac burned in my stomach, and I left the glass on the table. “So... the Gemini Witches are what?”

“A coven of seers.” Grayson stared through the night-drenched window as he spoke. “In every generation, they choose two to sit in a cave, back-to-back and above a vent spewing fumes like the ancient Oracle of Delphi. They’re hostile, vindictive, and if you don’t ask a precise question, the answer they give is gibberish.”

“Then you ask a precise question,” Fallon argued. “Take Noa. Have her ask a different question.”

Grayson turned, and when he stared at his second... when he held the cognac glass to his lips... he was shutting everyone out.

I couldn’t stop the words. “What’s wrong with asking questions?”

Fallon answered. “It’s a business transaction. You give them something. They give you something.”

“What do you give them?”

“More than you can spare.” Grayson’s teeth snapped.

My chin jerked up. “Argue with facts, not insults.”

“Fine.” The testiness in his tone turned brittle. “You’ll expose your soul. Reveal every pain. Show them how deep to dig before they rip you apart.”

“Gray,” Fallon cautioned.

But the argument she’d started was now one between Grayson and me, and I was ready for it. He didn’t get to bully me, not after the way he stayed with the Carmag because they needed him and I didn’t. I was *just fine* without him.

“It’s not like I haven’t been ripped apart before. You’ve done it more than once and I survived.”

“They’re in Alpen territory,” he said through gritted teeth. “Where I am not taking you.”

Outrage flared. “Would you say that to Mace or Fallon right now?”

His glare turned volatile. “Did you learn nothing from Metis? Because I guarantee you, the Gemini Witches are twice

as bad. A witch died at the Gathering. They won't forget it. And they won't forgive it."

"They might have information we need."

"I said no."

His voice had deepened, perhaps from the cognac, but then he snuffed out the emotion the way he'd snuffed out the forest fires I'd started, and my chin jerked up.

"I'm not afraid of witches."

He refused to answer, and frustration cramped my hands—gods, what was wrong with him? Why was he fighting me from every direction, when yesterday, he pushed muddy hair from my face like we were friends?

Even if his wolf sigil didn't twitch, the thrumming from the Green Man's runes made me jumpy, and a burst of uneasiness drove me toward the vase of roses centered on the table. I stroked one red petal; the flower withered while all three alphas watched. Then I reversed the energy flow, and the flower shimmered into full bloom. It was the most control I'd had since leaving Aine's wrinkle.

Perhaps wanting to provoke Grayson made a difference.

"Nice trick," Fallon said.

Mace muttered something like, "Fuck me."

I glared at Grayson's now smoldering expression and said, "You and I have a bargain, so unless that bargain is as broken as your rune, we're going to see the witches—or I'll ask Anson Salas to take me. I'm sure he'd be accommodating."

"Shall I drag him here for you, Noa?" Grayson's voice flattened in a way that should have warned me, because his next words were an attack. "You can tell him about the book and the secrets it holds, how he could use those secrets to protect his pack. You can be his *faille*. He'll probably fuck you out of gratitude."

All I could think of was the Night of the Beacons, when I'd offered to sleep with Grayson to protect him, and he'd walked away.

Because offering to protect him meant offering my sigil, which he did not want. He'd made that clear enough.

But I could meet animosity with bitterness as easily as he could, and I didn't care if his seconds were watching. Together, we were volatile. There was no getting around it. The dread lord and the *faillie*. A conflict that played out with other couples over the eons, so why should we be any different?

I tipped my glass toward him, then swallowed a gulp. "At least he'd follow through on the fucking."

The stunned silence was almost laughable. Fallon blanched. Mace crossed his arms. I slid my tongue across my lips, an impulsive act of defiance as I licked cognac that still reminded me of Mosbach.

Grayson's lip slowly pulled back, then resettled with fierce control.

"It changes nothing, other than his blood will be on the floor. Our bargain still stands," he added. Such a soft, soft threat. "*I* protect you. No one else."

I aimed for the jugular with what I had—a slow smile. "Which is another way of dictating."

"You chose to come back, Noa," he growled.

"And you'll never let me forget it." I was surprised the room hadn't already burst into flames. So much for civility, or going back to the way we were, with our *bargain* meaning what we said it meant. It meant what *he* decided while I had nothing to say about it.

My hands curled into fists.

My breathing elevated.

Shadows drifted, and Grayson's glowering expression scraped across my skin. He might as well have used a claw to draw blood. We were the two opponents we'd been on the day we met, clashing now as if a circle struggled to close against adamant stone.

A vein throbbed in Grayson's throat. Ice firmed in my spine.

Mace growled low in his throat. His full attention was on me while Fallon shifted her weight. I wondered what they worried about. What they thought I'd do next.

"Noa." Fallon said, stepping close enough to brush my arm, but keeping her hands at her sides. "Look at your feet."

I glanced down. A ring of glowing embers charred the rug while bands of gray shadows came from Grayson as he doused the heat.

"Gray." Fallon moved on as if everything was normal and I wasn't starting fires while Grayson snuffed them out. "What if we ask the Green Man for help instead of the witches?"

"No." My jaw ached. "If he had answers, he wouldn't have sent me to Aine. Besides..." My gaze scraped around the room. "Wolves visit the witches every day and survive. You did it when you were teenagers. I shouldn't be any different."

"You will not leave Azul," Grayson ordered. I'd never heard an edge so sharp as the edge in his voice.

I shuddered at the pure threat and forced every bit of *faillie* aggression I had into resisting him. "We need to read that book. Why should I risk blowing myself up with corrupted magic because you refuse to be reasonable?"

He cocked his head to one side, predatory—oh, the enemies we could be without even trying. "Did the book blow your mother up, Noa?"

I met him eye-to-eye. "No. But Aine said it took two to read it."

"Two... what?" His teeth snapped.

"*Failles*," I said. "Two people with equal energies."

"Then Noa asks if there are more *failles*." Mace was unyielding as he held Grayson's gaze. "And you ask if Noa's energy is equal to yours. Precise enough for you?"

"She wants to do this," Fallon added. "She's strong. What other choice is there after the attack on the Carmag? If that book can help us, we have the obligation to read it."

I stiffened, unwilling to let them fight my battles for me. “I’ll go no matter what you say. By myself, if that’s my only option. You can’t lock me in.”

For an instant, I thought Grayson considered the idea. Then he held the cognac to his lips, swallowed. Nodded.

“The witches it is.” But I grew uneasy when he stared at me with those bi-colored eyes, and said, “Let’s hope they’re as easy to wilt as the roses.”

CHAPTER 11



Noa

IN THAT ONE STATEMENT, I heard the end of our truce and the beginning of hostility. I could not imagine what the ancient kings did when their queens rebelled, other than strip away their wolves and banish them. As for the *failles* who came after—the vows of protection became battles for dominance and control.

But as I sat on the boat dock the following morning, what I felt was relief. No more worries over Grayson’s reaction. I knew, now. We were no different from those ancient couples, bound by sin and obligation.

I’d answered the question about being a savior or a weapon when I nearly burned down the forest.

Whether Grayson could control my wild abilities, when I couldn’t, had also been proven. Multiple times. But Grayson would not have his advantage for long. I would read. Learn. Train on my own. Ask the witches for what I needed and say I was fulfilling our bargain.

Because if the King of the Forest could change the rules, then so could I, and under my new rules, I’d do whatever I wanted—although what I wanted first wasn’t possible.

According to Fallon, my witch visit wasn't happening until Grayson returned. He'd conveniently disappeared within minutes after our meeting ended—some urgent need to intimidate Mosbach.

Fallon said he was worried about spies. There'd been rumors while he was away that the attacks on Carmag were a distraction. Possibly a cover while new spies slipped into place.

I believed her because it was an argument I couldn't win.

Just like the argument I had with myself over Grayson. When I couldn't sleep at night, I thought of everything except him. I refused to reach for the comfort in a reeking shirt. When I wandered through the house, wrapped in a blanket, I wasn't doing it to see if he was there.

I never hoped, not even for a second, that I was not alone.

When I became impatient, I focused on the healing I could do. Every day, I went with Leo to visit the old wolves, more cautious this time about the flow of energy. I tested my syphoning ability, my energy reserves. How to release the heat without leveling everything I touched—although the day I flattened an entire field of wildflowers had me tipping my head toward the sky and shouting to the Green Man, "Happy now?"

He didn't answer—which made my question ridiculous, that I'd even asked it. I missed Caerwen, how she taught me every day, and we'd laughed at the dirt on our faces. The water soaking a bathroom. She told me the more I used magic, the more it would use me, and all magic came at price that wasn't always what I thought.

Even Grayson's black sigil came with lifelong strings, not that it worked right now—so it baffled me, why I missed that hateful little twitch beneath my skin. Or the way Grayson would listen in on my thoughts. How his shoulders would lift, or his lips tighten when he didn't like what he heard.

But he'd stopped listening. At the end of our disastrous inner circle meeting, in those moments before he walked away,

I'd thought every nasty word I'd ever called him... bastard... more.

He hadn't reacted.

And that, too, had been a passing grief, a shooting star in the vastness of a midnight sky.

I missed the way we'd been, playing in a crumbling watchtower, looking for the passageway that changed my life. Only the two of us, together against the world. Or so it had seemed to me, when he turned, smiling with an open delight he'd never revealed before. As if he also found relief from the loneliness.

What I needed to do was adjust to what we had now. Open hostility. A conflict we avoided through distance. I didn't see a path for us except plunging forward into disaster, and I reminded myself of that fact as I jogged through the trees, following my usual path.

At least my ability to sense wolves hadn't disappeared, and I was ready for Mace when he stepped from the shadows and took a braced stance in front of me, arms crossed, feet wide.

"Is he back?" I demanded.

"No." I understood Mace's challenge—there'd be no going forward on this path. If I wanted to keep jogging, I would have to go through him.

My chin lifted. "What do you want?"

His biceps flexed as his crossed arms tightened. "You're going to see the witches."

"Your idea," I taunted. "Here to waste your breath, talking me out of it?"

"Not when it's my idea."

I cocked my head and tossed my braid against my back. "How long were you arguing with him before that meeting?"

Mace flashed alpha canines. "A week. He's a stubborn ass, but it took you to convince him."

"Hah! All he wants is to watch me fail."

“He watches you fail every day, Noa. He doesn’t need to do more.”

“You’re the stubborn ass,” I snarled. “How often do you fail with Fallon?”

A muscle clenched in his jaw.

“Do you even see her?”

Mace uncrossed his arms and took a step to the side, not to let me pass, though. His hands came up. I matched him as we circled like prize fighters, waiting for the first strike.

“I see her every day,” he said, glaring at me. “Your point?”

“Do you see her as alpha? As a warrior? Do you ever see her as a woman, Mace? Because no woman is just one thing.”

His fist shot out and I ducked. He grinned, and said, “She’ll probably fight you for Anson if you still want to fuck him.”

The verbal hit had me stumbling. Mace was there, moving in against my weak side faster than I could react. His hard arms locked around mine before he tossed me to the ground. Air exploded from my lungs. My knees pulled up, but he wasn’t there.

He was standing with his hands braced and a scowl on his face.

“You’d be dead right now if it wasn’t me putting you down.”

I scrambled to my feet. “You’re here to *train* me?”

“In the time we have left.”

I brushed the grit from my cheek. “I’d rather have Fallon.” She was a sister, a comrade-in-arms who wouldn’t push until I was ready.

Mace said, “She won’t teach you what I will.”

“Why?”

“She sees you differently.”

He lunged to his right. I danced out of range.

“How does she see me?”

“As someone vulnerable. But you’re not vulnerable, are you? No... you’re angry. So damned pissed you could burn the world down and not even care.”

“There’s hope for you yet,” I said. “If you can see me like that.”

He ducked in close, tried to hook my waist, but missed. His grin widened. He was enjoying this, and... so was I.

“I see you.” A mix of emotions roughened his voice—honesty, sarcasm. Sunlight spangled through the pines, casting faery lights on the littered ground. Harmless light and unlike the threat glittering in Mace’s eyes, a threat from his golden wolf.

The wolf liked violence and the physicality in fighting, although the image was not as clear as it was with Grayson. I only sensed the wolf in Mace... but in that distracted instant, Mace had me on my stomach, his body pinning me with enough weight to make it hard to breathe.

“You’re dead again,” he snarled, his mouth against my ear. “Or captured because you’re probably too valuable to kill. Now... get up.”

His fingers clenched my wrists before he levered upward and rolled away. I scrambled to my knees and lunged toward his legs to knock him off balance. He avoided my attack, turning to face me.

“Pathetic, Noa. The witches will be laughing.”

“I didn’t think I’d be fighting witches.”

“That’s your flaw. You don’t think. You assume you’re still in the human world.” His hands were up, his fingers flicking with invitation as we circled. “Can you draw energy through anything other than your hands?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only felt heat in my hands, moving up my arms.”

“What if an enemy covered your hands? Gloves would blunt your ability.”

“Better than cement shoes,” I said because I’d foolishly never thought about it.

“Either way, you’ll lose.” He laughed when I hissed. “Multiple options, Noa. Find more than one way to manipulate the energy.”

“Easy words for you to say.”

“Hard words for you to hear.” Mace moved in again. His massive body was more agile than I expected, but I respected his strength and what he was teaching me. My arm jerked upward to deflect his momentum, using the energy to slide past him.

“Trying to annoy me, Mace?” Heat tingled in my fingers and I clawed through the air, just enough to send a spurt of dirt toward his face.

He swiped the grit away and grinned. “You’re such a child.”

“Then why are you even here?”

“I have a thing about lambs and slaughter. Unless I’m doing the killing.”

“Sending me was your idea,” I reminded him. “Not ready to slaughter me yet?”

“He wouldn’t like it.”

“I’m not completely helpless. I do have some control.”

“How many wildflowers would agree with that?”

His movements were inhumanly fast, but I kept up with him and ignored the verbal sparring meant to distract me. Instead, I threw a verbal punch of my own. “Mosbach has no respect for you. He sees you licking Grayson’s boots.”

A flash of disgust crossed Mace’s face, and I almost missed the pain that flashed in his eyes. But I caught enough to make me sick to my stomach for that comment. And I couldn’t take it back because Mace was already in attack mode.

“Mosbach played you, Noa.”

“So I’ve been informed.”

This time, when Mace lunged, I let him get me to the ground, then kicked out with both heels, catching his groin. He stiffened long enough for me to scoot free.

But what churned in my head were thoughts of Mosbach, touching my knee like he had the right. Threatening to have the vampires take the catalyst away. Telling me how a rabbit screamed when it was skinned alive.

It wasn't at the first cut... but after the ripping began...

I'd been alone and helpless, with no way to fight back. No courage left to face the bully, and a flash-fire rose so fast that my voice wavered. "Mace..."

He was right there. "What's driving you?"

"Anger," I gritted.

"Push it," he said.

"Are you crazy?" I glanced around, feeling a little wild. Reckless. "Which tree should I burn down?"

"Trees aren't your enemy. Think." His hands braced as he studied my expression. "Are you angry with me?"

The arrogant alpha, thinking it was about him. Maybe it was.

I bared my teeth. "You made me think of Mosbach."

"Why does Mosbach make you angry?"

Gods... there were so many reasons, and I couldn't sort through them while the heat burned like worm poison from so long ago.

"Why, Noa?" Mace gentled his voice, but with no less command. "Are you angry at yourself?"

My teeth chattered. "I believed him—what Mosbach said. I never once questioned it. And when he touched me like I was nothing but a whore and he had every right... I didn't fight back. I just sat there, willing to beg."

"That made you weak?"

“I’ve always been weak. But when you laughed about me being helpless... I realized you can see the truth about me. You’ve always seen the truth.” My breath stuttered. “I told you what Mosbach said, and it makes me sick to my stomach that I did it because I wanted to hurt you.”

“I’ve said things to hurt you, Noa. And I felt bad about it, when I said them.”

“Gods, Mace.” My body was shaking.

“But I won’t apologize because I trust you enough to share my emotions. You can say anything to me. To him, too. You can trust us to take your anger and not hold it against you.”

I forced in a breath, pushed the air out. “I destroy things, Mace.”

“So do I. So does Fallon. Does that make us bad?”

“You’re not *faillie*.”

“And you are. But you determine what that means. No one else.”

He was offering a pep talk when what I needed was some kind of catharsis, a way to rid myself of emotion I couldn’t identify.

“I destroyed a field of wildflowers,” I hissed. “Burned trees down.”

“Don’t do it next time.”

“Don’t patronize me,” I snapped.

“Hardly.” Mace snorted. “Tell me the truth. Why are you angry?”

The truth... My heart battered against my ribs. Truth hid in the nightmares that held me immobile. In the wall that had blocked my path. And I’d chosen rage instead of facing it.

“Because I’m frightened,” I whispered. “I’m alone and I hate it.”

“You aren’t alone.”

Tears still stung my eyes because I would always *feel* alone, and that was what drove the rage. Never belonging. Always searching.

“Look around, Noa. Everything you see—you belong here as much as we do. You have friends here, ready to fight for you. Laugh with you. Fight *with* you. Ready to search the forest, sleep in the rain. Ready to drink tea with you and read all those *faillie* journals. Ready to stand behind you when you fight with him, ready to stand with him when what he says is true. All you have to do is open your eyes and see us... waiting for you.”

More words from the stoic Mace than I’d ever heard from him. He lunged again, fierce, a warrior I met head-on. I expected him to pause, shrivel beneath the *faillie* energy raging through my veins and into my fingertips the way it had raged with the trees and wildflowers.

Only he didn’t shrivel, and as we parried, my fists beating against his upraised palms, I asked, “What is this?”

“You’re finally seeing.” He smirked, and I was smart enough not to mock his victory. “What you’ve been able to do all along, but were too afraid to try.”

No more arrogance in failing.

Tension dissolved from my throat. Exhaustion slowed my momentum until I stopped fighting, focused on breathing and not panting. “I could have done worse with a trainer than you.”

“You could have had him,” Mace chided as he flicked my braid, which had somehow swung around and was now draped over my shoulder. “But he’s not as cuddly as I am.”

Cuddly was not a word I’d use for either Mace or Grayson, and my training did not end with one session on the path. I met Mace every day to go through a grueling routine. I learned avoidance tactics since I couldn’t morph into a wolf when I wanted.

My goal was not to be captured—the most likely threat I’d encounter because I was valuable.

Everyone wanted to protect themselves by having a *faillie* under their control. I had to worry about rival packs. The nymphs, although they wouldn't need to capture me, just send the puppy magic and I'd probably do its bidding.

The vampires could be another worry.

We talked about the silver streak in my hair, if I should hide it or not. Mace said to leave it visible. The enemy would recognize my face, but the foot soldiers might hesitate when they saw my hair. They'd know they didn't stand a chance and let me slip away.

My *faillie* warning system would alert me to any threats. As long as I was never alone, I'd have a fighting chance. I could threaten the enemy by burning a few trees or knocking a few rocks loose—although I'd need to practice more.

The day I dangled upside down in Mace's cargo net was the day he started teaching me about snares. How to make them, recognize them. Get out of them, if necessary.

He took me to the armory and gave me arrows tipped in wolfsbane, told me not to stab myself because wolfsbane was poisonous to everyone, not just wolves.

I did not find that reassuring.

Then Fallon came to give her fear lecture, a big thing with the Gemini Witches, since they fed off emotions, got drunk on them. Fallon jogged beside me, telling her story, a twelve-year-old girl going into a cave with her pulse thundering.

I couldn't imagine how she did it, found the courage, but she said fear was a test, and once I realized it, I'd know how to cheat. Buy myself time to think. Mace's mantra, I thought, which was "*don't react blindly.*"

"Courage buys you nothing," she'd said, because it wasn't courage the witches wanted. It was tears, self-reproach. Cowardice. I should pretend to be more frightened than I was because then the witches wouldn't increase their witchy-ness. They liked to argue about impressions, sitting back-to-back. One could not see what the other saw, and that was the bargain: entertain them in exchange for what you wanted.

“Great,” I’d answered, as if bargain-making was how I made a living. “I’ll scream and pull my hair out. Get everything we need.”

“Only if you ask the right question, Noa.”

“Are there other *faillies*,” I said.

“No.” Fallon looked at me. “You ask where is the closest living *faillie*.”

“Precise,” I agreed, breathing hard as we jogged the last mile. For five more days, this was my life. October remained warm after a brief cold snap that turned a few leaves yellow and red. Then Laura arrived on my doorstep with Leticia, Cossa, and Vasha; they were armed with cosmetics, dresses, telling me I was going out that evening and had to look spectacular.

Feeling overwhelmed, I gave in and let them transform me the way they had for the Night of the Beacons. Tonight, Laura said, was a full moon night—and everyone in Azul loved a good party. The moon was as good an excuse as any. When I asked if they would shift into wolves at midnight, they laughed as if that was the silliest thing I’d ever said.

“You *are* a babe in the forest,” Cossa teased as she painted my fingernails. “No one shifts with the moon anymore, unless they want to.”

“I grew up on werewolf movies,” I said. “And I can’t shift, so I’m not sure why I have to go.”

“Because you’ve been cooped up here for days and days,” Leticia said, laying out the cocktail dress I’d be wearing. Skimpy, black, sexy. “Isolation makes you old.”

“Maybe I like old.”

“Liar,” Vasha teased. She’d been working on my hair again, creating a froth of curls and twists that highlighted the silver streak and made me look exotic.

Cossa pointed at my polished nails. “Keep your fingers splayed for five minutes.”

I wouldn't dare smear her beautiful work, no more than I'd be ungrateful for their friendship.

"Are there men at this celebration?" I asked suspiciously as Leticia helped me into the black dress. I twirled, kept my fingers splayed to make sure the polish was dry. Studied my reflection in the mirror. Back and front. The hem hit mid-thigh. My butt looked too large. The cleavage was... well, cleavage, and I stared a minute too long at the small rune Grayson had inked on the curve of my breast, feeling my pulse beat.

"The men come, but not right away." The four women made eye contact and giggled, although I read the slight hesitation in Laura's eyes.

"They come after we've warmed up," Vasha said. "As in alcohol."

"Don't worry." Laura leaned in and whispered, "There's plenty of food, and you don't have to dance unless you want to."

I looked at her. "Do you dance?"

"Sometimes. The music is usually good. We'll be outside tonight, so it's better than clubbing."

"Although we do that too," Leticia said. "Especially in winter. But why waste the mild weather? It'll be gone soon enough."

Her brunette hair swished around her shoulders. She wore red, while Cossa, also brunette, had chosen white with sequins. Vasha's spiky blond hair was tinted pink to match the dress she wore.

Laura wore black, the way I did. I glanced at her wrist where the scars from the Alpen were, then linked my elbow around hers and winked. She was safe with me. I was safe with her.

When we reached Azul, twilight had turned the town into a magical fairyland. Trees sparkled with strings of lights. The café doors were propped open and a golden glow spilled across the pavement. Everywhere, decorative planters

overflowed with the autumn flowers and decorative foliage, while pale moths flitted from white blossoms, gathering nectar and making me think of Aine's wrinkle.

Life here was more vibrant, filled with laughter and people singing. Grilling meat and brewing coffee to offset the alcohol. At the end of the street, a rock band played for an approving crowd—gorgeously dressed women. I couldn't get over the sensuality of wolves, or the languid warmth that I embraced with them, living in the moment. Enjoying the pleasure because it might be gone by morning.

Vasha with her pink hair, was the first to dance, weaving through the girls crowding the dance floor. Her arms were in the air, graceful, fluid. She wore dozens of glowing neon bracelets—rainbows on her skin—and I envied her, watching until she moved too far away for me to see.

We made our way past tables laden with food. More delicacies than I'd ever seen in one place. Plates and bowls kept arriving. Salads and fruits, hot and cold meat.

Laura insisted on sampling everything, and since she sampled, I sampled, too. Flavors burst on my tongue... sweat, savory... spicy. My eyes closed in ecstasy over a delicate quiche that melted in my mouth, the mingling cheese and broccoli. I'd never eaten strawberries as honeyed, the juice sliding from my lips to my chin. And the chocolate...

Women stopped to say hello or smile in welcome. To ask about the moonstone runes on my arm that glowed with the Green Man's magic. It seemed only Grayson's rune had been broken, but I kept that to myself, smiling, sharing stories. My fright with the river nymph seemed popular. The women smiled and swooned when I described how I had *begged* Grayson to put some runes on me.

We laughed over how naïve I'd been, thinking runes would make much difference, but everyone agreed the tattoos were pretty at night. And very sensual. That led to talk of other tattoos. Leticia was back, along with Cossa, who handed me a stemmed glass of pale, bubbly liquid.

“Sip,” she warned. “It’s sweet like ambrosia, but the alcohol’s a real kick.”

“Umm.” I relished the flavors bursting on my lips. “What is this?”

“Our version of white liquor. Moonshine.” The music thumped loudly, and Cossa raised her voice. “Don’t drink too much or you’ll end up with mate marks like mine.”

She held out her wrist and giggled. The intricate inked design had been altered several times but remained beautiful, and oddly... erotic.

“You have several partners?” My mind was a little fuddled with the sounds and energy and pleasure around me; I didn’t wonder if the question was too personal.

“Not at the same time.” She laughed hysterically and elbowed Leticia, who was also laughing. “Gods—can you see *wolves* sharing?”

No, I couldn’t see that, not with Grayson.

Leticia held her wrist so I could see. “It doesn’t mean what it used to, like a lifelong commitment.” She shrugged. “You meet a guy. He takes you to this tattoo artist in Priest River, you come up with a design, and you’re happy. When the day comes and you’re no longer happy, you find another guy and go back and have the design altered.”

I held the glass to my lips. “He doesn’t have to cut it off to end your relationship?”

“Not unless it’s an angry breakup,” Cossa said before her face reddened. Perhaps she remembered what happened with Jo-Rae and Karla.

Leticia covered for her and said, “Just don’t hook up with a guy who’s too possessive.”

I traced a careful finger over Cossa’s design. It was quite beautiful, a rose with several small buds, and a butterfly. “Does this ever... twitch?”

“I’d scream if it did,” she gasped, waving her stemmed glass through the air, making me fear she’d spill the alcohol. “I’d

think a worm or something had burrowed into my skin—why?” Her gaze dropped to my wrist. “Does yours twitch?”

“No,” I lied. Although, it wasn’t a lie now.

“No one believes in mate marks these days,” Vasha said, having joined us without me noticing with the crowd. Her face was still flushed from dancing. “Why aren’t you out on the dance floor?”

“We’re going.” Laura grabbed my arm and tugged me into the crowd. “Don’t mind them. It’s what everyone does with the full moon. We get a little crazy.”

“Why isn’t Fallon here?” I asked as Laura danced.

“The alphas never come.”

She moved to the music, her eyes closed, arms in the air. Neon bracelets like the ones Vasha wore tinted her skin with rose, pale blue. Pearl white. But the only marks on her wrist were from the Alpen’s ropes. She danced with her head back, her hair flowing. Beautiful, I thought, and so very good at hiding the scars she carried on the inside, remembering how she’d been all those years ago... wounded, whimpering... and I asked, “Would you ever want a mate mark? Even a superficial one?”

“No, not unless he was someone special.” She glanced at me. “I wish I was like you, Noa. And then I’m glad that I’m not. Having someone special and still being so lonely.”

Heat drained from my face. Laura stopped dancing, enveloped me in a hug. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“It’s okay.”

She didn’t believe me, but laughter distracted her because the men had arrived—*wolves*—weaving through the women as if energized. I gazed at my friends, twirling, flirting, getting a little crazy with the full moon. While Laura was lost in the music, dancing despite her pain. Or perhaps because pain had become a comfort. Proof of survival.

The music grew sultry and secretive. The sounds gentled, and I didn't want to think about anything when my friends wanted to celebrate. I drank more. Danced more. Watched the couples form and disappear in the night.

But as the moon rose over the distant hills... as a breeze brushed against my skin... I knew in some terribly certain way that the black rune wasn't silent because I'd broken it, or because the King of the Forest changed the rules. It wasn't silent because Grayson controlled it.

The dread lord's sigil didn't twitch because it was waiting.

CHAPTER 12



Noa

IN THE MORNING, FALLON pounded on my door and said it was time to visit the witches. I should bring a backpack with enough clothes for an overnight, and my bow—both items now sat on the rear seat of the battered tan jeep she drove.

The top was down, and the wind from driving whipped eagerly across my face. I sat beside her, smiling until my cheeks hurt. We were heading north, toward the old mine that closed because of a bear attack, although I suspected it wasn't a bear that had done the damage.

I'd be meeting Julien. He'd take me to the passage where Grayson waited. From there, we would sneak into Alpen territory.

But for now, I slipped on a pair of sunglasses and faced the sun, relishing the autumn warmth on my face and this small pleasure.

"I've always loved driving," I admitted. "It's the closest I'll ever come to running free like the wolves."

Fallon shrugged. "You want to drive?"

My pulse jumped. "Could I?"

She pulled to the side of the road and we changed places, giggling. I wasn't even sure why we giggled. Maybe we were Thelma and Louise, off on a buddy road trip.

"You can't get lost," she said as I floored the accelerator. "Only one road, and I'll warn you when we get close."

I glanced at her. "You weren't at the celebration last night."

"The alphas don't mingle on moon nights."

She meant the drunk dancing, going a little crazy with the hook-ups, and I could see her point. Authority would be difficult to assert in the morning.

"Why don't the younger women want lasting relationships?" The idea still bothered me.

"They aren't shallow," Fallon said. "But it's hard to love when loss and grief wait in the shadows. Good people died in the pack war. Fathers, brothers, mothers. Wolves who left in the morning and never came home."

I thought of my mother and the girl in the journal I'd read.

"Wolves believe in fated mates," Fallon continued. "During the war, those who lost their mates suffered more than others. It was only four years ago, Noa. Memories linger, and the girls don't want to risk a mate bond locking into place."

"Like handcuffs?"

"Ugh." She made a face. "And here I thought you were romantic."

"Handcuffs can be romantic," I said, as I wrapped my fingers around the steering wheel. "But I don't believe fate can tell you who to love."

"You never know." Fallon flicked a quick look at me. "Having a fated mate doesn't mean you accept the bond."

"Good," I teased, "because with my luck, he'd be fat and ugly."

"You always have a choice."

“But how would you even know?” I was goading her because I was uncomfortable. “Girls in Seattle could fall in love every other weekend, and each new guy was *the one*.”

“It’s different with shifters.” Fallon draped her arm over the backrest, twisting so I could see her face. “The wolf knows first. He becomes hyperaware of your moods. Protective. They can get a little crazy. Then they... do things. Considerate. As a sign you’re supposed to recognize.”

“Like what?” I smirked at her. “Tell me they do something awful. Like leaving a dead mouse in your shoe the way a cat does.”

“Not awful, but... what you feel can be unsettling.”

Now Fallon seemed uncomfortable, and I dropped the tease. “So, tell me.”

“Promise not to laugh?”

I made a zipping motion across my lips.

“First, it isn’t the wolf you’re responding to—it’s the man—and you sense something here.” She tapped above her heart. “Inevitable, like you can’t live without him. You want every passion, every touch. Every endless night until you’re breathless. No other man makes you feel that way. Someone else might get close, but you’ll always know he’s second best.”

“What else?” I wanted to keep her talking.

“You can hear each other, but it’s different from the pack bond. It’s... intimate. A caress. Wolves will wait their entire lives for that connection, to hear that singular voice in their head.”

I scanned her face, running through the signs she’d given off around Mace. The way she watched him, reacted to him—and the weight in my heart was for her. “Do you both hear it, even if you aren’t interested?”

“No.” She smiled sadly, brushed at the blonde hair that teased her face, strands tugged from her braid by the wind. “If

it's only one of you, it means the other isn't ready to hear. Or he doesn't want to hear."

The curving road demanded my attention, and once we hit the pine-edged straightaway, deep shadows made the sunglasses unnecessary. I tossed them aside, shooting another glance toward Fallon.

She was leaning back, one knee drawn up while she studied the road ahead.

I asked, "What did Mace mean when he told Grayson his frenzy was getting dangerous?"

She choked, then asked, "When did he say that?"

"The night I was burning the forest down."

"He was throwing an insult. It means a guy is thinking with the wrong head."

I flexed my hands around the steering wheel, studied the road, then glanced back at her. "He also said Grayson should just take me and get it over with."

Fallon stared straight ahead. "He was probably talking about taking you to see the witches. They'd been arguing about it for a week."

"That's what Mace said." I pushed at my own wind-tossed hair, where the strands caught between my lips. But while I appreciated the confirmation, there was something in the conversation that saddened me. And I couldn't decide if I was sad for Fallon, or for myself.



Julien Visant was a modern vampire, immune to sunlight, and he waited in an open clearing where the grass was still green and shaggy. Bare dirt marked the worn paths between the outbuildings. Pine trees clustered near the entrance to the mine, where heavy wooden doors were chained and locked. Rusting equipment sat out in the open, looking derelict, other than the silver reflections off metal edges.

Behind Julien loomed a ruined shed. Shattered boards cast sharp-edged shadows and the door hung on broken hinges. I shuddered as the vampire tossed something toward Fallon.

“Souvenir,” he said.

She caught it, opening her palm to study the item. Then she offered it to me—a curving black claw. “Touch it,” she said.

I crossed my arms and shook my head. “I don’t need to touch it. The air stings like nettles and the taste of ashes is in my mouth.”

“Even after all this time?”

“Yes.” The so-called bear attack happened months ago, but my *faille* impressions had developed while in Aine’s wrinkle, and I didn’t need to touch the claw to know the truth. “That didn’t come from a bear.”

“A spelled creature?” Julien asked.

I nodded. “You’ve seen them before?”

“One or two sightings.” His neutral tone told me he was good at lying, perfect for an emissary. He extended his arms with a formal bow. “Your transport awaits, my lady.”

“I feel guilty.” He’d already carried me away from the Gathering, then took Miranda and Albert, when he’d had no obligation to help us. “I should pay you for the ride.”

Julien flashed his fangs, did it with a blistering smile, and said, “Donations are always welcome.”

He meant blood donations—he was a vampire, after all—but as my knees weakened, I realized why Fallon said they were dangerous. Sex appeal radiated from Julien. Even when I knew he was teasing, his suggestion was difficult to resist.

I wanted to extend my arm to him in invitation, know the touch of a vampire’s lips on my skin. Julien wouldn’t worry about me biting him in return because I had no wolf—my teeth would be erotic, rather than dangerous.

Some threat I was.

But I should remember this feeling and guard against it, because not all vampires were like Julien.

“Tamp it down, big boy.” Fallon grinned. “You know how he is with his possessions.”

Julien slapped a hand against his chest. A smile tugged at his attractive lips, and for an instant, I forgot to protest—I was no one’s possession.

But Julien was speaking, so I remained quiet.

“A thousand pardons, Alpha,” he said to Fallon. “He knows I’m too afraid of his wolf to ever hurt his lady.”

She snorted. “Modesty doesn’t suit you, Julien. At least not with someone who pays attention.”

“And here I thought you were his softer side,” the vampire crooned. “Your teeth are just as sharp.”

“Remember it.” But there was no animosity, and I decided this was a normal conversation between species rumored to be enemies.

I bent to pick up my backpack, sliding the straps over my shoulders before reaching for the quiver and bow. “How far are we going?”

“Ten miles and a minute or two,” Julien said. “Not long enough to puke on my shoes.”

I smiled and teased, “I’d never puke on your shoes.”

“You were close the last time.” He grinned, no fangs visible, and wrapped his arms around me. The ground dropped away. Wind battered my face. I gripped his strong arms, but as he’d said, a minute or two, and I was standing on solid ground again. The only difference was the cooler air.

“How do you do that?” I gasped.

“I could tell you. But then I’d be daggered by my sire for revealing secrets, stuck until she needed me again.”

“Your sire is a woman?”

“One of the ancients,” he said. “Cleopatra’s handmaiden before she was turned.”

“But you don’t believe the story.” I was careful—where I put my feet—because Julien Visant had deposited me on the rim of a sheer ridge. One slip, and I’d fall a thousand feet to the valley below.

“It’s a wise child who publicly believes what his sire tells him.”

“What does daggering even mean?” My foot skidded over a loose pebble and my pulse jerked.

Julien’s hand was already on my arm, steadying me. “It means punishment. I’ll be pinned to the wall with a dagger only she can remove—or any other vampire with enough power to do it.”

I chewed on my inner lip. “I’d hate it if you were daggered just for talking to me.”

“I won’t be, my lady. I’m very good with secrets.”

We picked our way through loose shale until reaching solid ground, and as Julien walked ahead, I studied his leanly muscled back, wondering what century he’d lived in before his sire found him. Enticed him into immortality.

Julien seemed no older than Grayson, yet his courtly attitude was not of this century. He hadn’t lost his chivalrous streak along with his human existence, and strangely, we were alike. Each of us experienced a human life, then left it behind—although he’d been all human while I’d been not-human.

Carefully, I said, “Vampires can’t hear someone’s thoughts—or can they?”

I didn’t want him exposing secrets, but perhaps what I asked was common knowledge, and he’d be friendly enough to answer.

“Eavesdropping is a wolf trait, my lady,” he said. “Vampires prefer to mesmerize. Tease their toys into revealing the dirty desires before they play.” Julien smirked, then heaved a pretend sigh. “If only you had a wolf...”

I grinned. “You’d be scared of me.”

“Julien,” Grayson interrupted our banter, “thank you for bringing her.”

“Wolf, it was my pleasure.” Julien made his theatrical bow again, posturing for my sake—although the respect made me pause, seeing Grayson the way Julien did, not as my annoying nemesis, but as someone deserving the title of Wolf.

Despite that, irritation chafed. I’d made no secret of my fear of heights and decided the ridge was deliberate. Once Julien disappeared, I said, “We couldn’t meet on the flat somewhere?”

“The passage we need opens on this ridge.” Grayson turned away. “We’ll be an hour in the dark.”

That was all he had to say? *An hour in the dark?* After disappearing for more than a week without an explanation because he couldn’t get his way?

I glared at his rigid back. He disappeared through the magic, expecting me to follow, and I stepped into a tunnel that felt old and seldom used—dimly lit, freezing cold. At least it wasn’t wet. But a strained silence fell between us, and with every step, the length of Grayson’s stride increased until I was yards behind. If I wanted to talk, I’d be talking to his back, and I’d have to shout.

So, I decided not to talk at all.

I’d let him sulk because I refused to coax him into civility. We’d fought hard enough to get this far. Argued bitterly, said words not easily forgotten. I didn’t want him as my enemy, but I didn’t see how we could be friends when he made me doubt myself.

The argument was simple enough. We needed to read the book—a book protected by blood magic.

The Gemini Witches understood blood magic.

But they only answered one question per person, so if we needed two answers, the logical solution was sending two people.

Reasonable, right?

The goal ought to be what mattered, not pride. But if he chose to be unreasonable, I chose to be aloof. I wasn't responsible for his *feelings*.

Brave words that kept me stomping behind Grayson until he turned to look at me.

"The path grows steeper," he warned—the first words he'd said in more than half an hour. "The air is saturated with magic."

Loosened pebbles slipped beneath my feet. "I'm used to magic. Aine's world was nothing but illusion."

"You've never encountered illusion like this."

I shrugged against the cold—in the air and his voice. "Fallon warned me."

"She remembers the experience of a twelve-year-old girl who came on a dare."

I thought shadows darkened his eyes, and I looked away, then back again. "Is that what you remember, Grayson? The experience of a boy too young to have his wolf?"

No reaction. And the shadows were gone, replaced by a blank, icy glint that made me take a step back.

"The witches are already hunting you, tasting your emotions," he said silkily. "You think this is a game of wits?"

"I'm not deluding myself. I know they're witches."

"Seers, Noa."

I shot him a glance, hoping for defiance and not sure if I achieved it when Grayson's mouth tightened.

"They're watching you now. Drinking in everything you reveal. How damp your skin is, the rapid beat of your heart. The air in your lungs."

His voice took on a dark quality, low, as if he knew more than I ever would and wanted to frighten me. It was working. "They see your past. And they'll twist it like Mosbach did."

Give you an explanation that sounds so reasonable, you'll doubt what you know. You'll be trembling, terrified and ready to beg."

Mace! He must have told him how I'd felt with Mosbach, ready to beg, and the ragged sound I heard was my breathing. "Can they get into my head?"

"They won't need to—you'll be more than happy to give them what they want, and they'll use every word for their own purposes."

"Fallon said to show fear, entertain them."

Grayson tipped his head. The movement was slow, lethal, rippling with power. "You think theatrics will satisfy them? They'll try to break you."

But I'd had enough of his intimidation. "The way they tried to break you?"

I could have sworn lightning leapt from his skin to mine. "Are you stronger than witches, Noa?"

His gaze was darkly acidic, burning against my skin. I ignored it. Didn't dare react to it. I'd been foolish enough, thinking he'd stop fighting me when he thought I was wrong. But he was stubborn, and I wanted to read a book more than I wanted to admit he'd make this more difficult. Because we were here, standing within reach of witches who were already *tasting me*. Scouring for ways to frighten me, and he was giving them everything they needed.

"I want answers," I said.

"You might not like what you get. Nothing will protect you. Not even the Green Man's runes on your skin."

He wrapped his fingers around my wrist, covering the black wolf sigil and pressing hard. I yanked my hand free, stung by his willingness to provoke. But a muscle ticked in his jaw. In his bi-colored gaze, I read something else: *lie, lie, lie*.

The possibility tapped at the back of my mind that everything he'd just said was a warning. A way to make me

remember what he—and Fallon—said about the witches. How fear was a test and I should cheat.

I stiffened, readjusting the backpack before heading toward the light brightening in the distance. Every sound made me jumpy. Each subtle change in the air lifted the tiny hairs at my nape. In the dark, my thoughts raced, and the crawling sensation along my spine might mean nothing... but it was there, and I wondered if what unnerved me came from being watched by Gemini Witches I could not see.

Then it was a rock I couldn't see. Stumbling, I couldn't stop the wince as my ankle twisted. Sucking in a breath, I tested the pain with a gingerly step. Workable, as long as I didn't have to climb uphill. Then again, I supposed things could get worse when Grayson glanced back and narrowed his glance. "You okay?"

"Fine," I lied, staring at the steepening path ahead. I'd asked him for this—insisted he bring me to these witches. He hadn't wanted to do it, his face cold and strained when we argued. Given my hesitant steps, he could have kept arguing, using my weakness as a reason to turn back. But Grayson remained quiet, lengthening his stride and mercifully ignoring the limp that worsened as I lagged behind.

Moments later, we left the passage and entered Alpen territory. I rubbed sweaty palms against my jeans. The boundary magic was undetectable, and I asked about it.

"There's a gap in this sector," Grayson said. "The witches weaken the wards for their customers, and smugglers take advantage."

"Doesn't the Alpen send out patrols?"

"They don't go near the witches, and they don't bother with smugglers since Mule's Point gets a cut of the profits."

"Mule's Point?" I'd not heard that name before, but Grayson said it was Alpen's seat of power, built on a bluff above the river. Someone named Mule built the first ramshackle house, and the name stuck. "Is it far from here?"

“Three days for a normal patrol. Twice that if the weather’s bad.”

“No wonder the smugglers like it,” I murmured, although I wasn’t talking about the weather.

I looked around, wondering what smuggler wouldn’t like a forest so ancient and disturbing that it vibrated with abandonment and despair. Beneath my feet, branches cracked with the sound of breaking bones. Overhead, the dense canopy muted the watery sunlight, while the damp made the air unpleasant to breathe—like being lost in a bog. Even the birds were silent.

“Was it like this when you came before?”

“Yes.”

And three young, rebellious wolves would find the challenge irresistible.

I rubbed at my arms, shrugging against the pinch of the backpack against my shoulders. I thought about the boy Grayson had been. Orphaned, making his own family, never having a house of his own until he was old enough to build it. He’d come here with his friends, to this dire forest, searching for courage. A way to prove his bravery.

Such a needless quest... when he’d had both courage and bravery since he was six years old, guarding his dead parents with nothing but anger and a stick in his hand.

Regret knotted in my chest for that boy. Doubting himself, unable to see the honor he possessed, the greatness that others saw in him. What *I* saw in him.

It would be easy to offer an apology and ask to start over. But I wouldn’t. Not after his warning.

He wanted me to follow his lead, be angry, believe he doubted my abilities. Grayson understood the threat in ways I’d never fathom. He’d covered his sigil when he said nothing would protect me—the lie—because I had the dread lord’s protection.

A sigil that had gone quiet.

I turned to look at him, standing there, dressed in his usual black, and the concern, anger... the *sadness* darkening his eyes had me breathing in, pushing the air out before I turned away.

The limp from my ankle slowly faded. Only a twinge remained, and I refused to stop even when we walked on uneven ground. The air was cool and misty. Ahead, two standing stones bracketed the path, heavily etched with runes that oozed an arctic chill I was afraid to brush against.

Beyond, two additional stones stood, dull, weathered, and still weeping from a recent rain. The stones towered over Grayson, dwarfed me, and as we drew closer, they formed a gateway with more stone pillars I could not see beyond.

“This is as far as I go,” he said. “Leave the backpack. Take your weapon.” He pulled a gold coin from his pocket. “Leave this in the collection box.”

I looked toward the ugly wooden box, banded with iron. Monsters and twining plants were carved into the sides and ran across the top, where a black slot marred the design. I palmed the coin. Measured the heavy weight.

You pay the witches, he'd once told me. Because witches had to make a living.

“If you pass without paying, do they curse you?” I meant it as a tease to lighten the dread, but Grayson’s expression never changed, and unease rippled through the moonstone runes on my arm.

“Okay, then.” I dropped the backpack with a thud, rearranged the quiver. Gripped the bow in my hand, at the ready, although I had other resources. And once again, the tapping at the back of my mind warned me against revealing all that I had.

I hesitated only an instant, no more than a heartbeat... then a second beat before I dropped the coin. Listened to the hollow *clunk* of gold against wood.

“Not many customers today.”

Either his control was fiercer than mine, or his sympathies were no longer with me, because his voice held no emotion

when he said, “Follow the path. Keep going. The fumes affect you like white liquor, so take shallow breaths. Focus on what you want to ask. Turn around and walk out. I’ll be waiting.”

I held his blue-green gaze, unsure if the man or the wolf looked back. “Then you’ll go in?”

“I’ll go in, ask, come out.”

“Grayson...” My pulse beat like a wild thing needing to flee.

“Go, Noa.” His voice was steady. Hard. “Don’t look back.”

Somehow, I knew that once I started... if I looked back, there’d be nothing behind me. No standing stones. No path. No dread lord waiting. And then, if I turned forward again, I’d find no path in front of me, either.

Gripping the bow, I walked between the two monoliths, shuddered at the rasp of magic—iron-cold—reminding me of the jagged trap that once lacerated a young wolf’s leg.

I could almost feel the shredding, and I thought, *Okay, magic, if this is how you play it. Don’t expect me to look back.*

CHAPTER 13



Noa

I DIDN'T LOOK BACK. Instead, I followed the path that steepened until the witch's cave loomed, a gaping maw waiting to swallow me. Sand the color of drab olives made walking sluggish. Sweet incense thickened the air. Bronze bowls in wall sconces flickered with unnatural flames.

In the slithering light, I could see small depressions in the sand—what remained from earlier footprints. Breadcrumbs, meant to lead me onward.

I paused, searching with my human senses. Testing the air flow. Then I searched with my *faillie* senses. Evaluating the threats.

Impressions lingered: heated waves of bravery masking icy fear. Pounding hearts and stuttered breathing. On the sand, I noticed discarded things: bits of cloth, metal that had no meaning. Tiny, whitened bones half buried from creatures who wandered here, perhaps eaten by what flew overhead on nearly silent wings.

Foreboding crept in like the echo of distant screams, although I heard nothing except my breathing. Around me, arching caverns and blackened tunnels branched off, leading in all directions like a monk's cave—a maze with many choices.

Some tunnels expelled frigid air. Others offered the dry rustle of abandoned graves. But as I passed, the whispers began, voices I recognized. My mother. Leo. Levi. Even Stewart's voice.

Come, come, come.

Lie, lie, lie.

Air flow was real, and I followed it, measuring the gradual warmth as I ventured deeper. The distance between the burning bronze bowls made the shadows denser, and when a chitinous clicking came from the left, I snapped the bow upward. Nocked an arrow and focused on the creaking of wood against the bending force of the bowstring.

Every muscle strained as I tracked by sound—there. Claws digging at rock.

Real, real, real.

My pulse jackknifed as I scanned the inky corners. My eyes hurt from staring into the dark while images bloomed in my mind—pale, crab-like creatures, spelled nymphs swarming from the ground. I remembered the woman in a flowing yellow dress, running... then lying dead in a boat, her hands clutching a child's teddy bear.

Concentrate!

A creature shot from the dark. Instinctively, I released the bowstring, shuddering at the high-pitched squeal. Another image flashed of a sunlit glade and a rabbit with blades of grass in her mouth.

I couldn't suppress the nausea, even when I realized what I'd killed.

"You shot a damn rat." The words were gritty on my lips. My braid was warm and damp against my nape. But the rat was as large as a rabbit—intentional, I realized. Just like the scream.

They are seers, Noa. Looking into the past. Using illusions against you.

I pulled the arrow free, dragged the tip through the sand to get rid of the blood. It wasn't one of the poisoned arrows. Mace hadn't thought they'd be necessary on this trip. Small comfort as I re-nocked the arrow and listened to the creak of the bow.

My pulse steadied.

But the sting of nettles snapped against my skin.

The acrid taste of ashes dried my mouth.

White fog crept across the sand, inching toward me with seeking tentacles, or a flicking snake's tongue, tasting the air.

A wave of vertigo had me swaying. But the fog paused, curled before withdrawing, and once it completely disappeared, I forced myself to move, step after step. Venturing into the unfathomable dark.

Wall sconces appeared less frequently, their flames guttering to embers. Shadows changed, some darker and others lighter—as if the moon had risen over a midnight garden. And yet, there was no bioluminescent light to account for the change.

The scent of roses floated in the air, then the spice of Leo's aftershave that I'd bought him year after year. I breathed in the smoky tang from a campfire next, and then... pine trees dripping in the rain.

With the scents came the memories.

My throat spasmed; I let the emotions flow since emotion fed the witches. Losing Leo. Finding him again. My hands on a man's body, knowing he'd push me away.

The way we'd raged at each other. Then turned cold and distant.

My feet dragged with the effort to plow forward. The air continued to warm, gentle now, and when the passage widened into an arching cavern, it was as if the sun had chased the moon away.

The light was too bright for my eyes. I squinted at the white stone walls, laced with intricate silver carvings of vines, trees, flowers, birds. The detail was exquisite. Even insects hid

amidst the leaves that decorated every surface, every stone column.

On the cave floor, black sand sparkled with chips of mica while tall, golden torchieres flickered with white flames. Through the ceiling oculus, a perfect cone of light fell to illuminate the Gemini Witches.

I stood in mute awe while every *faillie* sense I had shuddered. Power swirled through the air. The low hum sank to my very bones, and I curled my fingers around the bow, forcing calm, willing myself not to react.

The witches sat back-to-back, queens on golden thrones. One wore a white gown. The other black. The hems draped to conceal their feet. Veils matching the gowns flowed over their heads, covering the eyes, but enhancing the visible flawless noses, cheekbones, mouths.

They looked like marble statues; only a master's hand could have carved such perfection.

My heart thudded with the thought that no beauty such as this could be evil.

No magic could be wicked when it floated golden thrones in mid-air, three feet above a jagged vent.

Fumes drifted from the vent, glowing like molten rubies, weaving like braided ribbons through the air—no fumes that color could be disturbing. No scent that sweet could be drugging.

My fingers flexed around the bow while I wondered why I still held it. There was no fear here, no test. What wrapped around me was comfort. A place where I could linger. Stare at the beauty.

And yet, I was afraid to move or draw attention to myself. Part of me recognized the sensation—like standing on the cliff edge, refusing to look down into my dark *faillie* abyss where the monster lived. Not let it notice me.

Now I was afraid to let these witches notice me.

It didn't matter, because both women turned their heads in my direction. The precision was uncanny. Veils covering their faces swayed, fluttered, but their bodies remained rigid and unmoving.

"Come closer," the witches said in unison. "We cannot see you."

The innocence of young girls echoed in their voices while I faced two adult women, and I realized a terrible truth lived in that purity. I'd trespassed here, the way I'd trespassed in Grayson's mind.

Chills pebbled my skin. My breathing rasped.

I rubbed my thumb against the ridged grip of the bow. Rubbed again.

"She hesitates," the witch to my left said, while the one on the right argued, "No, sister. She hides."

"She doesn't believe."

"She does, but fears what she believes."

"Are you afraid?" The witch who asked wore black. Her head was still turned toward me, and her red lips twitched in a tight smile. Once, twice... three perfect movements.

"She is afraid," her sister answered, mirroring every action, every disturbing flick of the mouth.

Anxiety prickled, energy seeking an outlet. I skimmed my gaze over the carved pillars bracketing the golden thrones, black beside white, white beside black. Fumes puffed from the vent with the clock-work regularity of a bellows, and everything held the same perfection as Aine's magic... except for the malice I sensed rotting beneath the surface.

I narrowed my eyes and studied the ebony stand supporting a black scrying bowl. Nearby, water trickled from a crack in the rocky wall, falling into a white marble basin with a melody that didn't change.

Was this nothing more than the magic in Aine's wrinkle? Recreated with the threat of something darker?

I jerked my head around to face them. Grayson's advice had been straightforward: go in, ask, walk out, and I said, "I came to ask a question."

"We know," the witch in black answered, her veiled face still toward me.

"It is the wrong question," the one in white added.

"We cannot help you..."

"If you cannot ask the right question."

When one witch spoke, the other carried on without pause, and in a normal world, the eerie mimicry should have alerted me.

But when I looked down... my fingers relaxed until the bow dropped. I didn't question it; didn't wonder why.

I shrugged the quiver from my shoulder and listened to the soft thud of the weight against the sand.

Real, Noa?

I couldn't decide.

But this was a test, wasn't it? And I was here for an answer. We needed to read a book. Lives depended upon it, and I asked, "Where is the closest living *faillie*?"

"Close," the witch to my left said, while the other added, "But you will not find what you seek."

"Why not?"

"You have not asked the right question."

This conversation was going in circles. Perhaps it was a game they played, and I wondered how long I'd need to play before they gave me anything useful.

But it could also be the gibberish Grayson warned about, and I stepped back. "*What* is the right question?"

"Why he stands in your way."

"What he hides from you."

"Why you bear his mark."

“What he intends to do.”

The voices bounced back and forth until I wondered if I spoke to two witches or only one.

I breathed in, breathed out.

“I’ve come to ask a question,” I repeated. “Where is the closest living *faillie*?”

“We have told you what to ask.”

My knee gave out, jolting as if I’d been hit from behind even though I’d felt no impact. Perhaps it was the sand or my weakened ankle throwing me off balance. I changed my stance, turned away to study the cave.

Etchings moved on the walls, squirming like snakes. Fumes pumped from the vent; the thickening scent of honeysuckle turned my stomach. My thoughts scattered until I remembered Grayson telling me about the fumes...

Like white liquor, Noa.

I bit hard on my lip; pain cleared my thoughts enough for me to realize... there was a problem, but I couldn’t quite figure it out. I knew the sand was shifting because the mica glittered like stars falling in the night. The torchiers shimmered with a smear of black near the edges.

I blinked. Breathed shallowly.

Took a step back.

The voices started up again, clanging like bells.

“He wants the book... he cannot read it... it is spelled against the kings... and all those wicked enough to descend from them.”

The information alarmed me, and I blurted, “Is it spelled against *faillies*?”

The red lips flicked upward in unison. Flicked again, so clearly identical that instinct kicked in—was I arguing with an illusion, and not witches?

Leave, Noa.

The warning beat hard in my mind. But I would not leave now that they'd given information I could use. If the kings couldn't read the book... maybe it was foolish, but I was too close to the answers to let this moment pass.

"If you don't like my question," I said, "then why should I want your answers?"

The witches hissed with their lips twitching.

"Because we know."

"We see."

"You cannot trust him."

"You should not be with him."

Each time they spoke, the veils swirled even though their heads never moved, and a chaotic heat bloomed and burned across my skin. "Why can't I trust him?"

"He will use you."

"Destroy you."

"You can't know that," I rasped.

"We have the gift of sight," one said, while her sister added, "This is what dread lords do."

And the cavern walls shimmered.

CHAPTER 14



Noa

IMAGES APPEARED LIKE THOSE I'd seen from the watchtower. Faint, shadowy at first, then coming into clear focus.

I was standing at the top of a blackened hill.

Overhead was a clear blue sky. An autumn sky.

But below, armies charged across a valley. Fell back. Regrouped and charged again. Weapons clashed with dull, tolling sounds. Bodies disappeared beneath torn and bloody flags. Men heaved last breaths. Lethal wounds pulsed. The weakest were slaughtered first amidst cheers of sick triumph.

My heart thundered as men faced storming gray creatures. Different creatures from what I'd ever seen. Creatures who stood upright, fast and vicious, more beast than man, ripping limbs from bodies.

Then I saw the pigs like those I'd killed, charging, grunting. I recognized the corrupted forms I'd thought were nymphs. And there—mounted on a rampant black horse, was a dread lord.

His pennant waved in the air—a flag, carried by another man. When that man fell, the pennant was retrieved by a third. Blades flashed. Shields and spears. Color bobbed and swayed

through the melee, following the dread lord on the horse. Everywhere, there was madness.

But forming the front lines, with their hands out, were the *failles*. The daughters of the queens, and their daughter's daughters.

Syphoning energy from the ground, the air... the dying.

Their mouths were open. Their clothes were mud-spattered. Light streamed from their fingers in whipping waves—red, gold, stark white. Deadly energy, destroying in great swaths.

The grotesque creatures stumbled back. The ground parted. A jagged crevasse opened and bodies tumbled before the land caved in on itself. Then an eerie silence, broken by the shrieking of the birds. The moans of the dying. The cheers of terrified victory.

But the battle broke too many *failles*. Their bodies lay abandoned on the field, the silver streaks in their hair slowly turning red—

A sob escaped my clenched lips.

“Enough,” I choked.

“It will not end,” the witches said. “The dread lords do not change. They are cursed with the sin of the kings.”

“Illusions.” But I could not look away.

The witches began their eerie chant again.

“Do not stay with him... he will claim your sigil...”

My lungs jammed until I couldn't breathe. Heat leached from my fingers, but I wasn't doing it. Could these witches draw the energy from me the way I did from everything?

I pulled in a hard breath. “Where are the other *failles*?”

“He must not read the book... he will use it against you... betray you the way wolves betrayed your mother.”

They would not speak of my mother—I wouldn't let them. “You know nothing of my mother.”

“We are seers. We see what is hidden. What is to come.”

I took a step back. Grayson had been right. I'd never encountered illusion like this, and I couldn't trust myself. Not with these witches. Whether they were syphoning, or I was, it didn't matter when the pressure inside me was rising faster than I could push it down. My entire body was heating, shaking.

The fumes from the vent had turned stark white, and my fingers clenched as if I still held my bow. But it was several feet away, lying on the mica-spangled sand.

I needed to warn Grayson.

Something wasn't right—

The witch in black said, "He must protect you."

The witch in white added, "You must not protect him."

"He will face his enemies and you will do nothing."

"He will die and you will be free."

I shuddered at what sounded like a prophecy.

The images shown to me—what had I been watching?

History—or my future?

Would I stand at the top of a blackened hill and watch while Grayson battled below?

Ice slid across my skin, colder than the ice I'd felt from Metis.

The ice of glaciers and unending night.

Ice that froze my veins. That mocked the arrogance in killing pigs and setting forests on fire.

The ice of evil and a thirst for revenge, and a book written by a queen and protected by blood magic.

I stared at the black wolf rune that remained silent, and said, "I put a gold coin in the collection box. But bartered truths are no more reliable than lies, and I don't believe you."

"*Fool,*" the witches answered in perfect unity. "Pour water into the scrying bowl and see what we see."

The pressure to do so was crushing, but I felt that odd tapping, there in my mind.

Fight them, Noa!

I turned my head. I'd found a passage in the old watchtower and I'd warned about creatures in a sunlit meadow because I could see the flickering light of magic. My gaze skimmed the walls, the pillars, the thrones, searching for the gleam of proof, telling me none of this was real.

And there—the smallest of shimmers near the scrying bowl. Fallon's advice ran through my mind: when you understand the game, you know how to cheat.

I stumbled across the sand until I reached the marble pool. A wide-mouthed cup waited. The water was frigid when I dipped, but as I struggled back to the scrying bowl, I paused as if I'd gotten out of breath.

With the cup in my hands, I tipped it enough to see watery reflections. The hand of the closest witch looked long and bony against the armrest of her throne. When I tipped the bowl to see the second witch, I barely breathed.

As I feared, she looked as age-spotted as her sister, but perhaps they were merely vain and hid their fading youth.

Except that something flashed, cloaked by the shadows—was a third witch in the cavern? The true Gemini Witch? While the two before me were the decoys?

I'd had worse ideas. Witches were treacherous. A witch died at the Gathering, the young girl I'd been staring at across the table. The illusion could be the coven's revenge, and the manipulation came from this third presence.

Feigning weakness, I collapsed to the sand, dropping the cup as I reached for my discarded bow. Dragged it closer. Did the same with the quiver.

“Where are you, child? We do not see you.”

Should I answer? I was crouched down, half-hidden by shadows.

On impulse, I threw the cup.

It clattered against the rocks. The witches turned to the sound, the veils snapping—

I picked up the bow, nocked an arrow, and shot toward the oculus. The light shuddered, winked—

Get out, get out, get out...

I struggled to my feet, but dark arches were opening in the white walls and men were stepping through, sleek, dominant, erotic—

Their crooning made my skin clammy—

Catalyst... catalyst... ours...

Vampires!

Too many—were they here to take the catalyst away?

That's what Mosbach said I was. I destroyed things, the spark that ignited the fire—had the witches called them here?

Perhaps they thought I deserved it after a witch died at the Gathering.

I stared at my trembling fingers. I'd dropped the bow again without realizing. Flames in the torchiers surged upward, crackling, angry. White walls turned blood red in the light. The mica beneath my feet glowed like rubies. The oculus still shimmered.

Let the pieces fall.

My mind raced and I couldn't slow it down. I couldn't move, not with men circling. Gorgeous, gorgeous men. Stroking themselves in a heady seduction.

Ripples of heat swamped me.

“A gift for you,” the witches said.

No. I'd asked for no gift. Fallon had warned me about the vampires, seducing, devouring. Even Julien hadn't held back. I remembered... remembered not to stare for too long...

What had Fallon said? Staring was an invitation.

But looking away became impossible. Too many beautiful faces lured me with laughing, carnal eyes. Full, enticing lips.

The fall of thick hair, all shades, all lengths. I wanted to stroke, bury my hands in the tangled textures. Touch bodies that not only promised sex but sex like no other.

I reveled in the intoxication: sandalwood, black oak, bergamot, spice.

These are sex-on-a-stick vampires, Noa. They will feed off you.

And I would die in ecstasy—was I actually arguing with myself?

Why was I not fighting?

“You want this,” one witch said.

“Crave it,” the other added.

“Forget the failures.”

“The lost causes.”

I was drifting, a leaf in the stream.

I rubbed the wolf rune on my wrist, desperate for the wicked little twitch.

Nothing.

“He doesn’t want you... he wants to use you.”

Not real, not real.

“Real.”

The witches’ voices came from every direction until I couldn’t listen anymore. My legs wobbled. I wanted to collapse, the way the images on the wall had collapsed...

I needed to warn Grayson...

Instead, I stopped fighting.

Shivers wrecked me as, one by one, the vampires brushed long fingers against my skin. Soothing, tantalizing with an invitation to join them in their darkness. Let go of the past. Release all the hurt.

Let them want me...

Once—long ago—I'd stood on a deck watching the beacon fires, finding hope in a dream. And then I'd lost what I'd dreamed, although I could not remember how.

Resistance drained away. I became pliant. Tipped my head back. Never fought as masculine fingers unwound my braid, combed the long strands loose and free.

My clothes were uncomfortable, and I held my arms out. Allowed myself to be undressed.

Part of me remembered Grayson, being in his cave, the soft give of the sand, the prick of the bone needle as he inked runes.

My skin tingled—I felt his hands touching me. Stroking, probing, enticing. Burning me with desire.

Arousal pulsed like the tug in my chest.

I thought I heard his voice, whispering—shouting.

Stop, Noa... Fight it...

But another part of me shut the illusion out. Demanding more sensation. More intimacy. Whatever it took to sear my mind, cleanse away the memories. Destroy who I'd been and who I would never be.

What I would never have.

Every inch of my skin was slowly... slowly exposed. Worshiped. Blessed with lips and tongues and fingers.

I shook beneath the easing of buttons, the lowering of a zipper. The loosening of a bra. The way the lacy material slid, catching on nipples overly sensitive and already hard—the pleasure-pain was too brief.

Silken panties were dragged down my legs. Knuckles brushed against zinging nerves. Hands explored and sampled, masters of seduction, drawing music from an imperfect instrument.

I delighted in the male crooning, basked in the words of admiration and praise. My stomach clenched with the rioting lust, the deep, throaty demands that echoed through me.

Muscles quivered, tightened as if I was the butterfly, freed from a dried and useless chrysalis.

“Oh... gods...” The moan was honey-sweet on my lips, and I relished the way sound had a taste. I wanted all the flavors of seduction, to savor them like fine wine.

My body softened. In the wavering light, I could see myself dancing, a seductress with my arms weaving a delighted invitation. My lips parted on a breath of perfect bliss while male hands cradled my hips. Moved my body from side to side. As other hands cupped my breasts.

I panted as fingers plucked and teased my swollen nipples.

Palms pressed against my thighs, urging my legs to widen.

Fingertips traced over the delicate, untouched parts of me. Reverently. Yet... hot, carnal, dominating... driving the desire that scorched my inhibitions into ash.

Every touch became welcome. I grew eager for each sordid need they aroused. Fragile, as if I'd shatter beneath the pleasure. Tongues lapped at my body, in my body. Fingers probed, unleashing a passion I'd never known. Raw, beautiful. I opened my mouth against the many male lips, tongues. Shuddered beneath the decadence.

The chant in my head was *more, more, more*.

So many... did I care?

Should I care if vampires were ravishing me? I felt them in every orifice. Wanted them deeper, more intimately, darker, more cravenly.

My body throbbed, a begging plea, ravenous while... there... a mere whisper in my mind... “*sorry.*”

I gasped. The cool stroke of regret made no sense. But then my thoughts disintegrated.

I wondered how I'd gotten to my back on the sand.

Wondered why vampires circled around and I trembled, not from fear, but from the waiting... for the brush of fangs

against my inner thigh, the first sharp piercing, then the sweet rush.

But I was greedy, whimpering and desperate. Wanting to writhe. Pant and cry out. Arch and beg with my breath catching on my lips, luxuriating in each second of excruciating anticipation.

The sounds were there. I recognized my voice, plaintive and familiar in this cave filled with mind-altering fumes. The sand was gritty against my back as I arched, a restless, yielding lover... offering... when, inalterably, the hands, tongues, fingers, bodies withdrew.

The illusion dissolved, and I was alone, still fully clothed. I rolled to my side, pulling my knees to my chest. The anguish was punishing, the unfulfilled ache... until growls sparked an atavistic alarm.

Around me, wolves circled, their canines dripping slaver, while the malice lurching from them became a fiery rush. I shoved myself upright, reached instinctively for the bow, my fingers clamping around the shaft. My arm straightened against the strain as I yanked back the bowstring. Let the arrow fly true—

Oh, gods—

Mace was lying in a pool of blood, my arrow still vibrating as his chest heaved. Light caught in his blonde hair. He arched in pain, his hands gouging the black sand, over and over. Blood bubbled from his lips—

Not real, not real, not real.

Not Mace!

Mace's wolf was golden—as golden as his hair. I remembered him running beside Mace, and the wolf I'd shot had been dark gray.

No time to think. More wolves closed in. I could feel the wet in their hot breath, smell the bitter stench.

I aimed at the wolf sinking into a crouch.

The arrow *thwapped* into the animal's quivering side, and as it fell—

I was looking at Levi's tortured face, his brown hair drifting

—
Agony ripped through me.

I nocked another arrow and sent it flying. Not toward a wolf, but toward the nearest witch. The one in black.

The arrow sailed past the witch and splintered against the white pillar. The pillar wavered before snapping back into place, while the witches remained unmoving, their grotesque smiles still twitching.

I staggered to my feet. The wolves were gone. Levi was gone. Mace—he was gone, and no trace of his blood remained. The arrows I'd shot lay useless on the sand, as if I'd merely dropped them.

Illusion on top of illusion.

Magic, Noa!

Weapons were useless in this fight. I sank to a crouch, tossed my bow aside and dug my fingers into the sand, syphoning the decades of energy that had accumulated in this cave. The flash fire tore through my veins, and when the pressure turned madly explosive, I rose and sent it whipping toward the scrying bowl.

The bowl and stand wavered and fell away.

Without a pause, I turned toward the spring. Water continued to flow, but it no longer filled a stone basin. Instead, a muddy depression held stinking water rimmed with cracked bones.

The oculus was next; when the energy hit, the light splintered into a thousand pieces that whirled and fell like ice in a storm, barely visible in the lowering light.

Night-dark openings in the rocks became dead tunnels that went nowhere.

The cave dimmed, devoured by the shadows while the torchiers stood, sad sentinels with the flames whipping whitely.

I summoned more energy, let it stream in shining ribbons toward the witches in their golden thrones. Illusion fell away.

I couldn't tell how long they'd been dead, but it was long enough to look mummified. They were still sitting—suspended three feet in the air—but their arms were tied to the armrests of the tarnished thrones. Over their heads, the veils hung in black and white tatters, tangled in gray hair. What was left of their gowns barely disguised emaciated bodies.

The witches that once inspired fear were now no more than dried husks, the shriveled prey of spiders, with all the life energy syphoned out of them.

I stared, and in that instant, a shadow behind the dead became a solid figure with gleaming black hair, a perfect face.

She screamed before she disappeared—and I recognized that scream. Hated it. Hated the terror that always gripped me when I heard it.

It was the scream that echoed in my head when Grayson inked his rune... when I stood in the cave behind the waterfall, clutching a magic book.

Now... I knew I hadn't imagined the scream, and the woman who screamed was important.

I should pay attention. But not yet.

I wasn't finished with what she'd started.

Fumes puffed from the vent, flashing from white to gray to black before I sent energy flowing in great, golden waves. The air snapped. The scent of sulfur soured the air, but I left nothing of the vent except the ash falling toward a dead fire.

Next were the pillars, white and black. Black and white.

They collapsed in pieces.

I turned to the torchiers with the guttering flames, paused while the light wavered. But the frenzy inside me kept

swelling, building. Perhaps driven by the ancient magic still hammering through the cave. From centuries filled with Gemini Witches... wails from the destroyed tore around me, the ruined hopes and dreams. I thought of my mother, crushed by what she could not control. My friends in Azul. Their screams heated my blood and became mine. Their pain... became mine.

I was their vengeance, and I loosened the energy before it broke free, sent it soaring through the cave. Sand exploded at my feet, the bits of mica glittering in the vanishing light.

The cave groaned, as if it retained some dark power—but it was no match against the fury that collapsed side tunnels like a string of closing eyelids.

With each beat of my heart, energy surged. Rocks softened, folded inward, and as they disintegrated, I saw the images that were still on the cave walls... images of the *failles*, expending too much energy and lying dead in the mud.

All for the sins of the queens.

And I was just as bad.

If this was how I ended... so be it.

At least I'd stop hurting people.

"*I'm sorry,*" I thought, and perhaps it was a vain hope—that Grayson would hear me. The rune was broken, and the shield of corrosive witch magic was rigid with spite. Nothing would break through. I couldn't warn him of the evil hiding here, waiting to destroy.

If there was any evil left when I was done.

Roiling dust snuffed out the light, and in the descending dark, I could summon no illumination. No remnant of energy remained in my fingertips.

I stumbled, following what I thought were my footsteps, depressions in the sand that could lead me back to sunlight—or deeper into the dark.

Behind me, the cavern crumbled in a tumbling storm of gray. I'd released too much energy. Destroyed the magic that

had been fueling the wall sconces in the passage, because they were dead and cold.

I tried not to drown in the nothingness that closed in, but even with my hands outstretched, I had no sense of up or down, left or right. Rocks pelted my head, my arms. Something warm streamed across my face, blood or tears. Or both.

I'd been so close. But I'd failed, and now another wall was snapping into place, one I could not see. Not in the pitch black. But I didn't need to see what was built out of uselessness and cowardice. Of never being committed, unable to get over a six-foot wall.

Despair drove me to my knees, then down on the rubble-strewn sand. I let the grief flow. All the moments I hadn't cherished, the dreams I hadn't dared to have. The one chance that slipped beyond my reach and was now gone forever.

But fear shuddered with that thought, and I searched for the broken sigil on my wrist. If he was doomed to protect me, I couldn't let him try when it was pointless. I was losing him. He was losing me. Nothing we did could change that.

With my fingers shaking, I pressed hard on the rune. Mace said Grayson believed in hope. He'd asked what I believed in.

"Wolf, it's a trap," I whispered. "The witches are dead. Take him away. Don't come."

No answering twitch. And somehow, that seemed right to me.

I deserved this ending. Deserved to disappear in a cave that I'd broken with too much energy, because I had no control. I would always be that way. Beyond hope.

And then I felt him sweeping through the dark. The magnificent, turbulent power of a dread lord, striding forward, wrapping his strong hands and lifting me into his arms.

As he carried me through the many tunnels, past the standing stones... as Grayson's heat overwhelmed me... the wolf rune twitched.

And there, a feather stroke at the back of my mind. A male voice.

A voice I should not have been able to hear.

A voice that said, "*You will never lose me.*"

CHAPTER 15



Noa

I MUST HAVE PASSED out, because when I woke up, I was lying on the wet ground, tucked beneath a grotesque bush with Grayson lying beside me. Rain splatted against the cloaking leaves above my head; water drops slipped through the tangled gaps and plopped chillingly on my face. When something scurried across my hand, I thrashed, scraping at the dead leaves, stirring up more spiders and the many-legged things.

Grayson rolled his body over mine, pressing his hand against my lips.

“Quiet,” he mouthed, holding my gaze until I focused. Then he tipped his head to the side.

I barely breathed as I listened to the tramping of feet. The rough, complaining voices. Through a space between the leaves, I could see one man on the path above. A second man was on the piney slope, step-sliding in our direction.

I froze.

Alpen!

The man on the path shouted, “You gonna piss all day, Banks?”

“Who cares how many times I piss?” The sliding man was overweight, wearing clothes that looked like he’d slept in them, and his boots, braced sideways in the pine needles, did little to slow his momentum. “Patrol on your own, if hurry’s so damn important. I’ll catch up.”

“We’ve been over this,” the distant man said. “Smugglers ain’t leaving us no charity, and nobody pays unless they got no choice. That needs two of us, Banks, and if you keep straggling, some other patrol gets there first. Then we’re screwed, you and me, and I ain’t going back to the Mule empty-like because you won’t do your part.”

“I’ll do my part.”

Banks halted his momentum and braced; I studied the tips of his boots through the leaves of our bush, hoping he didn’t slip or take another step.

“For the fuck’s sake, Banks—”

“Quit your yammering about nothing.” Banks lost his balance as he yanked on his pants. Straightened, and jerked. “Rain’s the shit for patrols, and any fools out here won’t risk those witches.”

“You and me, Banks, we’re patrols, and we ain’t afraid of witches turning our balls into some girl’s titties. Could be others not afraid.”

“Won’t be.”

I recognized the rasp of a zipper, followed by the rush of urine as it hit the leaves a few feet away from my face, splashing into a sloppy puddle. When the wind shifted, the urine smell had me pressing my nose against Grayson’s shirt—and there, in his chest—the faintest lift of laughter.

I pinched him. Grayson’s amusement increased as the irritated man swore.

“Blue hell, Banks. You’re worse than a damn horse.”

“Gimme a minute, will ya? I got a condition. Medical.”

“Plug it.”

But the stream carried on, lifting the browned, fallen pine needles as it snaked downhill, passing our burrow and barely missing our feet. When finally, the stream lessened, I sucked in a small breath and peeked. But seeing the pink jiggle through the leaves had me snapping my eyes closed—while amusement rolled through Grayson again.

We waited until the huge man seemed satisfied enough to zip and hike toward his companion. They remained on the path, refusing to leave even though the pissing was done, and I forced myself into stillness.

Grayson seemed in no hurry to move. I looked up. His stare devoured me, dredging up those moments when I'd surrendered to the vampires. I'd wanted their hands to be his hands, and I could have sworn he knew it too, because his body pressed against mine.

A lick of heat stroked across my skin, chasing the chill of the rain.

I pushed at his weight, squirming to the side. “The witches,” I mouthed.

“I know.” He barely spoke the words. “They’re dead.”

“For a long time. Mummified. But a third witch was there.”

I felt him go still.

“She hid in shadows like the wolves at the Gathering. But I saw her.” I pressed my lips together, then whispered, “We can’t stay here.”

He bent close to my ear, his breath warm. “Can you hold on a little longer?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Ten more minutes,” he murmured. “The Alpen are between us and the passage. We’ll need to take a longer route.”

“I’m not safe to be around.” My voice wobbled more than I’d hoped. “I can’t tell real from unreal.”

Grayson studied my face. “This.” He stroked a finger across my forehead, down the curve of my cheek. “This is real.”

My eyes closed... a shiver trembled through me. Followed by the questions that needed answers. And those I was afraid to ask. But while I didn't know whose magic fueled the illusions in that cave, I knew it hadn't come from the Gemini Witches. They'd been dead long before I dropped a coin into their horrid little collection box.

But who—or what—was powerful enough to kill witches who were also seers? Wouldn't they see the danger long before it approached?

And why kill them, unless there was some secret to protect?

Grayson wouldn't talk while the Alpen were close, and his ten minutes passed like an eternity. When he finally pulled me from the leaves, he brushed away the debris on my clothes with gentle hands. I tried to speak. He hushed me with fingers against my lips.

“Not here.” Taking my hand, he led me deeper into the forest. Bruised shadows battled with storm light, but at least the rain had stopped, and the sooner we found the passage home, the safer we would be.

He remained silent, although not out of anger this time. I drew on that small comfort, fighting the urge to disappear down the mental rabbit holes, fall into the dark places, where I would think about his sigil twitching again, and his voice whispering through my mind.

Perhaps I'd imagined those things, the way I'd imagined my hair loosened, when it remained in a messy braid.

Perhaps I hadn't collapsed the cave or needed rescuing, and the lingering anxiety that crawled along my spine was the test of fear.

I rubbed the black rune. When it remained silent, I focused on the piney scents mixed with wet, moldering leaves. My feet slipped the way Banks had slipped. My heart jolted. I missed my bow and the weight of the quiver on my back. I wanted to go home. Be warm and safe and far, far away from witches in Alpen territory. Away from the eerie prophecy that clung like gray mud, smothering every thought.

The rain started up again, sporadic, chilling, spiky in a tormenting wind. Grayson had my backpack slung over his shoulder, and I consoled myself with the hope that the backpack was waterproof, and once we got through the passage, I'd have dry clothes.

I was about to ask how close we were when something *plopped* in front of me. I stopped. Grayson had stopped too, and while he scanned the trees, I studied the green acorn wobbling on the ground, inches from my feet. A bird might have dropped the nut. But when a second fell from the sky to land next to the first, I decided it wasn't a bird.

Grayson closed his hand around my arm. Pointed upward toward a girl peering at us through the wide leaves of a tree. Her face was dirt-smearred. Her clothes were green and brown, blending in like a wild creature. But she held one finger to her lips, then wiggled her fingers in rapid succession.

Grayson released me. His hands came up, his fingers moving in answer—gestures I recognized as American Sign Language. The girl grinned, signed back. Her fingers were nimble and speedy as she balanced in the crotch of two branches, then pointed to the right and disappeared, jumping from branch to branch.

We followed, leaving the rough path, and after five minutes, the girl dropped down in front of us. A bow was over her shoulder, along with a quiver of arrows. Her brown hair had a chopped look, as if she'd cut it herself. The dirt smeared on her face was a skillful camouflage, including her clothes, along with the leaves she'd pinned in her hair.

She pointed at me, then signed something with her hands.

Grayson nodded, whispering, "She asked if you were the *faillie* they'd heard about, from the Gathering."

I stiffened, but the girl's fingers were moving again. Grayson signed in response, his gestures sharp-edged. Once again, she held her finger to her lips, then pulled an arrow from the quiver; the fletched feathers were striped with black. She aimed toward a distant tree. A moment later, two men emerged from the heavy underbrush. One held a bow with the

arrow nocked and aimed. The other gestured to the girl. When she went to stand at his side, I saw a family resemblance, father or brother.

The man signed something to Grayson with three quick gestures. Grayson turned to me and said with his voice kept low, “He wants to see the rune on your wrist.”

“Why?” I whispered back.

“To be sure it’s you.”

I glanced at him. “What about you?”

His grin flashed. “They haven’t figured me out yet.”

I nodded, held out my wrist so the black wolf rune was visible. The leader flicked his hand. Eight men materialized to join the first two, coming from different directions. Encircling us quietly, methodically, and although the arrow was no longer aimed at Grayson, I remained on edge because they were all armed with weapons similar to what I’d lost in the witch cave.

My lips dried. “Who are these people?”

“Wolves who live outside the pack,” Grayson murmured. “They move around, undermine the Alpen when they can. Not every pack member remains loyal to Lec Rus.”

“Why use sign language?”

He grinned. “It’s silent. Low tech. Impossible to hack. And you see who you’re talking to.”

“Is it an Alpen thing, or a rebel thing?”

“Rebel thing.”

My nerves continued to jump despite Grayson’s hand against my back. Regardless of what these men thought about Lec Rus, they were still Alpen wolves—the wolves who’d terrorized me and the people I loved.

We trudged through the softly rustling forest, and when the men spread out, I wasn’t sure if they wanted distance because I was a *faillie*, or if they assumed defensive positions. Mace’s men had used similar tactics during the times they’d escorted me. But each step took us farther away from the passage back

to Sentinel Falls. I hated the delay. Disliked not knowing where we were going. With so many details swirling in my head, I wanted to talk to Grayson. Put the facts in some order before I forgot what was important.

So far, no one had asked why we were here, in their territory. But these men weren't the wolves with the questions. The men with the questions would be waiting at our destination, and I doubted they'd believe the *faillie* had come to see the Gemini Witches for a prophecy, when so many unsavory prophecies already surrounded me.

But thinking brought nothing but more worry. Beside me, Grayson matched his manner to the rebels. He wasn't hostile. He'd dampened his natural dominance and put the warning in the way he walked, silent and alert.

The rain stopped when the storm moved toward the distant mountains, and a watery sun peeked out between the clouds. I still shivered and thought about syphoning a thread of heat into my fingers before Grayson reached down and squeezed my hand. My head was sticky with drying blood and my hair stuck out from the bedraggled braid. I was covered with mud and leaves from the bush; I wasn't that different from the girl. Partly human, partly wild.

She walked beside her father—I'd decided he was too old to be a brother. Each time she glanced back, I smiled with chattering teeth and probably looked as grotesque as the witches with their twin smiles.

We kept hiking. My limp returned, my ankle twinging, and when I thought my legs would finally give out, I spotted the first ramshackle dwelling hidden in the trees—a wooden cabin with a raised foundation, an open crawlspace, and three sagging steps leading to a covered porch and a planked door. Thin smoke rose from the stone chimney, but the only sign of inhabitants was the white dog who growled from beneath the porch.

Soon, more houses came into view, and while they also blended with the trees and shrubbery, anyone passing this way would recognize what they were. A stream glittered with clear,

fast-moving water. Peeled wooden poles formed a supporting cross-brace for a drying deer hide. A small child scurried out of sight. A door banged closed. But I could sense the curiosity from those peeking through shutters, the nearly closed curtains. Tiny peep holes.

In the center of the town—if this settlement even resembled a town—a communal, open-air kitchen surrounded a tamped-down fire. Dishes and bowls filled with nuts and edible roots covered the tables. Vegetables overflowed from woven garden baskets. A turning spit labored beneath the weight of an animal carcass, roasting with an aroma that had my mouth watering.

The poverty was appalling. A toddler stood with his toes inches away from a muddy puddle. He wore a gray tee shirt and diaper. His finger twisted in his nose, but his face was clean. So were his clothes. When I got close enough to see the details, I realized the shirt was gray from dye and not dirt. Handmade, perhaps cut from a shirt that no longer fit someone else.

“How can they live like this?” I whispered, while guilt nagged at me for my comfortable life in Azul. The beautiful home on a lake. The conveniences I’d taken for granted.

“They prefer the dignity in freedom.” Grayson kept his voice low. “Don’t insult their lifestyle because it doesn’t come up to your standards.”

I drew back, frustrated that he’d misunderstood. “I wasn’t saying they had no dignity.”

“Maybe you didn’t say it, but they’ll still feel it.”

“Why can’t you offer protection? Food or supplies?” I argued. “You can’t let them live like this.”

He turned his head and looked at me. “It’s not my pack, Noa. We’ve extended an invitation, but they know what happens when a Sentinel Falls alpha adopts Alpen wolves. They’d rather stand and fight the battle their own way.”

I couldn’t let my irritation go. “Maybe I could help them.”

“And do what?” Grayson challenged. “Storm the Mule and face off with Lec Rus? I’d give your chances of surviving a zero.”

“I would still try,” I hissed. “There’s no life in being afraid.”

My lips barely moved, but he heard me and stroked a warm hand down my back.

I turned to flash a look at him, and he grinned. “I love the way you fight with me.”

He threw me off balance with that compliment, and I snapped, “Did you love it when I burned the forest down?”

“Even more when you burn forests down.”

My steps faltered.

He leaned in and whispered, “I love the anger sparkling in your eyes, and these two red spots...” His finger brushed, feather-light against my cheek. “I love how you fight me as an equal, Noa. As a woman who doesn’t understand her strength. You look at my light and dark and you’re not afraid.”

Sincerity deepened his voice to rough velvet. The same sincerity I remembered hearing in his voice the night he healed me from worm poison, when he’d told me he was sorry. That I’d be all right.

My breathing quickened. I wanted to tell him everything, but it was impossible to talk with so many rebels listening. Time held new importance, and I worried over this delay. Over details that were already fading from my mind, along with the ability to sort through what had happened.

Then I worried about the third witch hiding in that cave. Rubbed at the goose bumps rising on my arms. The squirming sensations in the moonstone runes.

Two women walked toward the cooking pots, uneasy but determined; they nodded as we passed. A child laughed, and a dog barked, breaking the tension.

Our escort separated off in different directions until we were down to the bird girl and her father. She signed something to him, swiftly emphatic. He nodded. She skipped ahead. We

followed, slogging through a muddy patch toward another battered house. A man stood outside. I decided he was an elder, judging from his posture, not the clothes, which were what I'd expect from someone who worked and survived in the forests, dark colors, sturdy and warm. He stood with his arms crossed, staring at Grayson—who waited, relaxed. Something silent passed between them. An evaluation, perhaps. Awaiting judgment and a decision.

After a moment, the man offered a subtle chin tip, honoring an alpha who had not yet identified himself. One who had not stormed in demanding respect—but had offered respect without conditions.

“Name’s Jodan,” the elder said before motioning us inside. Grayson touched my back, urged me up the wooden steps. When we stepped through the doorway, Jodan was clearing a place for us to sit, moving chairs closer to the fire and toeing a sleepy, gray-muzzled black dog away from the warmth. “Move, Burn.”

The dog unwound his long legs and stood unsteadily, ambling closer to me once he caught the scent. Shoved a cold, curious nose into my extended palm. I smiled, and asked, “You call him Burn?”

“Easier than burden, as that’s what he is,” Jodan muttered, but there was love beneath the gruff. “And you’ll be?”

“Friends,” Grayson said.

“Aye, that’s what the mark on her wrist says.” The old man’s eyes were clear, blue, and narrowed. “That probably makes your name closer to some color.”

Gray.

Grayson nodded.

Jodan grunted. “Best we keep it that way.”

CHAPTER 16



Noa

REBELS, I THOUGHT. WOLVES living outside the pack. No one wanted their names used. Not that keeping my name secret made any difference when my hair gave me away. I should consider dying it again, despite what Mace thought.

But at least Jodan seemed friendly. Grayson made me sit closer to the fire. He settled in the other chair, and both chairs were wooden and creaky, but smooth from use. Stable enough not to rock when I leaned forward, holding my palms toward the warming flames. I couldn't stop the shivering. I wasn't wolf enough to ignore the weather, and my wet clothes held a cold I'd need hours in a warm bath to get over. Blood still crusted on my forehead. My muscles were locked in place and I didn't want anyone to notice how ragged I felt.

"We'll get you something warm to drink." Jodan turned to Grayson, and added, "Old Mae'll be here soon—she's our best healer."

"The day is miserable. Don't bother your people when I can heal."

"Allow us the honor of hospitality. We can care for your lady. She'll be needing privacy to clean up, rest awhile. A

woman's touch is always better. Give you and me a chance to talk."

"Then I thank you for the generosity."

Grayson tipped his head, and I sensed the undercurrent beneath the formality. But I was too tired to work out the code they were using. I decided Jodan basically said we weren't leaving until he had answers, and Grayson agreed. But the answers would be those Grayson wanted to give.

Outside, the sky was darkening, and clouds brought a distant grumble of thunder; another storm was moving in. Through the crack around the house door, the gust of wind was more wintery than early autumn. The fire leaping in the fireplace soothed, although I couldn't stop chewing on my lip. Hospitality aside, too much had happened. We were here because I'd insisted on coming over Grayson's objections, because I'd wanted to fight him. Wanted to prove I was as strong as he was, as Mace and Fallon. They'd faced the Gemini Witches while I'd been riding bikes and going to the movies and believing the stories in Leo's children's books.

"You'll be safe during the storm," Jodan said.

I glanced up. He was sitting now, relaxed, his eyes kind as he studied my face, and I imagined the emotions I'd given away.

"Rain dampens the patrols some," Jodan continued. "Not that the rangers won't come out if some reason bites hard enough on their asses... my pardons, lady."

"Noa," I said. "Just... Noa."

Grayson added, "We ran into a patrol north of here. Two men, heading west."

"That'd be Banks and Skids, going after their smuggler reward. Two dolts if there ever were some."

I listened to the scrape of a stick while the elder stirred up the fire. The pop of sparks, before he tossed more wood on the flames. "We have people watching."

Grayson shifted his position on the wooden chair. “I’m guessing you have wards in place.”

The old man gave the fire another stir. “You feel ’em?”

“Your bird girl caught me first,” Grayson admitted with a smile.

With a sigh, Jodan tossed aside the stick, leaned back in his chair with both hands braced on his knees. “You triggered one of our wards about a mile out. One near that cave. Adriel was closest. She followed you some until her father could get there. She’s my granddaughter. Been deaf since she was seven, in case you were wondering. Fell out of a tree and hit her head. She’s still too young for a pack bond, so we all learned to talk with our hands for her.”

I thought Grayson’s explanation was more strategic, keeping conversations private, but the idea of a girl inspiring rough, hardened rebels to communicate on her terms and not theirs deserved respect.

The elder picked up an old-fashioned smoking pipe and tamped down fresh tobacco, held a burning twig dug from the fire until a puff of fragrant smoke drifted in the air. “This place is called Sutter. Won’t find it on a map. But then, Alpen’s not found it in three years, so there is that.” He leaned back. “If you don’t mind, I’ll ask what brings you here.”

“Business with the Gemini Witches,” Grayson said evenly.

“Ah.” Jodan’s gaze swept over my face. “I’m thinking that did not go well.”

“Not as expected.”

A young woman edged into the room, offering tea; I tasted pine needles with spearmint and something honeyed. Grayson held his tea cup braced against his knee—a ridiculous sight—and the fire crackled around charred wood. Smoke ran up the chimney, but if Sutter survived for three years without discovery, smoke didn’t matter.

Thunder rumbled right before rain pelted the shingled roof. Burn raised his head. The thick fur along his spine was up and bristly.

“Burn doesn’t like storms much.” The old man swatted at the smoke curling from his pipe. “And rain slows Old Mae down. But she’ll be along in a moment. In the meantime, we’d best talk about those witches.”

I looked at Grayson.

He looked at Jodan.

The elder nodded, puffing on the pipe with his lips pursed. “Some questions ought not to be asked, but I guess that’s up to the person asking. I was a scholar before I left the Mule. Spent time in the archives and have a fair idea of who you two are. Whatever you needed from those witches... the coven’s either dead or gone. We’ve seen no one around for months, and the two witches in the cave, well... I’m guessing you’d know more about that than I would.”

“The witches are dead,” Grayson said. “Have been for some time. The cave may have collapsed.”

“Already sent someone to check.”

“The Alpen wards were down when we came through,” I said.

Jodan nodded, another puff of gray smoke drifting from his lips. “People still come and go. I figure whatever those witches did, it turned permanent. Or someone else wants the wards down so they can move as they please. Either way, the Mule won’t fix them because they need the smuggler kickbacks coming through. Revenues got to come from somewhere.”

“Any incursions from the north?” Grayson asked while I juggled my tea.

“Odd things. We thought a passage opened up where it hadn’t been. Then disappeared.”

“If you ever need help,” Grayson said, “get word to me. Any of your people who wish to come, they’ll have safe passage.”

“I thank you for the kindness, but we’ve a lot of unfinished business with the Mule. Families gone missing, snatched up

and punished for things they didn't do. The people here—they'll stay and fight. Try to find their loved ones."

"The offer stands. For anything you need."

I glanced at Grayson, and mouthed, "*thank you*," even though I knew he'd made the offer before and didn't need my anger to make him do it again.

"Bah." A twinkle had entered the elder's eyes. "We believe in self-sufficiency here, part of Sutter's charm."

Burn came back to lean against my knee. His breathing sounded rough, and as I scratched his ears, I wondered if the old dog was simply too feeble to walk far without resting. I couldn't imagine him making the trek through a passage, or Jodan leaving his "burden" behind. No, the old man would stay and fight for those gone missing.

"Adriel will take your lady to lodging." Jodan held Grayson's gaze. "We'll sit awhile and talk until dinnertime."

My eyes widened as I turned to Grayson, gave the slightest shake of my head. I didn't want to be in the middle of Alpen territory, separated from him until *dinnertime*.

"No harm will come," Jodan said to me.

But my heart raced and my skin chilled.

Grayson said, "Go with Adriel. I'll be along soon."

I would do it for him, I decided. *This* time, without argument, because I owed him my cooperation and he needed to speak to Jodan. Five minutes later, I was standing beside Adriel in the middle of a clean, one-room cabin where a fire burned in a stone fireplace and warmed the air. Bleached mortar filled the gaps in the peeled log walls, and the hand-crafted table was smooth and sturdy. I smiled at the ceramic teapot and cups sitting on the table—a woman's touch—along with the flowered cotton curtains framing two small windows where the rain beat against the rippled glass.

When Old Mae arrived, Adriel took her damp shawl, then signed something, her fingers moving while Old Mae

translated, moving her own fingers. Using sign language seemed as natural and constant as speech for these rebels.

“Adriel says the privy is outside—a dash in the rain. You won’t get too wet. Everything you need is already there. And I’ll be Old Mae, since the imp has no manners to let me say my peace.”

Adriel giggled when I met her mischievous gaze. She signed something new, and Old Mae huffed and glared while continuing with her translation.

“She wants to tell you not to worry, the privy roof doesn’t leak like it did before, right on your head when you’re sitting there—which never bothered the men much, not until the women got together complaining about maintenance.” The woman offered a gap-toothed smile. “That part’s got the right of it. Because, just like that, all the privies were fixed, with new seats too.”

And as we continued our strange three-way chat, I relaxed. Old Mae tutted, and said, “You look like you’ve been mud-rolling. Better clean you up before you catch a chill.”

Adriel supervised the children who brought buckets of water and an oval wooden tub. While the water heated over the fire, Old Mae ordered me out of my clothes, then wrapped me in a blanket with a towel around my shoulders. For an instant, I considered heating the water myself, surging a touch of energy, then decided not to risk a water explosion that would drench the inside of the cabin even worse than the rain outside.

Fortunately, the water heated quickly, and I leaned over the wooden tub while Old Mae washed my hair, her hands gentle as she worked the suds against my scalp, and it was a luxurious feeling, being taken care of with such care. When the water was dirty, the children brought in fresh despite my protests, and soon I was sitting in a warm scented bath, having my back scrubbed.

“They tell me you went to see the witches,” Old Mae said.

“Yes. I wanted to ask them a question.”

“Questions are dangerous with those seers, but I’m sure your man told you that.”

I couldn’t stop the smile. “Several times.”

“Must have been an important question.”

“I thought so at the time.”

She made a *tutting* sound. “People always think they’ll get some magic answer and their troubles fly away. But not you. Could tell that the minute I laid eyes on you, how he stood guard and you kept him on his toes, both of you so serious. Course, you wouldn’t know there’s no worry here.”

She sorted through my wet hair again. “We heard what you did at the Gathering, and there isn’t a wolf in Sutter who wouldn’t give his life to protect you and your man.”

“I’m not sure what we did that deserves protection.” Grayson, maybe, but I’d done nothing for the wolves in Sutter, and didn’t want any of them risking their lives for me.

“It’s how you faced Lec Rus. Few men still breathe after staring that Mule down.” Old Mae’s gnarled fingers drifted across my shoulders, tracing the moonstone runes inked on my skin. “Your man put these here?”

I nodded.

“He has a fine hand. I’ve seen runes in my time, but none like these.” She turned curious. “He put them there to protect against that girl-witch at the Gathering, the one who spelled the wolves?”

“It was protection from the nymphs.” I hugged my knees. “Was the girl from here?”

“Rumor says she ran from somewhere else, bartering her skills. Who really knows? The Mule denies all involvement. Says he never hired a witch. But it’s funny how the witnesses end up dead, the way he likes it. Buys and sells folks, thinkin’ they’re cattle. Steals them, even.”

She pulled her fingers through my hair, removing tangles as she pushed the strands aside. I felt her fingers at my nape, skimming lightly over my skin. I thought she was finding

bruises, the cuts from the falling rocks. A few scrapes from the bush.

Really, I still looked like a total mess. More than rolling in mud.

“We’ve seen a few people come through here,” she said. “Those running from the Mule. Usually in poor shape. We do what we can for them. Let ’em go. Most never make it far, though. The patrols find them, drag them back to the Point and no one sees ’em again.”

Mule’s Point, the seat of power for the Alpen. I flinched and let her think she’d pressed against a sore spot.

“Sorry.” She patted my shoulder. “Climb out of that tub now. Sit on the stool with your back to the fire—not too close, but enough to dry your hair.”

She helped me stand, wrapped a clean patchwork quilt around my shoulders, and while I shuffled toward the stool, she set out her healing ointments. “I use the old remedies. Make a wound heal faster, but the smell isn’t always pleasant.”

I fanned strands of my hair to the side when she asked. Relaxed as her hands moved against my nape. “You get these bruises while visiting the witches?”

“I was disoriented,” I said. “Fell against the rocks while trying to get out.”

Her laugh sounded like a dry cough. “You don’t have to tell me. There’s lots I know about those witches. For a while, folks were going in all brave and coming out looking like ghosts. Said the witches were ranting on about someone like you coming. And someone like your man. A warning, they said. Heard tell Lec Rus got upset as hell. Wouldn’t surprise me if he did something about it since no one’s come out of that cave in some time.” She dragged a brush through my hair, smoothing the silver streak. “Wouldn’t be the first time for the Mule. He gets outraged over everything.”

Nerves squirmed beneath my skin. “What were the witches ranting about, Old Mae?”

“Talked about signs, of course. Bread and butter for seers. How in a time of peril there’d be two. One would open the door. The other would reap the vengeance. Worse was the prophecy. Talked about beware the one who strikes a king without a queen. Must have made sense to the Mule because he went crazy, looking for *failles*.”

Old Mae tugged the brush through my hair again; I hugged the blanket so she wouldn’t realize how hard I was shaking. “When was this?”

“Maybe a few months before the rumors started about you. Probably why the Mule risked attacking the Gathering. Imagines himself a king. Thinking he needed someone like you. Best you don’t stay around here much longer, give him a chance to find you. He’ll come with enough wolves, not even your man could fight them all.”

I shuddered. “We’ll leave as soon as we can.”

But I sensed a strange energy when I glanced at the rain-darkened windows, even though it was the middle of the afternoon. I wondered when Grayson would come.

Or if Jodan meant it when he said they would talk until dinnertime.

CHAPTER 17



Noa

WHEN GRAYSON OPENED THE door two hours later, I flinched. I'd been huddled by the fire, wrapped in the patchwork quilt that smelled of lavender and pine soap—two scents that barely covered the boggy smell of the ointment Old Mae smeared on my skin. My ankle throbbed and I had no ice for it—other than sticking my foot outside, which was as impractical as it was nonsensical. I blamed exhaustion. Being left alone for too long. And clothes that were still too wet to wear.

I was deep in feeling sorry for myself. Ashamed to say I enjoyed it. I couldn't be fine or okay all the time, could I? Since dry clothes were in the backpack Grayson had, I'd been distracting myself. Ignoring my near nudity by thinking about what Old Mae said. More witches and warnings. Then I'd wondered if any Alpen wolf, even a rebel, could be believed.

“What do you think?” I asked, shivering in the gust of stormy air before Grayson closed the door. “Do you trust Jodan?”

“Enough to stay until the storm passes.”

His calm tone made me blink. He crossed the cabin to toss the backpack on the sagging bed, but rather than turning away

so I could get dressed, he sorted through my clothes. I scowled as he pulled out jeans and a shirt. Taking his time folding silk panties and a bra. When his thumb brushed the panty crotch, I glared at him. I didn't think he did it deliberately, but the intimacy made me realize how lonely I'd become, if watching Grayson touch my clothes could get to me, make me feel cared for when I'd rather feel offended.

Looking at him now, I wavered beneath the wave of power that was Grayson's. He'd dropped whatever shield he used in front of Jodan, no longer blunting his strength, and I saw the Alpha of Sentinel Falls. The dread lord. I understood his commitment, the honor in sacrifice. The wicked sense of humor he hid from others.

But then I saw the utter isolation in his life.

Rain had dampened his hair during the walk from Jodan's cabin. One inky strand fell over his forehead, and I wished for the freedom to push it back. To thread my fingers through his hair as if it was my right to comfort him.

His eyes met mine, and he pushed the wet hair back while I watched. His breathing grew uneven, tightening the tension in my stomach. He hadn't really looked at me since the night I said Anson Salas would carry through with the fucking. But he was looking now with the shards of green in his eyes.

The fire flickered with a subtle, popping sound. Rain beat against the windows and the rhythmic patter should have been soothing. Only what welled up inside me was all the anguish and terror I'd experienced in the illusion.

The pointless challenge I'd issued to him in facing the witches, and how disastrously I'd failed.

The prophecies jumbled together, the promises of death and destruction—and some of what had been forewarned had already come true.

One would open the door.

One would seek the vengeance.

Hadn't I been the avenger in that cave, seeking retribution for all the wrongs done to people I loved?

Hadn't I wanted revenge—aimed for destruction?

Alarm was the cracking ice beneath my feet, and I thought—I thought of Caerwen, telling me about dread lords and *failles* being mirror images, reflecting the best and the worst. Then I saw the blood-drenched future in the witches' warnings. What we were, what we were becoming.

You cannot trust him.

You should not be with him.

He will use you.

My heart jolted as the pieces fit. Grayson had battled so hard against bringing me here because he already knew—truly feared the prophecies I'd received.

Not for himself. But he feared what I would learn, and how I would see myself. The role I was meant to play.

I dared another look at his face. Self-recrimination tightened his expression. He'd brought me to the Gemini Witches against his better judgment, then let me go in alone. He'd been alone, too, at fifteen, facing the witches, and I understood—it wasn't the questions he'd asked, but what the witches revealed on their wretched cave walls that had changed him.

Had he watched the kings destroy the *failles* and realized what he saw was his future?

Was that when he chose to resist fate?

I didn't know where the realization came from, but I knew, without question, why he would never ask for my protection or accept my sigil. Because he believed what he'd seen—believed he was fated to repeat the sins of the kings.

He would never complete the circle, never bind me through fate.

If I ever protected him, it would be because I chose to do so and not out of obligation—like the obligation I'd forced him to accept by asking for the runes inked on my skin.

Had it been only hours ago, when I believed I understood this world? I thought answers were logical and solutions

would follow.

Now I rocked against the sacrifices already made by Grayson, my dread lord, the Alpha of Sentinel Falls. The many pointless deaths that burned in my memory.

And the worst sacrifice would cut off all the light—if he made it.

If he battled and died while I stood by and did nothing.

Heat rose beneath my skin. I could feel muscles tightening. Too much energy, seeking release. I closed my eyes against the darkness, trembling, afraid to reach out. But I heard the nearly silent scuff of boots, steady and sure. Warmth wrapped around me. His hand cupped my face, his fingers unsteady, his breathing deep, slow.

My voice trembled. “I need to tell you—”

“Not yet.”

Grayson tugged me against his chest. His face pressed against the side of my head, his hands stroking, gentle, rhythmic, sliding up and down my back until the tension ebbed. The beat of his heart was steady beneath my cheek. The pressure building in my veins turned silvery and then faded—and I cherished the gift he had. The gift all dread lords had, to use their dark power to ease the queens. Give them blessed relief.

Another burden between us, my dependence upon him. I hated that I’d added to it by insisting we come here, when we were no closer to the goal. We still had no way to read the book. Alpen rebels offered shelter, but for how long?

I could see Grayson’s tight shoulders. His face was pale and strained enough to recognize the past few hours had been as draining for him as they’d been for me.

Exhaustion was a weight pressing down on both of us, and I said, “If you’re telling me you don’t want to know—”

“I’m telling you that if you let that quilt droop a little more, I’ll stop breathing.”

His voice was raw with fatigue—but also a dark humor—and I yanked the quilt upward even though the drag of material irritated my nerves. I was reacting to nothing more than the aftermath of the witches—or whatever entity had been in that cave. The power struggle we’d maintained over the last week only aggravated the tension between us, and I stepped away. But I couldn’t get far, not when Grayson’s presence shrank the space. One room, with the fireplace, a sturdy table and chairs. Windows. A single bed.

No privacy.

I told myself I could handle him. This *situation*. We wouldn’t be here that long—maybe long enough to dash to the privy, eat something. Then be on our way.

Needing normalcy, I asked, “What did Jodan want to know?”

“He’d heard about the attack on Azul and wanted to know about the creatures, how we fought back.”

“Have they seen creatures here?”

“Not yet. But he’s worried about that passage opening and closing. It wasn’t the first occurrence. And rebels from Cariboo tell stories he wasn’t ready to believe. I told him to use the weapons he has, kill from a distance whenever possible. We thought the enemy used passages, sending the creatures through. He promised to strengthen his wards, set multiple wards at greater distances as an early warning system. Since the Gathering, he said other rebel groups had formed against the Alpen, and everyone was on edge. If they need to evacuate on short notice, I said he should use the smuggler tunnels. Get his people out and worry about fighting after they’re safe.”

I felt dull, unable to think. “I should get dressed.”

“Not yet. I meant it about healing you. I want to check what Old Mae did.”

My lips twisted and I plucked at the quilt, the red square at the corner. “She covered me with a salve that stinks like a bog—in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed.”

I glared and his smile flashed. “The salve works against infections, but not much else. So I’ll still look.”

His voice had deepened, settled into neutral, a healer interested only in an ailment and not the patient. I struggled against reacting. Having his hands on me while I was stiff and defensive was bad enough, but I smelled like something that should be left alone.

Bending my head, I waited while Grayson parted the strands of my hair, probing gently the way Old Mae had done. And each time his fingers brushed my skin, an answering tug pulled from deep in my chest. I pressed an unsteady hand against the sensation. When a hint of amusement tapped at the back of my mind, I shifted restlessly.

“Do you believe in the curse of the kings?” I asked. “That they’re destined to hunt *failles*?”

His fingers continued to press at my scalp, but he said nothing.

I took a long time tracing the quilt designs, then twisted around until I could see his face. “Do you believe in fate, Grayson?”

His touch was like rough satin, warm against my skin. His expression never changed. “None of this is your fault, Noa.”

And yet, what I saw in his eyes. I sat, frozen but burning at the same time.

“Do you... believe... in fate?”

His eyes closed, and he turned away as a furious pounding rattled the door. He swung the door open, letting the weather in while Adriel stood on the threshold, signing frantically.

“Get dressed,” Grayson ordered as he motioned the girl inside and out of the streaming rain. “We have to leave.”

CHAPTER 18



Noa

THE AIR WAS HARSH with rain that fell punishingly on my head, my face, flooding into my eyes until I could scarcely see in the grainy light. A keening wind thrashed through the groaning oak trees surrounding Sutter. Dark pines clustered ahead. The backpack thumped against the small of my back. My hastily braided hair felt like a wet rope. I'd stopped thinking about the cold within minutes of being back in the storm; all distractions were wiped by the adrenaline throbbing through my body.

Grayson gripped my hand so I wouldn't stumble. We followed Adriel, her spikey hair now flattened against her head. She looked too young for this life, too thin to be darting through the trees and living the life of an insurgent.

She glanced back, then spun and ran toward me. With mud in her hand, she rubbed it against my hair—the streak of silver that would be a beacon in the low light. When Adriel would have turned away, Grayson touched her arm. Signed emphatically. She nodded, breathing hard, signing something in answer.

“Jodan had people watching the witch cave,” he said to me. “A second patrol from the Mule passed by—they started following our trail.”

My stomach dropped. “We led them to Sutter?”

“They won’t find it.” Grayson held out his hands. “Trust me.”

I hesitated only a second, then folded my fingers around his, and the cold, raging power that rushed from him to me brought back all the times I’d destroyed things. When the energy controlled me instead of me, being in control. Blood pulsed through my veins, followed by an unending heat. The heat of a distant star and the heat of a trembling flame. A heat from the treacherous witch cave that took me outside myself.

I tried to pull back, but his grip tightened. “Take what I give you, Noa. Then reverse the flow.”

Calm confidence was in his eyes, that I’d do as he asked, and I couldn’t look away. Wouldn’t, not when I breathed. Not when his power became a glorious, riotous surge. I gathered it, turned it. Forced it back toward him, my dread lord. The Alpha of Sentinel Falls.

Grayson’s gaze locked on mine while, around us, the sound of grinding stones matched the storm’s thunder. My weight shifted as a current jumped from him to me. I thought of half a circle, where the heat flowing back to him was the other half of that circle. And if I let go before it was done—

Through a new deluge of rain, I blinked, glancing over his shoulder as the trees moved. Branches waved and tangled in a windy storm. Boulders rolled into new positions. The grass around them swayed. Low shrubbery rose and fell with undulations lost in shadow.

Moments later, Grayson released my hands, signing to Adriel while he spoke to me. “I used the Green Man’s magic to alter the forest around Sutter. The trail the Alpen follow will head in another direction.”

She nodded, not quite believing him. But I’d seen it happen before, knew how disorienting it could be.

“Thank you,” I said to him. “Will Adriel find her way back?”

“Yes.” He signed each word we said, so she’d be included in our conversation. “Everyone in Sutter will know where they are, how to get back. Only the patrol will be confused.”

Adriel turned, and as we followed, the brutality of the Alpen lands became stark and pitiless. The wind scraped the ground bare, leaving rough rock with no vegetation. A restlessness filled me, as if I wasn’t put back together. But I was a *faillie*, and with the amount of energy I’d absorbed and released today, wasn’t it normal to feel that way?

The miracle was that I still stood, and I stopped analyzing every random thought, digging for failure. Instead, I slogged forward. Found hiking to be soothing, even through an unforgiving environment. I could be silent, let the rain wash away ragged memories and dead witches.

But when I recognized the metallic tang of magic against my lips, I stopped. Adriel was already standing beside Grayson. Both of them stood in front of a darkened passageway, and as she signed, he translated.

“This is an old smuggler route, but people still use it.” He coughed, his voice strained as he said, “Leads into Sentinel Falls territory. A passage I didn’t know was here.”

I elbowed him. “Better tighten up those wards.”

His eyes narrowed, although a smirk curved his lips. “I could order you on ward duty, since you work for me.”

Uncertainty pinged in my chest. “I wouldn’t know a ward from a rock.”

“Mace will teach you.”

Adriel thumped the middle of his chest, her glare intense as she signed furiously. Grayson gave her his full attention. Even I became edgy, watching their interaction, silent because whatever she was telling the Alpha of Sentinel Falls, it alarmed him.

Adriel touched the silver streak in my muddied hair and continued to sign.

Grayson answered, then cupped her face, leaned in to kiss her forehead. A blush stained her cheeks.

When he turned, his hands closed around my arms and his eyes pinned mine. “She says there was a girl like you, with silver in her hair.”

“Here?” I barely breathed.

“Not now. The vampires have her.”

CHAPTER 19



Noa

THE SMUGGLER'S PASSAGEWAY STANK of rotting food and worse things. No bioluminescence to chase the hated gloom. I gripped Grayson's hand, wanting the light, to know that once we reached Sentinel Falls, I'd be safe again. Dry again.

But when Grayson led me from the dark, we hadn't outrun the raging storm. Ahead, a rising dragon spine of mountains speared into the misty rain. A valley spread below. Wind gusted from the side because the weather, it seemed, still had a temper.

Grayson seemed unfazed, standing in the rain, unbowed. Water streamed from his inky hair and he wiped the wet strands aside before I could.

But my hand still curled.

"We're near Owen Griffith's settlement." He swung around at my silence and added, "Miranda Kirk is his mate. Their settlement is a two-hour hike from here, out in the open. I can call for Julien—"

I answered before I thought about it. "No vampires."

His lips twitched. So did my suspicion before his amusement faded.

“We can go somewhere else.”

My teeth chattered at his offer. “Where... else?”

“The home my parents built.”

Where they were killed, and he’d stood guard until the alpha arrived.

The cold I felt sank deeper. Sheet lightning lit up the sky. The clouds turned purple before fading to a normal stormy gray. But in that half-light, I saw the shadows in Grayson’s eyes, and compassion welled up. Life followed its own rules, and no matter how powerful the man, be him Alpha or Dread Lord, in the end, grief still pierced the heart.

Pain kept a wolf human—he’d given Laura that advice. And I could think of no other place where I’d rather go with him. To the home he’d loved too briefly. The loss he still carried.

When he held out his hand, I wrapped my fingers around his, honored by the offer. “How far?”

“Not far.”

We hiked through a forest that was less foreboding than the one in Alpen territory. The storm faded with squalls and spits. Rain dissolved into a crisp blue mist. Downed logs turned into emerald shrines, covered in moss and guarded by tiny white mushrooms.

Late-flowering rhododendrons dripped crimson against the green. Gurgling streams rushed over whitened rocks, carrying rain-battered autumn leaves—tiny yellow boats swirling along. I thought of Burn, how he’d love chasing through this forest, kinder than the one surrounding Sutter, although he could barely move. I wanted to believe it was possible.

The sun was breaking through the gray; it offered little warmth, and after a time, we approached an aging cabin set in the middle of an overgrown field, a larger cabin than those I’d seen in Sutter, and not as rustic.

I stared, envious, at the stone chimney. Boards were nailed haphazardly over the windows. Dried grass edged the steps leading to a covered porch, wide enough for two chairs. I tried

to imagine Grayson's mother sitting there, with the steps swept clean, flowers in the cracked pots near the porch railing. She'd be watching her little boy play. His father would be working the field or off hunting. And Grayson—oh, the adventures he'd be having, chasing the enemy, waving his pretend sword through the air.

Had they been warned, that day—his parents? Did they see the attack coming?

Had Grayson's mother pushed him into the house, told him to hide? While his father came running?

Had the enemy charged across the field—where we'd just walked?

When the alpha found him—had he been sitting beside his dead parents in the spot where we now stood?

The imagery was so clear I wasn't sure if my *faillie* senses were kicking in, or if the story came from my imagination. After so many illusions that day, I couldn't tell them apart.

But the porch groaned beneath our feet and at least that sound was real.

Grayson put his shoulder to the warped door and shoved inward. The screech of tortured wood ended in silence—a silence prolonged as he stood with his palm pressed against the door frame. But he didn't cross the threshold.

I studied his face, wondering if he allowed others to see what I was seeing. If he even knew he had the look of a man lost and distant.

I put my hand on his back, rubbed circles the way he'd always comforted me. His chest lifted. Iron muscles flexed beneath my palm. I offered silence. Allowed him to work through what he needed while I stared at the starkness darkening his expression.

The desire to protect him was so unexpected that I rocked back, wanting to take him anywhere else, other than here—a complete reversal of my earlier impulse.

And foolish or not, reckless or damning, I didn't care about what the witches said, if it was false or true. I could never abandon him, watch while he battled alone, whether against an enemy or his emotions.

I could not.

Maybe that was my ultimate weakness. Why the witches were almost right about one thing. This man destroyed me with his palm pressed against an old wooden door, splintered and rain-swollen, while his head remained unbowed and my fingers on his back kept us tethered.

Grayson rolled his shoulders, sleek, shedding the tension, and just like that, he stepped back into control.

"It was a year after Keelan Ross adopted Mace into the pack," he said. "Mace still fought it, settling in. He would disappear, and the alpha asked me to track him. See where he went. So I tracked him all the way... here."

I glanced around at the isolation. Grayson's old home was the only visible building. Nothing in the distance. "How did he know to come here?"

"Fallon probably told him. She was always trying to connect. She'd pester Mace with our stories so he wouldn't feel left out. But I never told him about this place. It was my secret. My private business. That's what I told the alpha when he ordered me to track Mace. That I'd be poking into Mace's private business. And the alpha told me prying wasn't always a bad thing."

Grayson's mouth twisted. "He said we were alike, Mace and I, both of us wounded. But we could heal each other if we tried."

I brushed my fingers down his arm. "What was Mace doing when you found him?"

"Nailing a board back in place—this board." Grayson slapped his palm against the splintered wood, half-nailed and crooked, hanging beside the door.

"He was trying to fix things, but I beat the crap out of him for it—and he beat the crap out of me in return. Neither of us

would give up. Kept slugging, breathing hard, slug again, stumble. Finally, I caught him off balance, and he dragged me with him when he went down. We were both out there in the dirt.”

Grayson gestured to a space now overgrown with twiggy weeds. “Just laid there breathing hard, staring at the sky and blinking tears away. I asked him why. He said because he’d never had a home. Wanted to see what mine was like. Then he said it seemed wrong to leave it all torn up when maybe he could fix it. That led to a lot of talking. We were up here a few days, dragging wood, bending nails. Mace finally got around to talking about himself. Told me his father drank a lot, and one day, when Mace was six, his father got mad about something and locked him in a closet with rats. He still has the scars on his hands. He said he’d heard about me, guarding my dead parents, and he...”

Grayson shifted his weight while I struggled to breathe.

“He said he wished he’d had courage, like me. And I told him my mother shoved me into the house, locked the door and told me not to look. But I looked, and I pissed my pants. Cried for two hours, hiding under the bed, too scared to unlock the door, go for help. I had a stick in my hand because I couldn’t make myself let it go, and when I was sitting beside my parents, it wasn’t because I was guarding them. I was afraid to be by myself. But when the alpha came and found me, I let him think what he did because I was ashamed. And in all the years, I never changed the story.”

After a long moment, Grayson turned his head and held my gaze. “Mace is the only one who knows that about me.”

And now I knew. “You were a little boy.”

“I was a wolf.”

Silently, I vowed to keep the secret the way Mace had done on the Night of the Beacons, when he’d told me about Grayson guarding his parents and believing in hope.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

His smile was sad. “I wanted you to see me, Noa. To know what’s real.”

“This.” I traced my fingers across his forehead, over his temple to the damp of his hair. “This is real.”

Grayson froze, too quiet, and then pushed the door open until it was wide enough for us to enter. I expected dust and cobwebs, but the floor was spotless. Wood waited in the fireplace. Light fell through the windows, and I realized the boarded-up window frames were only on the front and designed to make the cabin look abandoned.

I was afraid to enter with my wet clothes and mud-stuck hair, but Grayson didn’t hesitate, and so neither did I.

“After we’d talked,” he continued, “I told Mace trying to fix this place was like trying to hide the shame. And he told me every wound needs a scab before it can heal. Something tough to cover the tender until it’s strong again. So we stayed up here until Fallon came. She picked up a hammer and said we were hogging all the fun. When Keelan found us, he was grinning. Said he’d sent a bunch of misfits poking into people’s business and found himself a team. And that’s what we are. I love them like family—Mace and Fallon. I’d do anything for them, and they’d do the same for me.”

He stood in the kitchen, checking cupboards with the neatly stacked dishes. After a spurt and rattle of pipes, water swooshed into the sink.

“Do you still come here?” I asked, sliding my palm over a round table that made me think of family meals and laughter.

“Every so often, just to check up on things. Make sure the roof doesn’t leak. I don’t stay. Fee drops in from time to time, but ever since he tried to cook, the stove won’t light. I think he scrambled the burners.”

Fee. The Green Man. The King of the Forest.

I looked at the glass hurricane lamps on shelves. A set of overstuffed chairs. A hall that, when I peeked in, revealed open doors. Bedrooms. Two. A third door was closed, and I wandered back toward the cold fireplace. The space wasn’t a

shrine to loss, as I'd first expected. But shadows lurked in the corners. Echoes of time and lost dreams. A reminder that everything heals but does not always end up the same.

I was the intruder who'd wandered from a public space into something too private to be disturbed, but fortunately, Grayson's thoughts had drifted. He stared at what I didn't see, and I took advantage of his distraction, admired him from a distance—at least, the distance of a single room.

He wore his usual black, and I studied the width of his shoulders. His stomach was washboard hard, his hips slim. The veins in his forearms led to powerful wrists and sensitive hands.

I'd first felt the physical impact months ago, when he stood in front of a glowing fire, nude and uncaring if I watched. That night, I'd had no mind of my own beyond what I imagined—his taste, the lift of his muscles, the hard thrust of his body.

I'd known those things would become a drug to me if I ever indulged. A hunger I'd have for the rest of my life. For this man and no other.

And once again, I was watching.

Although not nude, his effect on me was the same. He walked to the waiting fireplace. Bent to check the wood stacked on a black grate, reaching in to resettle the logs—such a mundane action. People did it every day. But Grayson moved with the easy mastery that infused everything he did.

When he rose from the crouch, the black jeans caressed his firm buttocks, the strength in his legs, and although the movement to stand was ordinary, it was also profoundly erotic.

The storm outside had cleared. Looking through the kitchen window, I could see the setting sun, spreading a golden, sparkling light over the trees. The ground faded into bruised, silent shadows. But in the quiet, I had the unmistakable sense that something waited impatiently.

And what waited alarmed me.

I glanced around. "We don't need to stay here tonight."

Grayson studied my face while my heart hammered.

“We have to stay here,” he said. “Because what I have to say to you has to be said here. This is where it started for me, Noa. Out there, in the yard, the day shadows killed my parents. When I was old enough, I went to see the Gemini Witches. I asked them why my parents died. The witches told me the shadows were creatures sent to kill me. I should have died too, but the King of the Forest protected me because my fate was to pay for the ancient sins of the kings. They said that if I wasn’t careful, everyone I loved would die trying to protect me.”

My legs trembled, and I knew I should walk away before he said more. Not let him inalterably change my life.

But I stood... still.

“Before Keenan died.” Grayson’s tone steadied. “He shared a secret each alpha must share with his successor. Two initials have been passed down alpha to alpha, for generations. One is **A**. The other is **N**. There’s more. When she comes, the wheel starts to turn. And when she returns, fate is sealed. I didn’t want to believe it. Then Fee found me. He said there would be two. One to kill. One to die for. That I’d face darkness before the clouds cleared and I could not change the path.”

His gaze glittered with both green and blue, and having him look at me like that was a fist to the heart.

“I’ve shared none of this with Mace or Fallon. I know they’ll try to protect me even more than they do, and I won’t risk them for my sake.”

“Grayson...”

He shook his head, continuing to speak while time slowed. “So when you asked if I believed in fate, the answer is yes. I have to believe. Now I’m asking the same of you. Do you believe in fate, Noa? And given what I’ve just told you, be very careful about the next words out of your mouth.”

I rubbed at my chest, feeling the ache there first.

“My mother warned me years ago. No matter how seductive or inevitable I thought it was, I should not believe in fate.

What I believe is that we have free will. The sins of the past or some magic vengeance cannot trap us. But if Fate exists, then she has a sick sense of humor.”

Thunder thrummed through my ears, although it was only my heart, racing.

“The witches told me things, too. When I asked about another *faille*, they said one was close, but they wouldn’t tell me where because I’d asked the wrong question. When I asked about the right question, they gave me several. Why did you stand in my way? Why did you want the book? They said a spell had been cast on that book. It was against the kings, and you couldn’t read it. That I shouldn’t let it fall into your hands or read it for you.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“They said you would use me. Destroy me. That you hid things from me, and I should leave before you demanded my sigil. Forced me to protect you.”

“Maybe you should believe them,” he said hoarsely.

I shook my head. “I didn’t believe, so they projected the proof on the wall. Made me watch a battle. I was standing at the top of a blackened hill. The sky was clear and blue, and a dread lord was leading the charge. I heard the screams as the lines clashed. They were overrun by creatures like those I saw in the meadow, and some I hope never to see again. But *failles* were at the front lines. Their hands were outstretched. They syphoned energy until it ruined them. Killed them. Too many were left in the blood and gore, broken. Used as weapons by the dread lords and discarded. Abandoned while they died. The witches said you’d do the same. Force me to syphon until I broke. That was what all dread lords did.”

He drew in a shuddering breath, and I wondered if he was thinking about what he’d asked of me, to protect Sutter, and if he was—I was watching a man slowly break.

“Then they gave me a prophecy.” My voice had grown as choked as his. “They said you had to protect me, but I was still

free. They said you would battle alone. You would die, and I—I would do nothing to help you.”

Light shattered through a hanging window prism, spearing through the room as if the sun was throwing knives.

“Now you ask me if I believe, when we both know the truth about the secrets passed from alpha to alpha. The **A** meant Andrea—my mother. The **N** means Noa. And your pack has been warning alphas for generations. Warning them for when we appear.”

“You don’t know that,” he argued roughly. “Those initials could mean anyone.”

I tipped my head back, laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. “When I came, you gave me your sigil, and the wheel began to turn—don’t shake your head. Caerwen told me,” I hissed. “When I returned from Aine’s wrinkle, our fate was sealed. One to kill, Grayson. One to die for. Don’t stand there telling me you don’t believe that... is... us. That I’ll kill you by doing nothing. And you’ll die, fighting to protect me.”

The flash of his alpha canines came and went before I’d taken a breath. But in this house, where boards had been pounded to cover the tender places—I had to rip the scab off.

Because fate truly had a sick sense of humor if she’d locked us together in a battle with a heart-destroying cost.

“How long has your rune been working?”

He stiffened, but the wariness I saw in his expression made me want to curl my hands.

“No more lies, Grayson. The rune twitched when you found me in the cave, and I know that wasn’t an illusion.”

“I realized it was working the night you tried to burn the forest down. I thought I’d never feel you like that again.”

“It’s a connection for you?”

“Yes.” His voice was low and calm now. “It’s my rune, Noa. There will always be a thread of my magic that I recognize.”

I didn't buy his explanation for an instant. "You knew the rune was working, but you still told me the Green Man changed the rules and you wouldn't ask him why. You sat across from me and lied. What didn't you want me to know? What secret have you been keeping all this time?"

I didn't expect an answer, but as I walked to the polished table where I'd imagined family dinners, traced a finger along the smooth edge... I had hoped he'd tell me the truth.

"The whole hearing my thoughts..." I turned, leaning against the table edge because I didn't trust my legs. "That wasn't because you're the alpha and I never learned to shield my thoughts from you, was it?"

"Noa..."

I held up a hand against him. "When I was in that illusion, when I thought vampires were making love to me, you were there, weren't you? In my head."

Telling me... Stop, Noa... Fight it...

Or had he been taking part in the seduction?

I'd sensed him there, recognized the hands that touched me differently. Reverently. *Regretfully*.

Then I remembered the whispered word... *sorry*. Thought about it.

His entire demeanor changed. A muscle jerked in his jaw. The skin around his eyes creased, and his deep inhale carried the struggle of forced control.

"I was there." The grittiness in his voice had to be anger because it couldn't be pain. "On my knees, screaming because I couldn't break the wards. Couldn't get through. I had to listen to every sound you made..."

He scrubbed both hands across his face. "I tried to help you the only way I could. Reach you... *the only way I could*. And maybe it was wrong, what I did. Maybe you hate me more than you hated the vampires. But I was on my knees for you. I was begging for you."

"I was destroying things," I said.

“Yes.”

“The wards?”

He nodded.

“That’s how you could get to me?”

He nodded again, slower this time.

I held his gaze. “Because of your dread lord sigil, the obligation to protect a *faille*. The king’s curse.” I moistened my lips. “Because of fate.”

“Yes.”

“What else do you believe in with fate?”

A start of surprise before his eyes narrowed. “What are you asking?”

“Do you believe in fated mates?”

Silence.

I walked to the fireplace, surged a thread of energy and waited while the flames whooshed around the stacked wood, licking at the bark, curling the paper stuffed at the bottom. Chasing the chill. Because, out of everything he’d told me, I could not forget the pure power radiating from him when he’d walked through the disintegrating cave. A parting of the seas, the dark retreating beneath the force of his light. Even the air had trembled.

And power like that worried me. Worried me enough to wonder about those wards he said he couldn’t break—and the possibility that he’d broken them easily, but hadn’t tried to save me.

Because, once he slid into the vampires’ seduction, into my illusion—he refused to back out. He’d craved it as deeply as I did, for the same reasons I did.

“Nothing to say?” I turned to face him. “No telling me how a bargain means only what two people want it to mean? And it ends when they want it to end?”

Grayson straightened. “What would you have me say?”

“Given all the prophecies and warnings being tossed around—if they’re true, all the dying and seeking vengeance, then we have a problem.”

His gaze burned through me. “What kind of problem?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I remembered what Fallon said, how fated mates heard each other when they were ready to hear.

Then I thought the words the way I’d always thought the insults I tossed his way.

“I can hear you in my head.”

CHAPTER 20



Noa

“I WAS WRONG,” GRAYSON said, his tone unbalanced, as if I’d just suggested something disastrous. “We can’t have this conversation here.”

He waved a hand toward the fire I’d started; the flames died in a symbolic act that crushed me. The fire was a part of me, my energy, what he controlled with such ease. Blinking out like nothing. In this house of memories—his memories, not mine. And for a moment, all I could think about was the grief and horror, then the love, contentment—two emotions I’d spent my entire life waiting to feel.

But what if I’d only imagined the sound of his voice? What if his ability to hear me was exactly what he’d always said it was—his alpha ability, enhanced by being a dread lord. Making me an open book to him because I’d never learned to shield my thoughts.

What if the fumes pumping from that vent fueled the odd tapping in my mind? The way they’d fueled the illusion I’d willingly lost myself in—the sensation that he’d been there, not the vampires, touching me? Seducing me?

Had I jumped to the wrong conclusion, one he obviously didn’t want?

Had I thought it was everything, when it was nothing but a witch's hateful retribution, and then made a fool of myself?

The heat drained from my face, and I wondered how hard Fate was laughing right now.

I wanted to scream at him, launch toward him. This was his gods-damned fate, and he'd dragged me into it. Told me a bargain was what we said it was. Let me hope...

I grew dizzy, forced myself to take a step back, but there was a scuff of boots, the scrape of a chair as he moved it aside. Grayson was walking toward me, his hand reaching for my arm. My eyes were on his fingers as he gripped my wrist.

I recognized the wicked little twitch I'd always felt from his sigil, but it was nothing—nothing compared to the firebrand now burning on my wrist.

The eroticism that wrapped around me like silk at midnight, the caress of dawn.

Grayson tugged, and I followed.

He led me down the hall, and the last, closed door opened at our approach, revealing a large and somewhat old-fashioned bathroom. Checkered tiles covered the floor. A clawfoot bathtub sat against the wall; the handheld shower mount dripped water as if someone had recently been there.

A blue-and-white striped bathrobe hung on a hook; on the lapel, the letter **F** had been embroidered in a loopy blue script. Brown slippers were on the floor, the furry kind a child might wear. They resembled a bear with a flopping mouth and fuzzy ears, although the size was certainly not child-like. The bathroom air was moist, warm, with the lingering, citrusy scent of soap—which made me think of bubbles for some ridiculous reason. Then I looked at the wooden staff resting in a corner; leaves, acorns, and twisting branches were carved into the wood.

Grayson kept his hold on my wrist, but he glanced over his shoulder and said, "Fee."

"He was here?"

“He likes my soap.”

Before I could say more, Grayson pulled me past towels on a shelf, and a step beyond, I recognized the eager brush of magic an instant before we crossed a hidden threshold and entered another reality.

I laughed. “Hello, magic. Know any good jokes?”

Grayson’s eyebrow arched. “You’re friends enough for conversations?”

“And then some.” I turned giddy and jumpy at the same time. This was the joyful puppy energy from Aine’s wrinkle, although I supposed it was more than that and not limited to one location.

Grayson swung around and I straightened at the gleam in his eyes.

“You’re jealous?” I was curious about that side of him. “It’s only magic.”

And not a man. Not like him.

“I’m...” A flash of alpha canines. “Jealous.”

Two perilous words separated by masculine desire. I stepped back, but he was right there with me, closing in with a firestorm in his eyes.

“Why?” I asked, with no thought of self-preservation.

His fingers constricted around my wrist. Pleasure raced across my skin. Anticipation surged out of nowhere. Memories flooded my senses, of clothes dragged from my body, fingers tracing and probing. Dancing with a man’s hands on my hips as he moved my body.

Being lowered to the sand...

And Grayson... he remembered what I remembered. He cupped my hip with his free hand, tightened his grip around my wrist. The flex of his fingers was slow, deliberate, until the pressure became familiar. I recognized the dominance. His fingers pressed, and I stopped doubting that he’d been in that cave with me, invading the illusion. He’d listened to the

hedonistic sounds I'd made. He'd been there when I opened myself to every touch, stroke, bruising pulse of need. When I became wet and eager while he'd been on his knees, screaming.

More than once, I'd lain in my bed at night and remembered the Night of the Beacons. The way he'd touched me. I'd tried imagining him with other women and found it too painful. Still, I wondered what kind of lover he would be. If he'd take a woman gently.

Now I knew. He was the Alpha of Sentinel Falls. A Dread Lord. Grayson Devante would not touch his lover gently unless he was sated and she needed soothing.

But first... first, he would claim her with decadent ferocity. Mark her with passion until she trembled. He would bend her to his will, position her body, seduce her with commands and praise while his hands, his tongue, his cock brought pleasure until she cried out with her body arched and trembling. Then he would turn her over, tell her to grip whatever bed or table or counter and thrust into her from behind, hitting deeper, finding the overly sensitized spots that would have her moaning and pushing her hips back against his...

Sexual heat flared beneath my skin, tightening my nipples, sensitizing my breasts until they were heavy and aching for the touch of his hand. The cleft between my thighs pulsed and moistened. I caught my scent rising in the air, and a soft sob slipped from between my lips.

Grayson grasped my face with both hands.

"Never," he said between his clenched teeth. "Never be ashamed of your body. You're beautiful, every scent, every sound. You tear me apart whenever I'm close to you."

His face was flushed now. My fingers curled in his shirt, my thumbs brushing restlessly. His head tipped. The glitter in his eyes was sunlight on pure, depthless water, while his breath grazed my skin with the seductive warmth of a breeze.

I leaned into him. He pressed his forehead against mine. His shoulders lifted, tense. The tips of his fingers burrowed

between the muddy strands of my hair, and seconds later, the braid was loosened. Then the bands holding his control broke.

The darkly male sound he made was unyielding, primal as his mouth crushed mine. His tongue stroked the seam of my lips, thrusting in, pulling back. Devouring like a man starved and unable to stop himself.

The sensations were intoxicating. I could have stood there for the rest of my life, kissing him, tasting him. His head lifted. In the shadowed light, only emerald shards shimmered in his eyes, and I understood this was a private moment between us. No blue of his wolf. As sadly ignorant as I was about wolves... I'd wondered about that. But in this, we were alone, and I cupped his face. Let my fingers trace over his skin, the straight ridge of his nose, the curve of cheekbone. The chiseled jaw with the hint of an afternoon stubble, an erotic abrasion against my palms.

Then it was his turn. His thumbs slid to the corners of my mouth, where he stroked as if readying me for what was to come.

I couldn't move. The raw sexuality in his touch stopped the air from leaving my lungs. I felt naked, vulnerable. Battered by the heat of his body, so close to mine. I lost all sense of composure. Tension crackled between us like the sheet lightning we'd left behind in Alpen, leaving an afterimage of him. I blinked, unsure if he was there, or if all of this was an illusion.

Real, Noa.

His mental voice was a sensual stroke. My fingers curled around his arms, responding to the bunch and flex of his biceps. I'd never touched a man as physical as he was, fit and toned with iron strength. Closing my eyes, I traced my fingertips down his arms, wanting to explore through touch alone. Wanting the heightened awareness.

Each sensation formed images in my mind—the beauty I once appreciated and understood when I'd been the girl in the forest. The girl who admired the black-and-white photographs of Edward Weston. Hard against soft. Smooth against ridged.

Breathtaking art filled with sexuality that bordered on marbled hedonism.

Grayson was the living embodiment, and I would always remember him this way. A photograph of perfection locked in my mind.

He pulled away first, breaking the spell. Perhaps he'd been as aroused as I'd been with those images in my mind. But we had words to say, and I wondered where we would say them.

We were in another house. Glancing around, I could see how this space reflected Grayson's essence, his need for privacy. This was a place where he found solace in isolation. Soothingly warm grays covered the walls—the colors of the dawn sky. Woven rugs were scattered across the dark wood floors. I dragged my fingertips over the curve of a couch upholstered in a cognac-colored leather. Books were everywhere. On shelves, stacked on the floors and tables. A fireplace waited expectantly.

Windows looked out on the forest; I wondered if the view was genuine, or if we were in another wrinkle where the trees were almost real. Perhaps this was a hidden space, what Azul had once been, and I asked him.

“More like Aine's wrinkle,” Grayson said. “As a kid, I'd run away from all the mothers, come up here for a day or two. It was after Mace and Fallon helped me fix things, but I still couldn't force myself to sleep inside, and when Fee found out, he came, offered to create a secret space where I'd be out of the weather if I let him come and go as he pleased. I thought he was crazy. But he had this—” The expression on Grayson's face was so puzzled, I smiled. “He loves that bathroom. He loves puttering around in the kitchen. Banging the cupboards. And Aine can't find him here.”

I laughed then. “The nymphs don't know about this place?”

“They know there's an old house in a field. They don't know about the wrinkle.”

I looked around at what Fee had created. “Is this part of your club house with Mace and Fallon? Or another secret

sanctum?”

“Sanctum,” Grayson said. “They come to the house, but the bathroom is just a bathroom when they’re here.”

A secret, then, making this the second secret space he’d shared with me. Layers of his life that he offered, pieces I could hold safely for him.

Like the other secret he’d shared only with Mace. How he’d been afraid. And more secrets—the prophecies that warned of those who were dearest to him, dying to protect him.

I wandered closer to the windows, where I could see his reflection in the glass. “Was Fee in charge of the design, or were you?”

“He started out offering me a tent with a lantern I could light. Flashlights to read by. I thought it was cool, so I agreed. Over the months and years, the tent turned into a house, and I started to sleep here for more than a night. I’ve changed things over the years.”

“But this is you?”

“Essentially. There’s more comfort than in the other secret places.”

“Do you cook?” I asked, eyeing the modern kitchen with marble counters, sleek cupboards, and appliances—a stove so massive it was guaranteed to light.

“Will you laugh if I say yes?”

“Probably.” My lips twitched even while I battled against an image of him, standing in front of the stove in jeans but no shirt. Barefoot, with his skin darkly bronzed in the sunlight streaming through a window. “What’s your specialty?”

“Pizza,” he said, daring me to argue. But we’d danced around the conversation we needed to have for long enough, and I hugged my waist. Bent my head until my hair fanned in a curtain.

Grayson solved the quandary by speaking first. “When did you first hear me?”

“I don’t know, Grayson. When did your wolf first tell you there was a mating bond?”

I sounded testy. My fingers raked up and down my upper arms.

He tipped his head. “You’re angry.”

Add in jittery, sexually aroused, and when I laughed, I choked on the sound. Where to start, when there were so many questions? I finally settled on a simple one.

“How did this happen? Fallon said the wolf knew first, but I have no wolf, so a mating bond ought to be impossible.”

“There are no rules, Noa,” he said. “Half the pack doesn’t believe in fated anything. And the wolf isn’t always the first to know.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Fallon suspects. Maybe Laura. She’s always been perceptive.”

Which explained their reactions. Laura, wanting someone special but not wanting to be lonely... like me. Fallon’s idea of romance made more sense now, how she’d talked about fated mates, and being ready to hear each other.

Silvered hair clung to my cheek, and I brushed the strands behind my ear. There was another question... how long he had known and kept it secret?

“When did you know?” I asked.

“The moment you rolled in the mud.” His mouth twitched. “The night you saved Levi. You glared at my wolf like you’d willingly tear his throat out. I refused to believe it—what I felt. As if something clicked into place.”

That didn’t seem right. And yet it did in an unnerving way, because he’d been so aggressive toward me. He’d said protection was an obligation and perhaps I should have learned more about wolves. How I was shooting dinner if I wanted to eat. Then he’d left me at the river, with nymphs he claimed he didn’t know about.

I'd thought he was testing me, to see if I was worthy enough to be allowed near his precious pack, and I asked, almost too tightly, "How long did you deny it?"

His eyes narrowed. "Do you need to know this now, Noa?"

"Yes." Wanting more information was not a surrender. I needed details to force this into reality, and maybe I wanted to deny Fate her chance to gloat.

We stood on opposite sides of the room, combatants again. His arms were crossed. So were mine, and when Grayson's jaw flexed, my spine tightened.

"When, Grayson?" My voice shook. My hands, my entire body. I was as fragile as glass and close to breaking.

"When you stood in Leo's ruined house," he said. "When you stepped in front of Levi's vomit to protect him from me. I was angry. When you cried over the rabbit, I hated your tears."

I flinched at the way his mouth thinned.

"The night you nearly died of worm poison and I had to hurt you to save you—I hated myself for doing it. When you talked to my wolf, touched him—I was furious, but he became your ally. When I could hear you screaming in a nightmare even though I was more than a mile away..."

He breathed.

"When you found the hidden passage and I thought I'd never heard a laugh as beautiful as yours. When all I wanted was to hear that laugh again. There were so many times, Noa... when you ran through carnage because you trusted my wolf. When you called me bastard with that light in your eyes."

His voice was deep, the kind of deep I wanted when the lights were low and a fire burned in the fireplace.

"When you stood up to Metis, you scared the shit out of me. Anyone else would have broken beneath her power, but you... gods, Noa, you grew stronger, and it terrified her. A godsdamn oceanid. And each time I felt you, needed you, listened

to you, I told myself it wasn't possible. There had to be some other explanation, something I could control."

"You knew what we were when you inked the runes."

"I... denied it."

"And the Night of the Beacons?"

"You walked toward me, and when you smiled, my heart stopped. You leaned against me with your hand on my waist, and I couldn't breathe. When I put those diamonds around your throat, I knew. When you finally dropped that *liar-liar* chant and I burned with your terror, I... knew."

He twisted away, raked a hand through his hair. "I wanted to kill Mosbach for what he did. When you offered to protect me, I should have explained. But I was afraid if I told you, it would be too much and you'd leave. You'd never heard of a mating bond. This shit-show between the kings and queens was something you read in the history books. I couldn't—I thought I had time."

When he turned to face me, his expression was bleak. "Then the Gathering happened. Azul happened, and when I pulled you from that pig, I could hear the terror ripping your mind to shreds... and every gods-fucking-thing about the ones I loved dying because of me slammed into reality. I couldn't protect you when I was the threat."

His voice grated as he pushed unsteady hands through his hair. "The night of the rite, watching you honor Halwyn, your strength and courage with each arrow you shot, even when your heart was breaking—you hollowed me out. I couldn't deny you were my mate, and when you walked away, I felt every step you took like stones on my heart."

My fingers dug into my waist as I hugged myself tighter. "You let me go."

"I wanted you to stay away," he gritted. "Have a happy life far away from me. I still want that."

Nerves undid me and I demanded, "So what now, since I'm back? Do we go to Priest River and get new tattoos?"

Anger flared in his eyes. “Don’t demean yourself.”

The blood rushed into my face, but I needed antagonism between us to balance what he’d said. “Does a mating bond mean you love me? Or just lust after me?”

His canines punched down. “Did you feel me in that damn witch cave? While you were deep in that illusion? Because I was there. Holding you. Trying to reach you. Making godsdamned love to you while you thought I was someone else.”

I shuddered. Emotions rolled from him and through me. Wonder and longing. Passion and fury.

The confession trembled from my lips. “I have... ached for you. Been afraid for you. Confused by you.”

He was across the room in an instant. His arms closed around me while I battled against the exhaustion that stripped my ability to think.

“You need rest.” He pressed his lips against the side of my head, his hands stroking my back before he led me to a bedroom, where white linen covered a bed, and a thick comforter in chocolate-brown offered warmth. But Grayson steered me into a bathroom, and I cried when I saw the steaming tub with floating flower petals, exactly the way the magic had prepared my bath in Aine’s wrinkle.

“Take as much time as you need,” Grayson said, then left me alone.

I was grateful. My emotions were raw enough to bleed. The water was hot enough to make me gasp when I first stepped in, but by the time I lowered myself, the water had adjusted in temperature.

With a sigh, I gripped both edges of the tub and leaned back. Closed my eyes and let the warmth seep into my muscles while the petals floated. The soft, floral scents intensified in the steamy air. Time passed, but the water remained warm and I only realized how I’d fallen asleep when Grayson lifted me from the water.

The brush of his magic was a cocoon. He wrapped me in a towel and carried me to the bedroom. My skin, my hair dried

before he helped me into a pair of silk boy shorts, then tugged one of his reeking shirts over my head. I slid toward sleep when he put me in bed, tucked the comforter up around my shoulders, and silently left the room.

But he still hadn't answered the one question that mattered most.

Did he love me?

Or was it lust?

CHAPTER 21



Noa

WHEN I WOKE, THE light through the windows had softened into lavender and meant I'd slept for hours. The bed Grayson put me in was his. The sheets carried his scent, and for a moment, I imagined him there, sprawled across his half of the mattress, the sheet thrown back and tangled between his legs. I wondered what he looked like, relaxed in sleep. The bronzed skin against white sheets. The hardened muscles sleek in repose.

If we'd had normal lives, would this be our reality? Would I wake to the comfort of his body, pressed close to mine? Would his hair be tousled because I'd clenched my fingers in the strands when we'd made love?

More questions followed... would I wake without the sense of borrowed time? A wheel already turning toward an unknown end?

I pushed upright. In the pastel light, I could see my backpack. As I dressed, I glanced around, searching for signs of him. Clues to who he was when he was here.

A collection of acorns filled a glass jar. Beside the jar was a palm-sized, shiny black stone. Obsidian, heavier than I expected when I picked it up. The irregular, knapped edges

were razor thin—the sharpest material known that could be carved into a blade. Obsidian was sacred to wolves, the blending of two opposing forces, molten glass forming into hard stone. The wolf... fiery, emotional. And the man, hardened, protective. Deadly.

The warmth of his energy drew me through the mellow house, then through the open French doors. Outside, pink-tinged clouds formed ribs against a sky that had not fully darkened. I was barefoot, wearing jeans with his reeking shirt. My hair was loose and probably still tangled.

Grayson stood on the patio with his back to me. He also wore jeans but nothing else, and I allowed myself the small luxury of studying his back, the muscles that bunched. The black wolf tattoo, what I could see of it, seemed muted. As if the wolf it represented had retreated to some quiet corner of his own.

“Do you like pepperoni?”

Somehow, he'd known I was there, and I wandered closer to see what he was doing—cooking. Actually, what he was doing was spooning sauce on pizza dough, arranging a variety of ingredients: olives, onions, crumbled sausage, green slices of bell pepper and thin, round slivers of tomato. I stared at the way his hands moved as he handled a knife, unable to look away. How he wiped his fingers on a white towel that he tossed aside.

“What is this?” I teased. “No pizza out of a box?”

His eyebrow arched while humor sparkled in his eyes. “You doubt?”

“No.” I laughed. “I'm impressed.”

Stepping closer to the outdoor kitchen island, I studied his handiwork. “Any extra olives?”

“Here.” He picked one up, held it a fraction from my lips. “Open.”

“Feeding me n—”

Grayson pressed the olive against my open lips, holding it until I bit down. The olive juice tickled my tongue, igniting my hunger, and the soft humming noise I made kept his gaze locked on mine for a beat too long. Was this how we were now? Did the mate bond snap into place that fast? Hours instead of days like normal relationships?

His smile was easy and revealed his charisma, while the relaxed, boyish humor only emphasized how harshly he controlled himself around others. The image he presented was of a man too powerful to fail, but what I saw was a man caught up in fate. A man who could soon be destroyed by it, because of me.

We'd become a beautiful and broken destruction—if his craving for me was as strong as mine was for him.

He brushed at the hair drifting across my forehead, then turned away to finish his pizza creation. I stood mute, watching as he slid the thick dough, cheese, and sauce onto a wooden paddle, then into the personal, wood-fired pizza oven, an oriental ceramic design that reminded me of an open-mouthed fish, sitting on its own counter.

“A pizza oven is the last thing I expected to see,” I said.

“Fee’s idea. He likes all the newest gadgets, wanders through shopping malls for days on end. The human world fascinates him. I don’t know how he does it, but things show up unexpectedly.”

I had a hard time picturing Fee in my mind. To me, he’d first appeared as a face in the ivy-covered trees, the Green Man, a garden ornament who yanked me through a magic barrier. Aine’s version was a man who became distracted, forgetting where he was. Fee’s magic made me wonder if Metis was correct, and Fee was as batty as Aine. Then, this new version of him I couldn’t wrap my mind around. The King of the Forest, enjoying Grayson’s soap, wearing bear slippers. Needing a hideout from Aine. The delightfully carved staff had looked like something out of a fantasy movie. And now... gadgets.

“One year,” Grayson said, “Fee got into the Christmas spirit. He rented a Santa suit and when to a shopping mall, sat himself down in an enormous chair and nearly caused a riot by giving away game consoles. Security intervened. He couldn’t prove he’d paid for everything, although no stores reported a loss of inventory. They’d only lost sales, which mattered to them but not to Fee, so he showered dollar bills all over the place to cover his escape.”

I giggled.

Grayson pointed to a silvered tub of crushed ice. “Open a beer for me, would you?”

“One fated mate bond, and now I’m the maid?” Teasing him brought a rush of intimate pleasure. He was cooking, and it made sense for me to contribute. But when I plucked a bottle from the ice, I realized it was the same beer Fee had given me months ago, in Leo’s vet clinic. When we’d put on a show for my stepfather.

I remembered the weight of Grayson’s arm around my waist, his fingers brushing beneath my breast, and I deliberately sampled the beer before handing it to him.

“I’m still struggling with this house,” I said, licking the alcohol from my lips.

“Don’t try to understand Fee’s magic in human terms.” Grayson held the bottle to his mouth, swallowed, while I stared at the powerful movement of his throat. “If he decides to protect you, things appear when you need them.”

In human terms, Fee’s magic was like walking from one room to another—from the old house belonging to Grayson’s parents, and into a new house without the memories. There was more to it, though. Something precious that I already treasured.

“This wrinkle is private,” Grayson said. “Only you, me, and Felix know it’s here. No one else senses the magic. When I meet with other pack members, or Fallon and Mace, I do it in my parents’ old house. No one questions it if I stay for a few days. They allow me the privacy.”

He bent to the pizza oven to check the progress, his back moving sleekly.

“You can stay here as long as you want,” he added.

“Hide here?” I thought of another wrinkle where he’d wanted me to hide. To stay until life moved on. “Does time move the same way here as it did with Aine?”

“No. Fee knew I couldn’t function effectively if it did.” He straightened. “While you were sleeping, I contacted Mace. He’s looking into the girl Adriel talked about.”

The girl the vampires had taken. “We should talk about that,” I said. “And everything else that happened.”

“But first, we’ll eat.” No room for argument with that tone, although it wasn’t determined as much as it was disrupting. I moistened my lips. Grayson slid the bubbling pizza from the oven, deftly sliced, then held one piece as if he would feed me again.

“Open,” he said.

Anticipation zipped along my nerves.

“It’s too hot,” I protested.

“Is it?”

He slid the pizza tip into his mouth, bit down, and when he pulled the slice away, cheese oozed, stringing until it broke and stuck to his chin. Laughing, I wiped the cheese with my fingers. He caught my hand, pulled my fingers into his mouth. As his lips closed, the stroking of his tongue had me dragging in a breath.

“You’re still wearing my reeking shirt,” he murmured.

I pulled my hand free. “Do you want it back?”

And was that the mating bond kicking my ass? Opening my mouth, letting words tumble out without thought of the consequences?

He inhaled deeply, steadily, while his eyes glinted. “You’re not bound by it,” he said—because, of course, he’d been listening to every thought I had about the mate bond, knew the

insecurities that kept me on edge. “It’s up to you if you stay out here with me, or walk back into the house. But if you walk, Noa... I won’t follow you unless you ask.”

How easily he said that.

“Now that I know what’s going on,” I managed, “it’s pretty hard to ignore.”

As were the brutal muscles in his shoulders and chest. He was everything I was becoming, and I trembled at the images in my head, the erotic, dark things he wanted to do with me. To me. The things I wanted to do with him. To him.

But we were not safe people. Not anymore. Singularly, we were the shadow and the flame, but together, our fire might consume everything and everyone around us.

He was smart enough to know not every prophecy was true—but what had been shown to me did not come from witches, and doubt crept back into my mind. What purpose had been behind the illusions in that cave?

And how determined was fate to close the circle between Grayson and I?

“Maybe I’m not really there in your head,” he mocked. “And you only imagined a mate bond.”

His offered way out had me crossing my arms. “Convenient for you if I did.”

“No—very inconvenient for me. I’d rather think about it than talk about it. Harder to argue that way.”

One corner of his mouth curled up, arrogant, the damn alpha, and I thought my favorite word for him. “*Bastard.*”

“*So furious, Noa.*” His mental voice whispered warmly in my head. “*Afraid you’re in deeper than you thought?*”

“I’m not in anything,” I argued—out loud—without even realizing what that proved.

His snort of laughter rocked through me. “*Convince me.*”

“*Convince yourself.*” And maybe I shot the thought toward him because I wasn’t begging.

His answer came as swiftly. *“Take off my shirt.”*

My eyes widened. *“No chance in flaming bright hell.”*

“Now you are begging.”

“Get out of my head.”

“Get out of mine, Noa. Or else take off my shirt.” He took a step toward me. *“Let me see what I had to imagine in that cave. I want to see the pulse flutter in your throat when I touch you. Put my mouth on you.”*

He waited, the controlled predator, but the sensations rocking through me were undeniable—his knuckle, brushing against my breast. His fingers caressing my skin. How could an imagined touch be so devastating when it existed only in my mind?

“It’s simple enough to prove, Noa.” His mental voice caressed again. *“Take off my shirt. Let me see your body, watch the way your lips part as I look at you.”*

Did I dare? His jeans were low on his hips, the top silver button unfastened. I could see the deep grooves and the dark, masculine shadow dragging my gaze lower.

“We’re outside,” I managed.

“There’s no one here to see us.”

What he aroused was... breathtaking. Everything about him hinted at dominance and promised a sexual encounter that would remake me.

I stepped back from the wildness swirling between us.

“Noa.”

His voice startled me after our mental communications.

“Do you want me on my knees?”

The air shuddered in my lungs. This man... unyielding. The Alpha of Sentinel Falls. A dread lord... a man willing to go to his knees for me.

What we felt—how deeply we felt it—was a mystery to me. Was this nothing more than magic, driven to even a centuries-

old score? A sin for a sin?

And were we the sinners? Or the saviors?

How could it matter when both were the same?

But I knew with certainty that if we destroyed what we had because it was irrational, the regret would linger for a lifetime.

Grayson moved as if he would drop to his knees, and my voice turned ragged. "No. You kneel to no one."

"I would for you."

The sincerity in his voice burned me.

I went utterly mad, grasping the hem of his reeking shirt and pulling it over my head.

CHAPTER 22



Noa

“YOU ARE MY AIR,” Grayson said hoarsely. “I need you to breathe.”

We stood in the dimmed light in his bedroom because I’d taken his hand and led him here. For our first time, I wanted the secrecy of shadows and the shelter of a bed. If I was going to bare my soul to him, I would do it where he could only see hints of me. As if by obscuring what was fragile and inexperienced, he would not find me flawed.

The cool air pebbled my skin. I was hyper-aware. Jumpy, as if I couldn’t stand the constraints of my skin and jeans. He was the same. Light through the bedroom door rimmed his skin, turning him golden. His body was so close to mine I reveled in his heat. His delayed touch made me tremble, wonder if I’d know his sexual ferocity or leashed passion. A seduction driven by something outside of ourselves. All of this was too new. Too much like being swept up in an avalanche neither of us were strong enough to resist.

But when we came together, a wildness raged. We tore at what we had left of our clothes, breathing raggedly, battling with mouths, hands, tongues. He kissed ferociously, bruising my lips as I bruised his. His fingers twisted in my hair as mine gripped his inky strands. We shook and moved until he stood

before me, seducing my body while I watched and became mesmerized.

He touched with reverence, leaving a trail of torrid enticements. Need was suffocating. His refusal to satisfy me was a torment I didn't want to end. His hard fingers cupped my breasts, his thumbs brushing, rubbing against my aching nipples. I pressed my palms against his pecs, the small brown nubs that were masculine and primally beautiful.

I wanted to run my tongue over them, taste his skin, imagined myself doing so and relishing the shudder that quaked through him. His black lashes lowered. The darkening of his eyes held both promise and fury, and I realized he battled harder than I did in this war of conquest and resistance. This *fate*.

He brushed his knuckles, feather-light, across the tips of my nipples as he'd promised, and the ache had me leaning into him, needing his mouth on mine. Fighting back with the hard press of my lips and the thrusting of my tongue.

There were so many excuses to explain what we did. The aftermath of danger. The transitory nature of life.

We should not be together, not if the prophesies were true. But for her own reasons, Fate had bound us, and did so with a finality that left no other option.

I became weightless, terrified, as if we stood above the raging waterfall and stepped off the rim together. Falling through the mists. Trusting... not trusting... but oh, gods, the *wanting*.

When I looked into the dark, fathomless green of his eyes, I understood. He was equally aware. Turning my face upward, I whimpered as his talented fingers worked their magic. Pleasure skimmed across my skin, coming close to unbearable. I shuddered, rose to my toes. Hissing in a breath. Could I stand more, even when I wanted more? Would I combust beneath the heat, the throbbing, begging need to be soothed?

His hands slid to my throat, his fingers caressing. The roughness of calloused thumbs brushed across my cheeks as

his mouth claimed mine. I was his. He owned me. With each plunge of his tongue, I battled back, tasting him, feasting off the mingled memories and moments.

I licked at the spice of pizza, the whisper of beer. The entirely male taste of his mouth. My tongue flicked over his canines, and he jolted.

“Noa.” His voice throbbed with a charring desire. He was breathing hard, but so was I when he pulled away.

I wanted to climb up his body. My arms wrapped around his shoulders, delirious and uncaring. I still wore emerald green boy shorts because, in our impatience, he’d left them on, more fascinated by dragging the jeans down my legs and exposing inches of my skin that he nuzzled and grazed with his teeth. But now his hands trailed up my thighs in a kneading, flexing seduction, his thumbs finding the cleft already wet.

I hissed in another breath as he traced my swollen clit. My hips jerked at the delicious savagery while my body readied itself for him, growing heavy, opening... quivering when he refused to give me relief.

Tears burned because what bubbled to the surface was more than obsession or lust. I’d been loyal to everyone I’d ever loved. I would do and did everything for them. But for him... for this man, I would risk anything. Do anything. Walk through fire to protect him. Pay any cost.

Give him my sigil if he asked.

“No.” His voice was like stone, aggressive. My arms felt bruised beneath his grip. “Not tonight. Not ever, Noa. I’ll never ask you for your promise.”

His eyes burned with fury, and I knew what we had was a *destin noir*, a black fate. One where we took and used, but never closed the circle, making the two halves whole.

Our fate would never be fully sealed. He might want me, but he would never demand my sigil. Never bind me. Destroy me the way the dread lords of old had destroyed.

Even if I begged, he would not ask for that commitment.

But a ruthlessness emerged between us now. A volcanic fervor. He carried me to his bed, held me down with a feverish rage because he needed me. Craved me. As I needed and craved him.

This fated damn mate bond—knowing I would willingly destroy myself just to be in his arms. Was it any wonder the women refused to believe? To risk everything of who they were, for something messy and heartbreaking and totally soul shattering? Knowing this could end with a prophecy and a grave?

But he was worth dying for. Killing for, if he asked. And it was terrifying to realize how thoroughly I believed in that conviction.

I turned ravenous. I was mad. I wanted to touch him. Dominate him. Arouse him in this war we fought. My fingers raked across the ridged muscles of his abdomen while my tongue and lips teased across his skin. His scent carried hints of the soap he'd used in an early shower and mixed with the scents I loved—pine and rain, something indescribable but filled with wildness.

I was being rewilded, losing the shell of civilization. I pushed him to his back, rose above him with my knees straddling his hips. When I fisted his cock, heated silk and iron pressed against my palm. His hips shifted as I slid my grip along his length, once, twice. I didn't think about anything safe with us. No condoms. I wanted him pouring his seed inside of me. I wanted him trembling beneath the force of his body, thrusting into mine. The little death—*la petite mort*.

I rose to my knees, meant to position him—but he flipped us both in a show of dominance that was devastating. His mouth was on my throat, my breasts, laving the peaked nipples until I moaned.

“Can you feel me? The way I hold you?”

His voice was warm cognac at night. The decadence of wolves. His fury was more focused now, heated with a passionate intensity. We were made for this coming together. A joining in this a turbulent storm. When his mouth found my

clit, when his finger pushed inside of me, once... twice... when he used two fingers, curled them upward... Fate could not have created a greater maelstrom. I arched. Cried out.

“I love how you squirm, greedy,” he said against my skin. “You’re so tight. I want that perfection around me. Clenching me when you go over the edge.”

My fingers dug into his shoulders, but he wouldn’t stop the relentless, tireless, erotic movements of his hand and mouth.

“You taste like heaven. You taste like mine.”

He changed my position, lifting my leg over his shoulder so I could not try to shut him out. “I want you aching for me the way I ache for you. Punish you for unraveling me. Gods, Noa...”

The carnal threat in his voice vibrated against my inflamed skin. The softest parts of me. He was savagely masculine, possessive and tender as he controlled his fury over *being* controlled. Not by me in that moment. But by what he would burn down the world to have and to hold.

As I would burn down the world for him. Easier for me than for him. We would flame together and race toward whatever end while Fate could stand by and do nothing but watch.

Because I did not believe in fate. I believed in changing fate.

My fingers clenched around his forearms. In the shadowed light, I lay fascinated and seduced by the intensity of his emotions. I’d always known he was a powerful man, but this... this was utterly destroying in its beauty.

The very air vibrated with intensity. He positioned himself, the broad tip of his cock pressing in anticipation.

“Watch me, Noa,” he ordered. “Watch me as I take you. Claim you until you forget your doubt. Watch me fuck you. Slide in and out while your body quivers and you can’t help yourself. While the beautiful carnal begging heats your lips. Until all you know is me. All you want is me.”

Then he lunged, withdrew until only the tip of him remained. Lunged again. Each time he slid into me, I watched,

fascinated by the sight of him, veined, slick... steel. Not only him. I watched each time my hips rose to meet his in my own claiming—my own furious, defiant fucking. *He* would have no doubt when this was done. All the promises, how we used to view life changed in this darkened room. Where the sounds of our passion, the slapping of his sac against my upward thrusts, the inevitable creaking of the bedframe from the punishment behind this battle bore witness. His hips flexed with a power that slid my body farther up the bed. My hair fanned out around me and my skin slicked with sweat.

“Gods, Noa, the way you take me...”

I was breathless. My fingers were clawing at the violence in his muscles as I choked out his name. My hands wrapped around the iron-hard solidity in his buttocks. The sheets tangled while I was drowning, tumbling in this frenzied mating, this... bliss.

His body was a furnace. His lungs heaved, and his eyes... gods, his eyes. The intensity in his gaze devoured me. Remade me. And when I felt him plunge all the way to the root, I understood. It didn't matter if we believed in fate or not. Fate believed in us, and we would never be the same.

Grayson fucked like his life—my life depended upon it. There was no end, no final satiation. Words were a seduction in my mind because he was so deep in the passion he couldn't speak.

But I heard them.

Burned beneath them.

“Do you feel me swelling inside you? Can I reach your soul? Are you the illusion, sent to torture me?”

“Can I hold you longer than this instant?”

Then, *“I will never leave you...”*

While a tiny corner of my heart began to break. Because I knew he would not leave me of his own free will. But it was a dread I had... that I would choose to leave him.

To save him.

CHAPTER 23



Noa

WE HAD FIVE IDYLLIC days before it ended. Days spent wandering through the secret wrinkle the King of the Forest created to comfort a lonely boy.

The pocket had its own seasons, separate from the rest of the world. Perpetual spring, early summer. Mild weather, the kind a boy would relish for his games of war.

Thick grass cushioned our feet. The air was a delight, filled with the scents of growing things, flowers, ripening fruit, loamy earth. We made leisurely, decadent love on a blanket beneath the stars. Swam in a pool where Grayson stood naked beneath the waterfall like an ancient god, rising. We picked wildflowers that didn't wilt. Chased like children, laughing at our heady game. Grayson looked younger, happier. I pressed my palm against his heart and told him so.

There were nights when we held each other. When pleasure taunted me with each ending, because I immediately wanted more. He understood my body like no other. In return, I stroked the utter perfection of his physique as if I touched a priceless work of art.

He drove himself into me with mastery and passion. He would spread my legs, angle my body until ecstasy surged.

The broad head of his cock would probe. I'd weaken beneath the pressure when he entered, gasp at the angle that brushed my clit and hit the nerves deep inside. Dirty words of praise and commands were hotly compelling. There were times when I forgot who I was until I'd hear his growling voice in my head. "*Breathe, Bedisa.*"

Bedisa was the name he'd started using only when he spoke to me intimately through our bond. It meant destiny. He was telling me I was not the Noa I feared I was. The secret knowledge passed down from alpha to alpha, with the initials condemning my mother and me.

A condemnation he refused to believe.

He said we'd come into each other's lives because of destiny, but not a black destiny. Not a *destin noir*.

In return, I had no secret name for him, but I worshiped every part of his body. Learned how hard to grip his cock and where to flick my tongue. I cherished each seduction, doing to him what he did to me, arousing in incremental stages until he writhed on the bed. My orders had him grinning wickedly.

"*Whatever you desire, Bedisa...*"

The physical awareness we shared was so instinctive, it became an inexorable pull. We grew attuned to the subtle messages in a shudder, the press of teeth against a lower lip, the warmth in a place so sacred no one else could reach us there.

Even during daylight, when we were holding hands or exploring some secret bower, the need would skip through my body and he'd already be smiling. When he found my limits, he pushed me higher. When I yielded to his commands, my surrender was a victory.

He told me secrets he'd never revealed before, how when he'd first searched my mind for signs of my wolf, all he'd found was hard obsidian and an endless sky of stars.

He said he'd never *felt* anything like me before, called it lightning in a storm.

And he'd been restless with me—for me. Because I was fire frozen in ice.

His fire.

Then he'd cupped my face, traced the curve of my lips and murmured heartbreaking words that were now carved into my heart.

Somehow, he'd become essential to me. I could explain it with words like shelter, calm, protection. But those words were so distant from the reality that I could use them to describe a thousand other men.

What made him different? I couldn't define it, but I would close my eyes and see what we could have had, if fate had not intervened... if a witch in a cave had not revealed what I could do, the chaos I could create...

I would burn the world down for him. And he might never forgive me for it.

Because the world had burned beneath the rage of the queens.

The kings had trampled the remains into the mud.

And the truth in that was a roaring in my ears.

I feared the day when he understood the truth, too, that what we felt might not be love, but it was certainly rage. We were the perfect lovers. We were passion. We could be destruction. The Dread Lord and the *Faille*. He wanted to save me. I wasn't sure he could.

I remembered the battle revealed to me on a cave wall. Yes, *failles* had fallen. But before they fell, they brought about a devastation horrifying in its intensity.

And what was he capable of? Even more than me.

Because, above all, he was a dangerous man. He raged at his own fate with a tangible heat I mirrored. A striking match could not be more volatile. Separate, we were twin flames. Together, we would be annihilating. Selfishly and wholly consuming. And I was a selfish woman. I might take what I wanted and let the rest be damned.

There were times when I was tempted, when I couldn't breathe without him nearby. I was ready to take and keep taking. As he was ready to do the same. Perhaps what we shared in those moments was more a curse than a craving. I'd wrap my arms around his lean waist, press against the hard warmth of his chest, and listen to his heartbeat. As if I was afraid it would stop.

He said it was the mating bond pulling us together, but what amazed me was how we both had not gone up in flames. His skin blazed, but never as hot as the energy I drew from him. Twice, he'd had to leave, and I'd stood in the doorway of his old home and watched him shift into the wolf. Wishing desperately that I could run wild with him. Sleek, beautiful.

But I could not sleep on those nights when he was gone. I'd wait for him to come back, twisting in the sheets, holding his reeking shirt in our half-empty bed. And when he returned, he slid in silently beside me, and I curled against him, his skin still cold from wherever he'd been.

Always, when he slept, one arm was thrown over me as if part of him couldn't believe what we had was real. That we were real.

But on the morning of the sixth day, the sense of borrowed time was back. He rose from the bed with a sweet kiss to my forehead and none of the ravenous sex that usually delayed our morning. I listened to the rushing of the shower. He hadn't asked me to join him. Perhaps I'd been holding my breath, waiting for this day when we would finally talk about the witch cave and what had happened.

And talk about the girl Adriel told him about, the girl with silver in her hair, taken by the vampires.

CHAPTER 24



Noa

GRAYSON SAID IT WAS another inner circle meeting, to be held around the wooden table in his parents' house. The kitchen stove Fee disrupted was working again, and a modern coffee machine sat on the counter. Everyone thought we were staying there, in the house of memories, so it needed to look the part. A fire blazed in the fireplace. Dishes sat in the sink. Grayson's childhood bedroom held traces of both of us. His shirt. My jeans, folded on the queen-size bed that nearly touched both walls. A book on the bedside table. A half-filled glass of water.

Puppy magic, I decided, helping the deception.

Fallon arrived first. She glanced around casually, then studied my face with what I thought was approval.

I was wearing the clothes I found in the closet that morning, soft jeans with a sophisticatedly casual look. I'd knotted a bright pink tee shirt at my waist. Strappy sandals clicked softly against the wooden floor. My hair was braided. Gold bracelets jangled around my right wrist, leaving Grayson's sigil visible on my left wrist. Tiny gold studs glittered at my ears, and above them, tiny hoops, each with a diamond.

I didn't look like myself, and yet I did, stronger, more confident. Comfortable in my skin. I held my arms open in an invitation and Fallon stepped close, hugging me back. She wore a faint perfume I hadn't noticed before, and while she wore her usual leather vest, black shirt, jeans, her blond hair gleamed in the sunlight, still in its tight braid. But there was something... different about her. I couldn't put my finger on it.

"You look good," she said. "Both of you."

"Thanks. I guess we needed the rest."

"I'm sure." Her wink was saucy, and I blushed. Perhaps Grayson told his seconds about our mate bond. He'd needed an excuse for taking time off from his alpha duties, and it had to be something they wouldn't worry about, or come looking for him. For... us.

Mace was out in the yard, gripping Grayson's forearm in greeting. My *faille* sight kicked in and I saw the two boys they'd been, fighting and talking and forming a bond that would last a lifetime. I pressed a hand to my throat.

"We should make coffee," Fallon said, her back to the scene outside. She stood at the counter, busy with the preparations. I joined her, and moments later the kitchen was filled with male voices and large, muscular, capable bodies. The scraping of chairs—enough for all of us. I smiled at the benefits of magic, producing everything we needed. Then my gaze settled on the small leather journal I'd been using; it was waiting on the table. Days ago, Grayson suggested I write out everything I recalled from the visit to the Gemini Witches. To put events in my own words without the distraction of someone listening, judging.

The minor details had formed into a clarifying picture of what I thought happened, and would help make my explanation more impactful. There were so many worrying questions.

I glanced around, uneasy as I took my seat. Fallon distributed the heavy white mugs filled with coffee, although they remained untouched because no one seemed interested in drinking. Perhaps it was the caffeine. Or the dulled light

streaming in through the windows that brought a somberness to the meeting.

Whatever it was, my bright pink tee and strappy sandals seemed suddenly out of place. I thought about changing clothes, but Grayson sat beside me, reached out and gripped my hand as Mace sat across from me.

“I’m sorry, Noa,” Mace said, folding his hands around the coffee mug that didn’t interest him. “But something happened to Sutter.”

My mouth dropped open. When? Why? We’d protected Sutter before we left.

Grayson’s voice stroked soothingly in my mind. “*Just listen, Bedisa...*”

The endearment chilled me.

“What happened?” I asked, scanning Mace’s face, seeing the deepening lines around his mouth. The darkening in his eyes—wolf eyes that flashed with retribution.

“Creatures attacked, a day after I left.” He breathed in. “I’d gone to ask about the girl. Jodan was there. Adriel’s father. He interpreted, protecting his daughter. No one knew about Adriel’s secret friend. Her name is Brin. No last name. Said it was a made-up name. She wrote everything in the dirt. That’s how they talked—writing in the dirt and then wiping the words away. A father, no mother. She was afraid because of the silver in her hair, wanted to run away. Adriel was helping her.”

“Where was her mother?” I asked.

“Presumed dead. The father looks good for it.” Mace’s tone was hard. Grim.

“Do we know where the father is now?” Grayson asked.

“No trace. But Adriel saw them fighting. The father threw her to the ground. Kicked her. Three vampires arrived, exchanged money for the girl, and took her away. Maybe four months ago, time was a little vague. But Jodan said that explained the raids afterward. Lec Rus sent patrols. Scorched

earth. Looking for either the girl or her father. A month after, Jodan talked to some smugglers. The Alpen found a man, dragged him away, but no one in the Mule would admit anything.”

“What happened to Sutter?” My hand curled despite Grayson’s comforting hold; his fingers tightened in tandem with mine.

“A passage opened.” Mace’s expression was stone-hard. “Tusked creatures poured through. The men rallied. I’m sorry, Noa. I know Sutter was important to you.”

My heart was pounding. “Survivors?”

“I’ve settled them with Owen Griffith for now. Adriel is there. Her father. Most of the women and children. A few injured men. Burn.”

The dog... Jodan’s *burden*. Somehow, he’d survived both the attack and the trek to safety. But something hard twisted in my throat. “Any others?”

Jodan? Old Mae?

The women who’d looked at me shyly but determined, or the children who’d brought buckets of warm water for my bath? I didn’t know their names. Wouldn’t know if they survived even if Mace told me.

Mace stared into the cooling coffee. I didn’t need his confirmation because Grayson was radiating the truth while his thumb stroked my hand, soothing me. Cooling the heated rage as fast as it formed.

Fallon cleared her throat and rose to refresh my coffee. When she set a fresh cup in front of me, she closed her fingers around my shoulder in comfort.

“Why would creatures attack Sutter?” she asked Mace as she resettled. Clearly, this information was new to her, too. Which meant Mace hadn’t communicated with her through the pack bond. Had he told Grayson? Was that where Grayson had gone at night, when he shifted into his wolf, then came back with his skin so cold?

We weren't that far from the unused smuggler's cave. Had he gone to help Mace? To fight? Then... close up that access?

I glanced at Grayson and silently asked, "*Why didn't you tell me?*"

"There was nothing you could do."

"How much do they know?"

"That's up to you, Bedisa."

Whatever secrets I wanted to share with Mace and Fallon. The two people he trusted with his life. His family. Who he protected by keeping secrets of his own.

If I revealed my secrets, these two *wolves* might see me as the threat I could become.

But information was just as dangerous when it was withheld as when it was used, and as ice settled near my heart, I said, "The creatures attacked Sutter because it was close to the witch cave. The Gemini Witches were dead when I found them. But someone else was there, spinning an illusion like a spider spins a web. A woman."

I looked up and held Grayson's gaze because even *he* didn't know what I was about to say.

"That woman is the enemy. Not Alpen. And I've heard her for months."

"The way I hear you," I added silently.



An hour passed while I opened the leather journal and revealed the details to Mace and Fallon. The eerie way the Gemini Witches appeared as mirrored images. How their heads turned in unison, mouths moved, the smiles like the twitching of the newly dead. Of course, they were dead and had been for months. Because of what they'd been ranting on about, how in a time of peril, there would be two.

"I've heard a woman's voice in my head," I said. "She screamed when Grayson inked his rune on my skin. I thought she was saying 'no.' Then I heard her when I found the book

behind the waterfall. The air ballooned with pressure, and I thought she was rushing toward me but couldn't get through a barrier. And when I destroyed her illusions in the witch cave—she screamed again.”

“Was she there physically?” Mace asked.

“More of a presence, a shadow, and I thought I was dealing with one witch instead of two, maybe the real Gemini Witch. The conversation bounced back and forth so quickly I couldn't tell who was speaking. They responded accurately to everything I said, so it wasn't like a pre-planned loop. We were interacting.”

“It takes power to do that,” Fallon said. “Create a living illusion.”

I nodded. “The detail was realistic. We talked, there were fires burning, the fumes scenting the air. I touched the sand, dipped my fingers into frigid water when I filled the cup. I only saw the truth because it was a reflection she couldn't control. But when the vampires came, I was physically aware of them. Each voice was different, the words they said. The same with the wolves. The scent, the heat, and when I shot them, when they turned into Mace and Levi, my hands were sticky and wet with blood. I could feel the slather that splashed on my skin.”

I glanced at Mace; sympathy narrowed his eyes. “At the end, when I destroyed the illusion, everything changed. Someone had tied the Gemini Witches to their thrones and turned them into dried husks. Wouldn't seers know if they were threatened, and defend against it?”

“Not if she attacked from a distance,” Mace said.

“It's possible she wasn't even there,” I agreed. “Because at the end, when the illusion shattered, I thought she was a projection, and I'm not even sure if she intended to do it, or if I somehow pulled her into visibility.”

Mace's face hardened as he glanced at Grayson, and something flared between them. “It could have been an emotional reaction,” he said. “A moment of weakness, when

her control slips and she's pulled into whatever illusion she's manipulating. She might not even realize Noa can see and hear her."

"That might explain the Alpen's attack." Fallon twisted her coffee mug and shot a glance toward Grayson. "If Lec Rus knew what the witches were ranting about, then learned they were dead, he might have panicked. Started hunting girls like Noa."

Beware the one who strikes a king without a queen.

But there was more to that rant. One would open the door. The other would reap the vengeance.

I played Devil's Advocate and built a case against myself.

"What if my mother inadvertently opened the door, and I'm here for the vengeance?"

Fallon glared. Mace smirked while his eyes brightened. Grayson stroked his thumb against my palm, but allowed me to work through my thoughts.

"What if my mom found a way to read that book?" I looked at everyone seated at the table, studying the expressions they didn't try to hide. Interest from Mace. Worry from Fallon. Grayson's friends—but my friends, too, I realized.

"We've assumed we can break blood magic with a power balance." My voice steadied. "Maybe it takes two *failles*, but that could mean any two *failles*. Even a child who hasn't yet changed."

My hesitation wasn't from doubt; I waited for Grayson—for the velvety thread of encouragement he sent through our bond.

"I remember a book. My mother asked me to help her hold it. I wanted her to read the story out loud, but after a few minutes, she jerked the book away and told me never to touch it again."

Mace challenged me first, as I knew he would. As I wanted him to challenge me. "It could have been any book."

"True. But my stepfather hid a book, and my mother was so desperate to find it, she dug up the backyard. Then Aine told

me she'd given a book to my mom with the hope she could read it with me. The same book my mom refused to return to Aine. She hid it in the one place Aine said she couldn't go, and in a pocket only I could find. When I touched the book, it glued itself to my hand. I thought it recognized me."

"Why would your mother hide a book only you could find, after she'd told you to never touch it again?" Mace asked.

I held his steady gaze. "That's a curiosity, isn't it?"

He said nothing, and my mouth dried enough to need coffee. Carefully, I resettled the mug.

"I remember thinking it was a picture book, and I was mad because there were no pictures. Now I'm wondering if my mom read something in that book that worried her, because she spent her life protecting me. She told me never to return to Sentinel Falls, or be around wolves. And she was adamant when she said I shouldn't believe in fate."

"You think she read some prophesy relating to you?"

"What else could it be? Maybe it was a prophesy she wanted me to know after all. Something I'd *need* to know if I ever came back. She couldn't stop the wolves, or the nymphs, or even vampires—if they discovered where I was and came after me. Maybe it was her last defense. A way to help me if I discovered what I—what I'm capable of doing."

Mace leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "What are you capable of doing?"

I just looked at him.

He smirked. "Why are you determined to make yourself the enemy here?"

I shook my head. "Not the enemy. But everything revolves around the book. Aine's reaction. My mother. The scream, and my *faillie* senses reacting to it. The witches said Grayson only wanted me for the book, and I shouldn't let him have it or help him read it. They said he couldn't read it on his own because of a spell blocking the kings and all those descended from them."

I glanced at Fallon to see how she was reacting. But the news that Grayson was a dread lord generated no reaction.

“The hatred was visceral,” I said. “The images on the cave wall were horrific, designed to condemn the dread lords. The detail... maybe seers could see that far back into the past. But it wasn’t witches casting that illusion. When I finally saw the woman’s face—the woman in the shadows—she was beautiful, ageless. Hair as dark as night.”

I breathed in, looked at Grayson.

“*What is it, Bedisa?*” he asked through the bond.

I answered out loud, so everyone could hear. “She had a streak as silver as mine.”

“She’s a *faille*,” Mace murmured. “And that’s why you hear her in your head. There must be a bond between *failles* similar to the wolf bond.”

“No,” I said with conviction. “She’s not a *faille*.”

Fallon was asking why, while the realization spun—why had I not seen it before?

My heart pounded. Grayson gripped my hand, and I didn’t need the savage mental leap he made to know he jumped to the same conclusion I did.

“Aine said a queen wrote the book.” I turned to face Mace and Fallon. “She knew it was protected by blood magic, but not that it was spelled against the kings. Against all their descendants. No one could know that unless...”

“The woman you saw was a queen,” Grayson finished for me. “The book we have is hers.”

“And she’s the one who spelled it against the kings.” I looked at Grayson. “Against you.”

CHAPTER 25



Noa

FALLON STOOD BESIDE ME in the kitchen. We stared through the window. Grayson and Mace were outside, talking to a group of men. Once again, I marveled at the massive power of the Alpha of Sentinel Falls. His strength and commitment. Valor. Sunlight caught in the black of his hair. He towered over the waiting men, although Mace was nearly as tall and muscular, impressive in his own dominance. I slid a glance toward Fallon, but her face was a smooth mask. Her hand was slowly rubbing my back, and I realized how tense I'd become.

"I can't let him try to read the book," I said. "The queen's hatred was something I've never experienced. I don't doubt she put some horrible curse on that book against any king."

"Or dread lord," Fallon agreed, then turned to look at me. "Mace and I have known for a long time, Noa. The Green Man visited each of us when Gray became the Alpha. He warned what would come and gave us choices. Of course we chose him. And we're choosing you, too. You aren't alone in this."

I turned to watch the men outside. "Do the others know?"

"Not all of them. Whatever happens, happens. We'll deal with it together."

“The girl. We have to rescue her. I can’t bear the idea of her being held by vampires. And for what reason? There has to be a connection. During that illusion, when the vampires came. I thought the witches called them as punishment for the Gathering, but that wasn’t right. The witches were dead. The queen devised that illusion, and she had some other reason.”

“Do you still feel a connection to her?”

“I can’t rid myself of it.” I chewed on my lip. “But I’m missing something, and I can’t describe what it is that I feel.” I turned back to face Fallon. “I know she attacked Sutter because of me. All those innocent people, dead, when all they did was offer us shelter. She’ll kill Grayson if she can. I know she will. The only way to fight her and protect him is to find out what’s in her book. The girl, Brin. If she’s a *faille*, she can read it with me.”

“Or you could figure out how your mother did it,” Fallon suggested.

“She asked me to hold the book.” I shook my head. “We were two *failles*, even if I was a child. There’s no other way. We need Brin.”

Fallon’s expression turned thoughtful—she was an alpha, after all, as brilliant as Mace. “It won’t be easy. High Citadel is the vampire’s seat of power. Most of the sires will be there, which means it’s heavily fortified.”

“They won’t be expecting me.”

“Noa...” She waited until I looked at her. “I’m not doubting your abilities, but you have no wolf. You can’t communicate with anyone but Gray, and if he’s out of range, you’ll be on your own. None of us will let you go under those circumstances.”

“I can take wolves with me,” I argued, even as I realized secrecy would be the greater necessity. “They’ll communicate for me.”

“One or two, a small group,” Fallon agreed, jumping ahead of me with the strategy. “The High Citadel is in Carmag territory. But the vampires have secure locations everywhere.”

They'll hide Brin where she won't be a danger to the sires. If she's *faillie*, she'll have abilities like yours, and no sire would take that risk."

"So, we ask Julien, find out where that location is," I said.

"A softer target," Fallon mused. "They'll order someone lower on the hierarchy to deal with the girl, but don't think for a moment they won't have a thousand ways to torture her until she has no strength to fight back. She'll be weak. Vulnerable. Harder to rescue."

Anger grew hot in my face. "They sat out the last pack war. Why the hell would they want some poor girl without a wolf?"

"Noa." Fallon's tone stiffened my spine. "After Mosbach threatened you with the vampires, Gray had a long talk with him."

I shuddered beneath the dark satisfaction that uncurled inside of me, as if Mosbach was one more enemy I needed to destroy.

"He said vampires have been secretly hunting *faillies* for months. Offering bounties. They started after an emissary disappeared in Cariboo territory. He had no explanation for why."

"Do you believe him?"

I read the answer in Fallon's eyes. Remembered something Mosbach said, how a man in pain was often unreliable. Then I thought of the rabbit, the scream, and hoped Mosbach had screamed.

The thought should alarm me. But it didn't. Because Grayson and I had become the dread lord and the *faillie*. And together, our flames would consume everyone around us. Maybe that was a necessary cleansing. Maybe our fate was a *destin noir* after all.

"We should still ask Julian," I said.

"He's a vampire. Emissary or not, he's not likely to go against his sire, if she thinks there's an advantage."

I turned away from the window, suddenly tired. “This queen wants revenge. She sent her creatures into a meadow to kill Grayson. She’s already destroyed Sutter. Azul. I don’t know how she’s lived this long, but I know now I am her enemy, too. And I don’t think she’ll stop destroying until we destroy her.”

CHAPTER 26



Noa

THE RAIN CAME MORE frequently with the autumn, blending the days of expectation. We waited in the house of memories. Waited for Mace's spies to report. For Julien. I'd been present when Grayson asked the vampire about the girl. Julien reluctantly agreed to find out what he could. But when he crossed his arms and looked away, I wondered how long he'd been waiting for the request.

Weeks? Months? How long had he known?

As time passed, Grayson and I avoided next-step conversations. We filled our days with simple moments. Curled in front of the fireplace in his childhood home because we wanted to feel the storm raging outside. Wanted to experience the energy in the real world. When the weather cleared, I'd taken his hand, leading him through the wet grass until we were chilled. And still, we bundled together in a blanket to watch the first stars blink on in the sky.

Other nights, we slept outside until dawn pinkened the sky and the morning stars disappeared.

But this night, when we seduced each other in the large bed stuffed into his childhood bedroom, I'd been unable to look away from the anger flashing in his eyes. He moved over me,

his jaw as taut as his body, the clench and thrust, and although he kept the rage banked, his body spoke for him in ways only a woman could understand—in the ways I would always recognize.

I could read his expressions. His emotions. I didn't think Grayson knew how little he kept secret. Before we made love, we'd argued, and I still couldn't decide what enraged him more. Whether it was my sigil I repeatedly offered, but he refused to take, or the pending solution that he'd been unable to alter.

I wanted to know my fate. And if that fate—if our black destiny—was written in the book my mother hid, then we needed to read it.

I needed to read it. For him.

That required two *faillies*. In this one thing, all the strength and power a dread lord possessed became meaningless. With the queen's spell, the risk was too great, and I was adamant that he should not try to read the book. Or even touch it.

He was as adamant about me, trying to rescue Brin, venturing into Carmag territory and risking contact with the vampires who already had an unhealthy interest in *faillies*.

But despite Grayson's anger, his craving for me was a desperation. And my craving for him was too powerful not to give him the solace he demanded, the reassurance he found in sheathing himself in me.

His gaze had been hot on my face while I wrapped my arms around his back and gave him what he wanted. The lust of the mating bond raged like a torrent through us. We would surely burn out before it was over.

The way we made love—he was gorgeous. He seared my soul. I would never have believed the strength in such a bond if I hadn't been living it.

He was the consummate lover, the force in my storm. Passion and fury. Every time he touched me, I was ablaze with hunger for more. But even as I reached each peak of ecstasy, a part of me flew somewhere else. Where a queen waited,

plotting for ways to kill him, through me. I was not equipped with the strength or knowledge to fight her. And despite everything I did, no matter how hard I fought, or how often I begged him to take my sigil so I'd be bound to protect him... I still saw myself standing on the hill while he died in the blood and mud below.

A queen would use me to reap her vengeance, and that fear was the shadow that haunted me with each step we took, each move toward an end game I couldn't see. I couldn't explain it to him. If he guessed I was struggling, he'd stop this mad plan of ours. I kept my thoughts light and girlish, teasing and seductive as we made love with desperation, as if we could anchor each other in place. Stop the world from turning.

After we'd battled our demons, quieted them beneath satiation, Grayson slept deeply. I left the bed and wandered outside, wanting the real world. Wanting a blanket wrapped around me as I stared toward the north, where a storm raged.

Red lightning lit up the night sky, and as the thunder rumbled, I heard Grayson's dark voice, stroking through our mental bond.

"The world burns for you, Bedisa."

He stood behind me, his chest and feet bare. Only a pair of black pajama bottoms that hung low on his hips. Warm, hard arms curled around my waist, and I leaned my head against his chest and told him the truth: *"The world burns for us."*

The first news arrived the following morning. Grayson put to right the house in his secret space while I tidied the house of memories. I paused in the checkered bathroom, at the threshold between the two halves of our world, and said goodbye to the puppy magic. A breeze brushed against my cheek. Then we hiked to Owen Griffith's settlement, where Miranda welcomed me into her kitchen while Grayson went on alone. He'd be meeting Julian in a secluded, distant meadow filled with dark shadows, and I couldn't go along.

I spent the time visiting with Miranda's brother, Albert, holding his hand and syphoning excess energy from him until I sensed his wolf stirring.

“He improves more each day,” Miranda assured me. “Whatever you’re doing, it’s enough to start the process.”

Adriel came, and we hugged. Her father interpreted. It was a hard conversation to both see and hear—the tremor in Adriel’s hand gestures, and the deepening of her father’s voice. I hugged her again and swore silently that I would avenge the destruction in Sutter.

I found Burn with Miranda, curled up beside the fire, and when I came into the room, he unwound himself, rising on unsteady legs to lean against my knees. Bending down, I pressed my forehead against the top of his knobby brow, cupping my hands behind his ears for a scratch, and tried not to let the tears flow.

They did, though.

“Such a good boy,” I murmured. “Run through the forest soon. I’ll run with you.”

His tail thumped. He probably understood the truth as well as I did.

When Grayson returned, he said nothing. We drove one of Owen’s pickup trucks, and it seemed odd to me, sitting on a bench seat, listening to the thrum of tires and the engine roar. After moving around through so many passageways, the time to cover the distance the human way dragged and seemed too loud.

The noise bothered me, kept me nervy and reluctant at the same time. I wanted information, but information also brought the decision closer to being made.

Grayson drove with the same efficient confidence that he did everything. His powerful body remained relaxed, with a control that made it hard to remember the man he became when we made love. A man at the mercy of passion and ecstasy. I doubted my heat could burn him now. He was lost in thought, and I couldn’t reach him. When I tried, I came up against obsidian. Stroked against it and felt the slightest tremor before I pulled away.

We drove to the watchtower house. It was the first time I'd actually been on the road leading there, and while I waited to see if the trees moved to conceal access, nothing in the landscape changed. Perhaps, after everything that had happened to Azul and Sentinel Falls, the secrecy was pointless.

Grayson parked near the edge of the wildflowers. He slid from the truck with an easy assurance while I found the moment awkward. Then he smiled, offered his hand, and I took it as if it was the easiest thing in the world for me.

I could find happiness with him, if there weren't a thousand lurking obstacles between us.

When we entered the house, Mace and Fallon were already there. And thus began the next phase of planning and strategy on how best to rescue the girl named Brin.

Julien's information was more detailed than I'd expected, and I wondered how much it cost him to provide what came perilously close to a betrayal. He'd said a few sires had been hunting *failles*. They were part of a secret cult, opposed by the majority. Julien had no list of members, but suspected who they were. He said the bounty offered on *failles* was high enough that fakes had fallen into vampire hands, unfortunate girls with silvered hair. Or those who'd been tampered with deliberately for the profit.

They were dead, now. Those girls. But there were rumors of others... not dead. And whispers about hybrids. Wolves turned into vampires. The depravity didn't really surprise me. But it worked in our favor. Because of the fakery, and the risk of discovery, the cult now hid girls in isolated locations. An advantage for us.

"The girl we're looking for is in a secluded farm house," Grayson said as he pinned a map on the wall. Beside it was the detailed floor plan of a small building, with thick outlines for the rooms, and a smaller rectangle with horizontal lines showing stairs.

Mace stood beside Grayson as they studied the pinned images, while Fallon and I remained at the table and studied

the same images printed out on copy paper.

“She’s not in good shape,” Grayson continued. “Julien didn’t think she’d last much longer. They’ve been trying to turn her, but she hasn’t been... cooperative.”

“What happens to the uncooperative?” I asked, even though I suspected.

Fallon reached out and squeezed my hand. “They’re used as feeders.”

I held her gaze.

“It’s a blessing, Noa,” she whispered. “Usually over in days.”

“No one should be that depraved and get away with it.” But they did. “And why even try to turn them?”

I didn’t think werewolves could turn into vampires.

“Hybrids are more deadly than either species,” Fallon murmured.

“If they survive the process,” Grayson said evenly.

“There must be some advantage with a *faille*, if the vampires are paying bounties.” Fallon pulled the floor plan closer and traced a finger like she was working through a maze. “They won’t give her up easily.”

Mace turned back to the map. “The house looks fortified, with these walls, here—and here. Basement level would be the most secure.” He looked at Grayson. “I’ll construct a replica in that old warehouse. Work out the various assault routes. Change up the obstacles. Practice the timing until she gets it right.”

Grayson’s jaw was taut.

“A small force,” Mace continued. “Less than five. Anything larger triggers the wards in Carmag, tells them we’re coming.”

“Anson won’t be happy.” Fallon leaned back as she studied Grayson. “We’ll be sneaking into his territory without telling him. Shouldn’t we give a courtesy warning?”

“No warnings.” Grayson was resolute. “He’ll want to be involved.”

“Then distract him,” Fallon argued. “Invite him here and keep him occupied during the time we take to go in and get out.”

“But not you,” Mace said to Grayson. “Your energy sets off every damn ward for miles.”

Grayson flashed alpha canines. “Not me. Noa goes in with enough wolves to keep her safe.”

“No,” I said, drawing his attention. “If Brin’s hurt, she’ll need a healer. She’ll trust me because I’m like her, and I can tell her what Adriel said. But she won’t trust a group of bristling male wolves who sold her in the first place, and we’d waste precious time trying to convince her otherwise.”

“I’ll go,” Fallon offered.

Mace shot her a look that chilled me. “Your energy is almost as strong as Gray’s, so no. You don’t go.”

“And I need you here,” Grayson added. “For Anson.”

Fallon stiffened, then said, “I’ll talk to Laura. See if she’s willing to go. Send Levi as their protection. You know he’s capable, and knowing Laura and Noa are involved will motivate him.”

“They’ll infiltrate,” Mace said. “Make the recovery. When they exit, I’ll have another team waiting. They’ll move in, get everyone out as quickly as possible.”

Grayson turned back to the maps pinned against the wall. “I want proof the girl is there.”

“I can verify movement,” Mace said. “The protection in place. No time to get someone inside.”

Grayson’s voice hardened. “We take Julien’s word that she’s there?”

“Your call, Gray.” Mace was just as hard. “You talked to him. Question is, do you trust him?”

That night, Grayson didn't come to my bed. I was afraid to go to his and have him send me away, and in the morning, training began.

Mace said I had three days to get it right. I didn't know how he'd constructed a replica overnight, but the house matched the drawing, including stairs to a dank basement, and for hours, Laura and I wore ourselves out trying to get through barricaded doors, past ambushes. Race down steep stairs nearly invisible in the dark and slick with wet mold.

I learned that each time I went down the stairs, I could see a little more. My feet were steadier. I also learned how to use syphoned energy to move things around. Tables and chairs. Then I opened a mini-passage in a wall; how I did it was a mystery. But Laura and I barely slid through before it closed, and we listened, laughed when Mace's ambush hit—other wolves, who were gleefully playing the part. We could hear their grumbled confusion. They'd entered a room with no other exit except where they stood, while Laura and I ran down the cellar steps to retrieve our padded "target."

"Sharpen it," was all Mace said in the debrief when we discussed my new skill. I wondered what else I could move. If I could open passageways the way the queen did—because that was how she sent her creatures through.

Fallon and Grayson were working on a strategy of their own. Over dinner one evening, just Grayson and I, he laid out the plan.

"I've asked Anson to come for a meeting."

He could have been discussing the weather with that disinterested tone.

"What excuse did you use?" I asked.

"Sutter. He knows about it, and he knows you're here because he asked about you. You'll greet him when he arrives. We'll have dinner." Grayson paused as he cut another piece of meat. "You'll excuse yourself, say you need an early night. Fallon will take him to the guest house in Azul, and I'll fill the following day with meetings."

I toyed with my fork. “Won’t he expect to see me in the morning?”

“No. I’ll tell him you’re meeting with the nymphs.”

I sampled the wine, ran my tongue across my lips. “What if he doesn’t buy it?”

“He will.”

Oh—the adversaries we could become, two lovers, so polite over perfectly charred steak and fine wine.

But I still stiffened at his dogged tone. “I’ll be fine.”

Grayson’s mouth firmed. “I know you will. You’ll do it just as you practiced.”

Which meant I’d leave as soon as Anson was in Azul. Reach Carmag and be back in Sentinel Falls by dawn.

“The guards are human, poorly trained,” Grayson continued. “Wait until the one by the door is down, go in. Don’t worry about the others. Wolves will find them. But don’t think that gives you extra time. In and out.”

“Don’t you trust Mace’s training,” I taunted, because for someone who was so sure I’d be fine, he was running through a long list of commands.

Grayson scowled down at the meat he was still cutting; I thought it must be mush by now. “I trust him. He gives you five minutes to get in and out. But no matter what, leave at the four-minute mark. Searching for her only risks discovery, and one girl isn’t worth losing a team.”

The house was small, with a kitchen and living space, two bedrooms, a hall, and bath. Front door. Back door. One steep flight of stairs down to a dirt and stone basement. A storage closet concealed the stairs; the door might be locked and I’d have to break through. Mace said three human guards, hired thugs on rotating shifts. At night, one would check the perimeter every hour. The other two disappeared and were presumably sleeping or indulging in other things.

During practice, Laura and I had gotten in, resisted the obstacles, and pulled a heavy, padded dummy figure out in

less than six minutes. I thought adrenaline would help cut that time down to under five. Still, a shudder dried my mouth.

“Use every skill you have.” An Alpha command. Grayson’s jaw ticked, but his voice softened to a purr in my head. *“Syphon the energy. Burn it down if they find you, Bedisa. Better a dead girl than losing you to vampires.”*

“Would you burn it down, knowing she was hiding somewhere?” I challenged.

His eyes flamed with a blue fire that licked across my skin. *“Yes.”*

I wasn’t sure if I could live with his protection, his anger, not if it came from the obligation of the kings and a fated mating bond. But if it came from his heart... then I would take it.

Cherish it for what it was.

Even if it only lasted a moment.

CHAPTER 27



Grayson

“SHE CAN DO THIS, Gray,” Fallon said. She stood at my elbow. We were in the living room at the watchtower house, watching as Noa talked with Anson Salas, the Alpha of Carmag.

Noa was radiant, wearing another red gown that reminded me of the Night of the Beacons. Diamonds glittered around her throat and at her ears. The luxurious dark hair I’d fisted in my hands two hours ago, while my cock plunged deep inside her, was now swept up off her nape, fashioned into an intricate knot. And all I wanted was to pull the pins out, grip with my fingers and hold her in place. Refuse to let her leave.

“I know she can.” I’d viewed the same surveillance tapes Fallon had, taken from the cameras Mace mounted inside and outside his replica. Noa solved each problem, battered her body and got up again. Laura kept close to her side, and seeing the two of them work together brought a new respect for Laura’s courage. I read a hint of revenge in Laura’s expression, and realized she needed to act for the same reasons Noa did, in utter defiance against bullies, those who preyed on the weak.

I glanced back at Fallon. Her blonde hair was down tonight, with one side drawn back and anchored with a glittering

diamond clip. She wore a black evening gown. Her stunning sexuality was on display, what she downplayed when fulfilling her alpha duties. Mace had a hard time focusing on the man he was conversing with—Elijah Stone, Anson’s chief military advisor.

Anson hadn’t come alone. After learning the purpose—or the presumed purpose for our meeting—he’d wanted Elijah sitting in on the threat discussions and building an alliance. I’d wanted that discussion too, along with Mace, but the primary purpose was a distraction, the role Fallon had to play.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told her. “If you’re interested in Anson, don’t do anything he’ll find unforgivable.”

“Noa deserves this chance.” Fallon raised her champagne glass and sipped. “She never could ignore an injured wolf—just ask Laura. Levi. You can’t expect her to let a *faillie* suffer. She identifies too completely with the underdog. That’s why she ran when she was sixteen. She couldn’t stand by and do nothing.”

“I can’t let her go blindly into danger because she feels sorry for the victim,” I said, forcing the tension out of my voice.

“Noa isn’t going in blindly. Her *faillie* senses will alert her to threats. You watched her during those practice sessions. She’s smart. Facing the witches was far worse than this, and she’s learned more than you give her credit for—”

“I give her credit.”

Fallon arched an eyebrow. “As far as your protective streak will allow you to go. Part of you still sees her as the girl who drove into Sentinel Falls looking for protection. You want her to remain innocent, safe, when this is as much her destiny as yours.”

My fingers tightened on the glass I held, and Fallon gently brushed my hand.

“Why won’t you take her sigil?”

“I won’t chain her to a fate she can’t control.”

“I don’t think she sees it that way. You’re half a circle right now. Out of balance. Don’t you feel it, the need for completion?”

My teeth snapped together—*gods*, hadn’t I fought that need every hour? Through every breath and every soft sound she made when I was deep inside her? Blood pounded through my veins with an unrelenting impotency. A grasping need to reach out and hold on, claim her entirely.

All that I was—all I had been—changed the moment she turned and looked at me with defiance in her eyes. Without her, I was dust, lost in the wind. I feared the thought that I would lose her. I’d burn down everything for her.

Hadn’t I told her so?

Screamed it outside the cave while the witches trapped her inside? Or a queen had trapped her, if we were right.

But I would not risk her for my needs.

My chest lifted with the force of restraint. “Right now, Noa can hear the queen in her head. It’s the only connection we have, and taking Noa’s sigil could change that. If we close the circle, my energy would become her energy, and our enemy might sense it, turn this fight toward Noa and not me.”

“She’s already a target.”

“I won’t increase the risk.”

Fallon looked away. She accepted the need I had for secrets, but the enemy waiting was like none other. And if the time came when Noa had to choose between saving herself and saving me, I didn’t want her bound by a sigil. By a cycle of revenge, and a pledge to protect me above all others.

Noa sparkled in the light of the overhead chandeliers. Delight was in her laugh, a confidence she’d never revealed before, and I questioned how much was a skillful deception for Anson’s sake. How much was real.

We needed an alliance between Carmag and Sentinel Falls if we were facing a queen. But we risked everything tonight. If

Anson discovered the betrayal, we'd destroy our friendship and any chance of cooperation.

Fallon understood. She moved closer to Anson's side, and the warm glances the wolf gave her added to my suspicions. Anson was more than interested in my second in command. He viewed her as an alpha, equal to him in strength and influence.

She was a beautiful woman, a formidable opponent. Her thoughts were quick, her insights brilliant. Anson realized the asset she could be to him. I respected Fallon, thought of her as a sister, coming into her power. That Mace seemed immune only pointed out his stubbornness. And the risk he took if he refused to face his emotions until it was too late. Fallon wanted what Anson could offer—a family, a mate. Happiness, or as much as she might find with a man who was her second choice. If she accepted something less than perfect.

She'd been waiting a long time, and perhaps... perhaps her agreement to this deception meant she was not so much deceiving Anson as she was tired of waiting for Mace.

Dinner passed in a blur. Then Noa was offering her regrets. Her morning would start early and she wouldn't see Anson before he left. Mace was taking Elijah Stone to his favorite bar in Sentinel Falls, where they'd discuss tactics over beer and a dart game. Fallon was smiling as Anson slid her wrap around her shoulders. She was escorting him back to Azul through the passageway in the old watchtower. I imagined them strolling, lingering, watching the moon rising. I left the images there, since the rest wasn't my business.

When the house was quiet, I went to find Noa. She was in our bedroom, braiding her hair. She wore jeans, shirt, and vest, all black. A knitted hat waited on the bed; she would pull it on once she was outside, covering her hair since the full moon would rise before dawn and brighten the night.

"Bedisa..."

I dragged my hands down her arms, felt the cold in her fingertips.

She turned and folded her arms around me. Pressed her cheek to my chest. “Wait for me,” she said out loud, her lips moving against my shirt. Against my heart. “I’ll only be a moment. And then, I’ll be back.”

My fingers were steady as I smoothed her hair. Kissed her forehead.

“I’ll be on the deck,” I promised.

She was a wraith in the night, there and gone. I wondered if she’d always be in that place beyond my reach, a wild thing fate wanted me to guard and not have. But I refused to be like the kings of old who destroyed what they’d once loved.

I settled in, leaving an empty chair beside me. Two untouched glasses filled with cognac sat on a table, near my hand; we would drink them when she returned. Tipping my head, I counted the stars overhead. Imagined them as points on a map, there and back. Through our bond, I could follow her progress, although once she entered Carmag, she’d be beyond my reach. I remained silent. Minutes turned into an hour, during which I tapped at the back of Levi’s pack bond to check in. He said all was well; the girls were fine, and it was colder than a well-digger’s ass. Which made me smile.

Earlier, Mace reassured me he’d put his best men on the security team. They’d make quick, silent work of any problems that arose. I wouldn’t distract them by prying through the pack bond, or worse—using a cell phone to demand updates. I’d treat Noa with the same respect. Trust her ability. Her training. But it wasn’t easy for me, sitting on the sidelines. Being... useless.

Rising, I paced across the thick glass, staring down at the darkest shadows. They’d be using passages, crossing into the Carmag now, avoiding the wards. The weather could bring a cloaking mist, adding to their safety, and the path was one seldom used. The house was nearly derelict and easily overlooked by Carmag patrols. Far enough away from Westvale—Anson’s seat of power—that, even if they triggered a ward, an investigating patrol wouldn’t reach it for an hour or two.

The vampires, it seemed, knew Carmag better than Anson realized. We'd be doing him a favor once he learned why we were there—and why we hadn't told him first. Having the vampires moving about so freely beneath his nose should be worrying enough for him to increase security. Not only against vampires. Anson would soon learn about a vengeful queen, and the threat she posed to all the packs.

Sutter hadn't been safe because it was in the Alpen's territory; the queen had attacked out of pure hatred. Vengeance, because both Noa and I had been there. And once Anson understood about vampires hunting *failles*, even the fake girls, he would wonder, as I did, about why vampires wanted hybrids. Was it any wolf? Or only *failles*? I couldn't recall vampires wanting to mess around with turning anyone other than humans. I'd need to ask Julien...

But Julien had gone silent. I'd tried to reach him through our intermediary, a banker in Seattle, where Julien kept his accounts. The banker reported back that his messages rolled to a voicemail, which wasn't entirely unusual, but enough to add to my concern.

Gods—I hated the waiting. Not knowing. I needed to trust Mace's training and Noa's instincts. Levi had proved himself during the attack on Azul. I could count on him. Laura was smart and determined, but not reckless. She'd counter Noa's impulse to rush in, keep everything steady and within the timeframe.

They'd be approaching the house by now. Levi would go in first, watch the door. Noa would follow. Laura would be one step behind. I ran the training image through my mind, imagined Noa going down the steep stairs into the dark. Syphoning energy to create a tiny ball of light. The girl would be crouched in a corner. Holding up a hand against the glare. Noa would be whispering, calm. Laura would be offering—

Then, from inside the watchtower house—*my house*—a door slammed open. I was through the French doors just as the Alpha of Carmag stormed into the living room, his shirt loose, pulled from his black suit pants. A cell phone was in his hand. Held to his ear.

He was barking orders, his tone cold and clipped.

Fallon followed, fury on her face. Worry in her eyes. Mace was closing the distance. Anson's second—Elijah—stalked at Mace's side, but his aggression turned blatant as he shoulder-bumped Mace, nearly knocking my second off balance as he passed.

Mace flashed canines and growled, but Anson was shouting, holding his cell toward me, although the screen was black and the call had ended.

“You fecking want to tell me why you have people in Carmag while I'm here being entertained?”

“Anson,” Fallon said, but he turned on her.

“And you,” he snarled. “I gave you more respect than you deserve.”

“Salas!” Mace bristled, already volatile.

Elijah moved to block him. Anson held out a hand to hold his man in place.

“Deal with me, Anson,” I snapped. “Not Fallon. She followed my orders.”

He swung back in my direction. “They triggered the wards, man. Sentries tracked a small group. Looked like a boy and two women—is Noa even fecking here right now?”

I was rigid and barely civil. “She's none of your business.”

“Not if she's on my land—my men are there. They tell me there's dead men in the forest.”

Mace's expression turned stony. Fallon was unmoving at his side, as if she was afraid to step away. Shock paled her face.

Anson jabbed at his cell. “An empty house, with blood on the floor, a black knit hat with a strand of silver hair—should I go on? Enough detail for you? Or would you rather fecking stand there and lie to my face?”

My heart froze. “What the fuck are you saying?”

“I’m saying if she was there—then she’s gone—and the fact that you can’t check in with them right now is proof enough.” Anson was shoving his shirt back into the waistband of his pants. I had no idea where his jacket was, and for a brief, insane moment, I wondered how far Fallon had taken her distraction.

“You have an hour to get your people out,” the Alpha of Carmag said. “Anyone caught after that—there’ll be no safe passage.”

My mind had already closed down to one objective. *Noa!*

Mace’s voice was sharp through the pack bond. “*No one’s answering, Gray.*”

The answer I gave him was a snarl.

CHAPTER 28



Noa

THE MIST CLOAKING THE forest made the pine-needed ground slippery while the path nearly disappeared in the dark. Levi was a shadowy form in front of me. Laura moved with stealth a few steps behind. But this was what we'd practiced. What I trained for until my body ached with the muscle memory.

The cold sliced bone deep; I swiped at my eyelids, tried to ease the numbing in my face. The moonstone runes along my spine grew restless; those on my arm tingled. Grayson had inked them on my skin months ago. The Green Man's runes for protection.

The black wolf sigil on my wrist was Grayson's promise, but it remained silent. We were too far away from Sentinel Falls for the pack bond. If anything went wrong, we'd be on our own. Like being lost on the backside of the moon without communication.

But the worsening weather meant getting in and out before the guards sought shelter—not that we hadn't planned for it. If guards were in the house, Levi would shift into his wolf and attack. Be the distraction while I syphoned energy, got close enough to incapacitate them. Even Laura was ready to shift,

and I understood the cost to her, because she'd confided how her wolf still harbored fears even Grayson couldn't assuage.

The house windows—all two of them—were dark. No wavering glow from a banked fire or hooded lantern. No smoke curling from the chimney. My *faille* sense picked up nothing current, no wolf or vampire energy, although Julien's information had been accurate. A girl had been here, leaving traces, whispers. But not enough to feel confident.

I followed Levi up three steps to a porch, through the doorway into the dark. Mace's countdown became a drumbeat in my head.

Back to the doorjamb... identify the obstacles... move toward your objective.

Dull moonlight wavered through the windows. My eyes adjusted, and darker shapes within the room became chairs. A table. No movement other than Levi, off to my right. Laura was to the left; she took a quick, backward step to check the door. Her movements matched my rapid breathing, harsh in my ears. No... scents, I realized. The air had the staleness of a forgotten room.

Keep moving, Noa.

Laura walked behind me. I listened to the soft scuff of her rubber-soled shoes. Levi circled through the kitchen, holding up a hand gesture to say *all clear*.

Go down the hall... find the closet... open the door.

Leave the rest to Levi.

Laura will follow you.

The hall was darkly oppressive. I slid my hand along the wall, found the door handle. The click when the latch slid back was dull and heavy.

Pull outward, fold the door against the wall. Laura will brace it if she finds something. Keep moving regardless.

The runes prickled, but so did the goose bumps rising on my skin from the cold, and I focused on the steps leading down. Dry, not wet or slippery, a small comfort. Laura breathed

behind me. I thought she sounded tense. My palm dragged along the rough wooden railing and I worried about splinters.

No sounds other than those we made. The arctic chill meant our breath puffed in ghostly streams. I couldn't imagine a wounded girl surviving long at this temperature. My heart sank because no white puffs distorted the air, other than those Laura and I made. I pressed my palm against the wall, pulling in heat until a tiny orb of light danced off my fingertips.

Standing in the chilled basement, I slowly circled, chasing the shadows but seeing only a dirty mattress. A discarded blanket. Laura stood beside me. Then, in the walls, archways opened like waking eyes and chaos flowed through. Laura screamed. Overhead, Levi was swearing. What registered was his excruciating pain, followed by a thud that jarred my entire body.

I spun, dragged energy up from the floor and surged it toward the menace rushing toward us. In the semi-dark, streams of flaming light became exotic feathered whips, wielded as if I was an angry demon, and in the ruby illumination, I saw men. Gorgeous, deadly men. Laura was writhing on the floor. Her hands were protecting her face, and it made no sense until the air became thick and choking. Bitter powder coated the back of my throat. Accumulating as if it would suffocate me.

I swallowed, coughed. Fell to my knees.

My fingers clenched around the black sigil.

It felt cold.

CHAPTER 29



Noa

THROUGHOUT MY CHILDHOOD, NIGHTMARES had always plagued me, and the worst came from the fear of being *faillie*. The fear that—if I wasn't careful—I could bring something terrifying and evil into the world.

I'd since learned that many monsters ran loose in the world that I'd wanted to protect. Monsters I never would have known about if I wasn't one of them.

And I was back in the nightmares, in the dark, a night so impenetrable it crushed. Each time I breathed, the stench of rotting things grew more unbearable. Claws were digging into my back, hooking my clothes, ripping and cutting. But I was sane enough to hover on the edge of hysteria. Hover and not fall because the dark always wanted fear. Craved it.

Fear fed the monster.

Open your eyes, Noa.

I refused, needing to thwart the dark. Needing to work through the events that brought me here. I was on my stomach, clenching my fingers in what I thought was dried grass. But the texture was thick, sharp against my palms, with tiny, crackling paper-cut edges slicing into my cheek when I moved my head.

From several feet away, a furtive rustle sent goose bumps racing along my arms, and I knew the sound was meant to alarm me. To force my eyes open. Make me watch as danger approached.

Open your eyes...

My lids fluttered as if my lashes were weighted. Objects swam into focus. I was lying on a hilltop. A woman stood nearby. Her black hair was streaming—silver glinting in the sunlight. Red lips pulled back in a feral smile. She raised her hands and destroyed the people surrounding me, my friends, my found family. My love.

Puffs of blood and ash.

I cried out.

“Noa!” Another voice. A hand pressing against my lips. Someone leaning close. “Please. Open your eyes. Look at me. See me.”

The nightmare snapped out, but the straw beneath my cheek remained. I gagged on the urine stench. Gaped at the red-hot pain in my back, down my left arm. I was feverish while chills locked my muscles. Drool gathered behind my lips, leaked from the corner of my mouth, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Breathe, Noa. Chew these.”

I recognized Laura’s voice. She held a small leaf. My lips parted; she pushed it onto my tongue. Then a second.

“Swallow the bits. The leaves will neutralize the poison.”

Her hand lightly brushed my back, and the contact was so blindingly painful I nearly blacked out. I gasped for breath. Tears pooled in my eyes, but with the leaves in my mouth, I couldn’t make a sound. Saliva seemed nonexistent after my drooling. Still, I chewed, forced myself to swallow.

“Where...”

“Vampires,” she hissed, leaning close. “Just listen, Noa. Don’t talk. We’re in cells. Deep underground. Levi is across from us. They shot iron bolts through him. One in his

shoulder. One through his leg. It means he can't shift into his wolf. It will kill him."

I opened my mouth as she pushed another leaf against my lips. The crumbling pieces had the woodiness of stale herbs, and I tried not to gag.

"I can't get to him," Laura whispered. "But I can see him. He's unconscious. A blessing for now. They dosed us with wolfbane powder at the house. I'm immune. Ever since... well, ever since the Alpen, I swore I'd never be vulnerable like that again. I'm a healer. I learned what plants could blunt wolfbane and I've been dosing myself for years. I pretended to be affected, and you need to pretend too, once the wolfbane wears off, or they'll keep dosing you."

She tipped a small bottle against my lips.

"They left water—it's pure. I've been drinking it and I'd know if it wasn't. Tiny sips. You'll feel like crap, but it's from your back and your arm, not the wolfbane."

She was readjusting my shirt, which seemed oddly loose and... in pieces.

"Noa." Her low tone was professional. "They cut through all your runes out of spite. To blunt any magic. I've stopped the worst of the bleeding, but if a guard comes by with food, I'll ask for something to fight infection. The wolfbane acts as an anesthetic, mostly for nerve pain, so it's going to get worse as the wolfbane wears off. You need to let it wear off, let the overdose leach from your system, and I'm sorry I'm not as good as Gray. I can't heal you the way he does, but I can make it easier for you."

"How..." I choked out.

"I can speed the healing. If you syphon a bit of energy, flow it into me, I'll close the deepest cuts. You'll need to try, Noa. It's important."

I curled my fingers into the straw, but the effort to syphon spun through me until I was dizzy. Spasms riddled my body. The burning was like worm poison all over again, only a hundred times worse, and Grayson wasn't there to help me.

With the pain, I became unhinged, drifting, unable to hold my fingers still enough to make sustained contact with the straw or the stones beneath. I closed my eyes, breathed shallowly, fighting the sounds that quaked and struggled in my throat when I needed to be silent. I would not draw the attention of the guards Laura talked about—the ones who cut me—who would gloat at my weakness.

I hated it with each breath I sucked in through cracked lips. Hated the grief that wrenched through me. I'd failed when it mattered the most. I hadn't protected my friends—I'd led them into disaster. And now, I couldn't even syphon a spark of energy to help Laura with the healing.

"It's okay." Laura leaned close and brushed the hair from my damp cheek. "We'll try later. Sleep now, sweetheart."

"Sing... to me," I whispered.

Tears stung my eyes when she started to sing.

Hush little baby... don't you cry.

Her voice was sweet, pure, and if it was an illusion, I still drifted until the pain brought me back. My skin grew so taut I thought I was splitting open, inch by inch. The heat was worse. Not just my skin, but the muscles beneath—was this the damaged magic in the runes? Bleeding out?

I stared at the bloody slashes carved through the wolf sigil.

Whoever had wielded the knife paid extra attention to the wolf, nearly obliterating it.

Laura was still beside me, pouring precious drinking water over my back, down my arm to my wrist where the blood was sticky between my fingers. I gripped her hand, pulled a thread of heat and pushed it through her. She stroked with her free hand, moving over each wound until the muscles relaxed. The throb lessened, as if fewer cuts were open to the air. Laura leaned in, murmured her suspicions. The vampires had rubbed ointment into the wounds to keep them raw and open—one of their tortures. But I was the *faillie*. I was a valuable threat that needed to be weakened. Hadn't Mace warned me?

Hadn't Grayson looked at me with shadows in his eyes? Trusting me, despite his anger over the danger?

For endless minutes, I stared at nothing while my heart beat and tears ran down my cheeks. For him, what I'd put him through. The anguish.

"Wait for me," I'd told him. "I'll be right back."

The sob that broke free could not be muffled, but I pressed my lips against my fist and tried. In the dark, in the shadows, time had little meaning. I slept, and when I woke, the pain had lessened enough for me to look around. Laura was sleeping, curled in the corner. I had questions, but I wouldn't disturb her for the answers.

I pushed upright, breathing through the effort. It was easier than I'd feared, and I sorted through what I could remember. The attack had been planned because someone had seeded the empty house with a girl's energy. And if the enemy knew we were coming, they would have also attacked the team waiting in the forest.

Hours would pass before our silence became suspicious. Grayson would learn what had happened. He'd be angry. But he'd fight to find us. Mace and Fallon would fight, too. Bring reinforcements. Wolves I didn't even know would risk their lives—more debts that I would owe to the dead.

But Laura. Levi. I hadn't saved them all those years ago just to watch them die now. I owed them my strength. My wits, my *faille* abilities, and despite bloody runes and weakness, I could still fight.

First, I needed some sense of my surroundings. Details came into focus. Shapes, then colors, edges. A gray stone floor, stone walls.

We were in a cell with iron bars between us and the wide corridor—jailer's bars, stretching from floor to ceiling and caked with a crust of rust.

Levi was a shape in a similar cell, curled on the floor, not moving. Between his cell and ours, a flagstone corridor

stretched. I could see similar cells, cloaked in shadows cast by overhead electric lights that flickered with the power surges.

I pushed my hand through the straw, testing the stones for energy traces. A low thrum scraped across my palm. Folded near the iron bars, I found a clean shirt. Well, it was reasonably clean, but intact and better than the torn rags the vampires left of my shirt when they attacked the runes on my skin.

Fingers flexing, I braced and dragged what was left of the old shirt over my head. I needed a moment while waves of pain subsided. Then I gathered the folded shirt, pulling it one-handed over my head.

“That looks awkward.” A girl’s voice, dry and amused. Slightly bitter. “Don’t ask where that shirt’s been.”

My gaze skimmed the other cells, all empty until I settled on the girl. She sat in the small cubicle next to us, braced in a back corner where the shadows were dark, drawing circles in the straw with her finger.

“I’m not asking,” I gritted, pulling the shirt into place.

“Your choice. But that shirt belonged to a dead girl. Vamps are sick bastards. And you’ll only attract attention, taking what they offer.”

Deep down, I recognized the provocation was deliberate—but was it because she disliked me, or because she was frightened? I couldn’t decide.

What I had to remember was that I’d gone to a house to rescue a girl and woke up in a dungeon with a girl conveniently sitting in the next cell. She could be anyone. The girl sold by wolves to vampires. Or the girl already doing the vampires’ bidding.

I held her gaze, what I could see of it in the low light, testing her with my *faillie* senses. Looking for a similarity. I could see her watching me in return, evaluating her next move. I wouldn’t let the next words come from her mouth.

“Where are we?”

She wrinkled her nose, drew her lips down. “Could be a sewer—smells like it, doesn’t it?”

Word games, I thought. All right. Spin it out between us. We had nothing but time. But then she kept talking.

“They told me we’re beneath High Citadel. Catacombs or something.” She glanced around, her dark hair like a shadow with only a silver thread of light. “It’s where they torture people. Humans, mainly. The last girl screamed a lot. They finally dropped her into that grated hole in the center of the corridor. They call it a way out. More like a black pit. She hasn’t made noise for a few days, so I guess she found her way out. Stupid, screaming banshee.”

I remembered the determined girl Adriel described, who wanted to escape from her father. I’d wanted to help that girl. She’d disappeared months ago, but months in this hellhole would change anyone and could explain the apathy in this girl’s voice. The lack of sympathy for banshee girl’s weakness.

I tried to get a better look at her face. “How long have you been here?”

“Weeks—months.” She tipped her head back, stared at the stony ceiling. “Between that asshat who called himself my father, and the asshat suckers he sold me to, I gave up thinking about time.”

She lowered her eyes enough to watch my reaction. “I’m Brin. It’s a name, means nothing. I keep who I am to myself. Your friend said you were trying to rescue me.” A small spark spun away from her fingers, not enough to do more than singe the straw. “You get credit for trying.”

I stared at her circling finger instead. “What else can you do besides sparks?”

White teeth flashed in her smudged face. “No one flaunts around here. They cut you over stupid runes. What *will* they think of with fire?”

“They don’t like fire?”

“Those suckers burn like dried tinder. I accidentally got one the first day, turned him to ash.”

“Can you syphon?” I persisted. Something about her kept my *faillie* senses on edge. If she was genuine, or a very good fake.

She rolled her shoulders, tipped her head to the side. “Show me yours before I show you mine. Vamps want a *faillie*. I won’t help them out, so maybe they bring in a new girl like you. New girl asks what I can do, and—bam. I stupidly show off. They get what they want. Can’t be too careful in this funhouse.”

I could understand her point. She was so like me; I could be looking in a mirror and seeing the truth reflected. “Don’t you want to fight back, Brin—or whatever your name is?”

A flame leapt from her fingers; she shook it out with a jerking motion as if she’d burned herself with the unexpected fire.

“Your friend said you could show me things.”

“My friend must have talked a lot.” I didn’t want the sympathy for her that rushed, but when Brin pressed her lips together, I thought she looked... young. Then she wrapped herself in the hardened cynicism, tipped her head back against the stone wall.

“You’ve been out of it for a while. Noa—right?”

I nodded, but she wasn’t looking at me. She stared at the bluish light from the overhead light bulb as it flickered, and the single moth that darted too close to death.

“Your friend isn’t sleeping,” she said. “They caught her giving you those leaves and beat her. If that’s her brother across the way, he isn’t doing so good, either. But you and me—we’re the lucky ones, aren’t we? See...” She leaned forward and tightened both arms around her upraised knees. “We have value, so they don’t give us too much of that wolfbane shit. Just enough to be nauseous and annoyed as hell. Pretending keeps them off my back about it, though.”

“Were you ever at that house?”

“For a while. Then they got all agitated about something and moved me here.”

My nerves prickled. “Do you know what they want?”

“They want to turn me into some shit hybrid, but not until they’re sure I’m freak enough for it. I’m not sitting here waiting.”

Brin rocked to her hands and knees, crawled toward the iron bars, and sat back down again. Then she wrapped both hands around the bars where they met the paved floor. “I’ve been working on weakening these. Almost got it.”

The bars scraped against the stone as she rocked them back and forth.

“Can’t let them catch me doing it, though. That’d set off their freak meter for sure, and I’d have my ass dragged away and to wherever they plan to do it. Suck out all my blood and put their blood back inside. They’ll do it to you, too. It’s just a matter of time. Don’t suppose you could take these bars out from over there, could you?”

“Not without a plan.” Brin was far from the helpless girl I’d imagined rescuing, but her jadedness gave away a deeper vulnerability.

“How old are you?” I asked her.

“Sixteen.”

Something scurried through the straw, and without thinking, I zapped energy in that direction and fried a rat. The steaming carcass looked like dried leather while Brin laughed.

“Don’t overcook the food,” she mocked. “They told me people starve to death down here. That’s why I say that hole is better. Get it over with.”

“I know you don’t think about time, but have you monitored their movements?” She was smart enough to measure everything in a dungeon with no outside light.

“From the food rotations, I’d say you’ve been here three days.”

It seemed longer to me, but all my senses were disoriented, and I remembered the way time lost meaning when I’d been with the nymphs. With Effa and Caerwen.

The damaged runes sizzled with random static. Some had scabs. Others itched. I couldn't connect my jumbled thoughts together into more than ideas lasting a few seconds before they slid away. Every time I looked at the mutilated black rune, I couldn't breathe.

Brin had turned away. I was relieved. We were done with the talking, and I curled on the cold floor, missing Grayson's heat. I imagined him lying next to me and felt empty because he wasn't there. I couldn't even hold his memory for long in my mind. Instead, I worried about things beyond my control—how angry Grayson would be with me. Or if he'd go full-on dread lord against the vampires. I worried about Mace, telling me how I'd screwed up in that empty house. Hadn't sensed the danger.

I worried about Fallon, deceiving Anson for my sake. What it would cost her when he learned the truth.

I worried that she'd decided for the wrong reasons and would regret it. Anson Salas would not be forgiving. Grayson couldn't keep our secret now that we'd disappeared into this black hell. He'd need Anson's help to mount a rescue, but Anson would not offer it, not after betraying him the way we did. And thinking about betrayals—had Julien set the trap with his information? Or had someone betrayed him?

We were in High Citadel, the vampire's stronghold. No one would come to save us, and maybe Grayson was right. I should burn everything down and not care, because compassion hadn't gotten me anywhere.

I should break through the bars and do what I came here to do. Save Brin because I needed her help to read a book, not because she deserved rescuing. We could get to Levi, battle our way out of this dungeon. I'd syphon energy. Destroy anyone blocking us.

But if they shot bolts into Levi once, they'd do it again. Shoot into Laura. Me. And Brin. She didn't seem to believe in or care for anyone. Wolves had betrayed her. But I couldn't stop caring about her.

I remained silent when a vampire walked down the corridor, a female wearing black robes with her head draped in a red-lined cowl that obscured her face, reminding me of the Gemini Witches with their flawless faces covered by veils. A shudder sent goose bumps across my skin. But the vampire wasn't a threat. She brought food, a thin soup. Brin drank hers, while I slid the bowl closer to Laura. Her eyes were puffy but open, and I helped her sit, then spooned the soup into her mouth.

"I'm sorry about the leaves," I murmured. "What they did to you."

"Good thing I have more," she choked out. "Sewn into my... bra."

"Can I help you heal?"

She gripped my hand, held my fingers against her ribs, and I surged a gentle heat. "Better?"

"Yes." Her eyes fluttered closed.

I wished we had a way to reach Levi. He woke more often, moaning. But then, a vampire came to pull the bolts from Levi's body. He had someone with him. They held Levi down, working slowly and not out of kindness.

Laura and I watched. She gripped my hand, and each time Levi screamed, her fingernails cut into my skin, drawing blood from wounds I thought I deserved—and I deserved far worse. I'd asked Levi to come with us. I'd asked Laura. Their suffering was my fault.

Brin was silent, but I supposed torture wasn't something anyone wanted to talk through, or about, after it was done and Levi was quiet again.

When another vampire arrived to treat Levi's wounds, we decided it was a good sign. At least Brin thought so. She said we all were valuable enough to keep alive.

For now.

CHAPTER 30



Noa

LIGHT BULBS FLICKERED, BURNED out, and no one bothered to replace them. The shadows deepened, and I told myself it was a blessing because the dark made it easier to sleep. Easier to shut out the grated black hole. The stony prison with rusted bars.

I could ignore the cold in the dark, and the vampires who came and went. Some brought the bowls of thin soup. Others tossed bottled water, laughing when the bottles bounced off the cell bars and rolled beyond reach. I learned how to retrieve them when the vampires weren't around. To syphon small surges of energy, then zap at the bottles.

Brin was better at it than I was. She said to aim at the backside of the bottle, spin it closer. But she'd had more time to practice, and I supposed she had more *faille* ability than she wanted to reveal.

Still, I was uneasy around Brin. I didn't want to doubt her when she'd done nothing wrong, and perhaps my anxiety came from the wolfbane, a drug not fully out of my system. Brin said the vampires wanted to see if she was freak enough to be useful, so it made sense that she'd keep secrets, hide the ability she had. I should, too, and since I'd never met another *faille* before, other than my mother, judging Brin wasn't fair.

Leaning back, I kept my thoughts from my expressions. The chill from the rough stones against my spine made me shiver. The runes on my arm itched with the healing. Gently, I rubbed at the skin, missing the magic I'd once wondered about, if it thought me worthy enough for protection.

So long ago.

The lights flickered again, and my attention shifted to the vampires sauntering down the hall—they weren't the vampires who usually came to change the buckets of stinking brown sludge. These were new, and Brin said, with her lips barely moving, "Stay quiet. Don't call attention to yourself."

She'd pulled her knees toward her chest, and I matched my posture to hers. I still wore the jeans I'd pulled on at the watchtower house. I'd lost the knitted hat during the fight in the house cellar, and the leather vest had disappeared when they'd sliced my shirt to get to the runes. I refused to think about the dead girl whose shirt I now wore.

But Brin had warned me to stay still. I didn't move, but, watching them, I fought the urge to syphon energy and wipe away the smirks on their faces. Each time they picked up a bucket of the brown sludge, they deliberately spilled it on the overly soiled straw, laughing as they kicked through the mess.

I would deal with the mess in our cell, but I tried not to bristle when a vampire opened Levi's cell—Levi didn't move fast enough. He could barely crawl with his injuries, and when the vampire grew angry, kicked out, I heard Levi's muffled grunt.

"Fucking vampires."

The vampire snorted, grabbing Levi's ankle, dragging him from the cell. Levi struggled. He lost his grip on the rusted cell bars, and as his fingers scraped against the sharp edge of stone, he left smears of red behind.

In the flickering light, his clothes looked blood-stained and dirty; it was hard to tell the dark stains apart. A reckless power pulsed through my veins, driving me to my feet. I shouted.

The vampires ignored me.

I swore. Over and over. But when the vampire dragged Levi toward the grated black hole, panic exploded. All I could think about was the screaming banshee girl. Being dropped into the dark, a permanent way out.

My hands scraped around iron bars that were ice-cold, crudely made, meant to hold the soon-to-be dead.

“You freaking, fucking monsters!” I blubbered, choking, gripping the skin-shredding bars, reaching for the trace energy, pulling it... pulling it into my hands. The trickle that moved like thick, reluctant molasses.

My entire body was shaking with the effort to turn the vampire’s attention—turn his vindictiveness toward me. Force him to take on someone who wasn’t writhing in agony. Someone who could fight back.

The bars vibrated from stone floor to stone ceiling. Bits of dirt fell from overhead like black rain. Soggy straw juddered around my feet as if trying to escape. Laura stumbled to my side and put her hands on my arms.

“Noa,” she hissed. “Noa, let go.”

“It’s Levi. The grate...” Sobs mangled my words. Levi was moaning, and I was hissing, “Bastards!”

“Hey—asshats!” Brin yelled, clattering her empty bowl against the bars before she threw it toward them. I counted three vampires—one with Levi, one still in Levi’s cell spilling the sludge, and one watching. “Come fight someone who’s not comatose.”

I glared at her through bleary eyes. Tears made everything distorted, and I couldn’t figure out what she was doing. But the vampire dropped Levi, turned toward Brin, and I realized she was doing what I couldn’t do.

She was protecting Levi with her cool challenge. Attracting the enemy’s attention while I sobbed and frantically drew useless energy.

Hysterics meant nothing to them when they wanted me suffering along with everyone else. But a girl who stood there

unafraid—that was something different. Why was Brin doing it? Putting herself in danger?

The metal bars were softening beneath my grip. Heating enough to get through to me—*that* was why she was doing it. I was out of control and revealing too much, letting them see what I could do. It was what Laura tried to stop with her hands on my arms. What Brin realized before I did, how the bars were already deforming.

I couldn't even save Levi without stupidly giving my abilities away, the only defense we had, and I choked on the saliva clogging my throat. Let go and wiped the snot from my nose while the cell bars solidified with the faint indents left from my fingers.

I was angry because Brin had more control than I did, but it was envy more than anger, and I couldn't hate her for it. Or think she was less *faillie* than I was. Brin had been with vampires longer than I had. She knew how they would react if she challenged them—what I should have known.

She also expected the reaction and actually smiled, taunting the vampire when he approached her cell. He pushed the air with his hand and a ripple of blasting power knocked her backward. I heard the thud of her body, the stifled cry when her head cracked against the wall. Blood smeared across the stones before she curled on the straw-covered floor.

The gorgeous man who attacked her opened the cell long enough to make sure she was alive, while I stared at his face, committing it to memory. To the list of who I would destroy before this was over.

“Stupid bitch,” he growled.

“Fuck, yeah,” Brin panted. “Touch me next time. I'll catch you on fire.”

“Shit, Brin.” I hissed when we were alone. “Why did you do that?”

She didn't look at me, but she bared her teeth and said, “Better me than you. No one else can get us out of this.”

How wrong she was. I'd been useless, caught up in my emotions while she had acted stone cold.

"Let me help you," I said.

"I'm fine." Brin pulled her knees up and withdrew behind defiance, but she was still fighting the world for the right to exist. My questions about trusting her grew more pointless with every passing hour. I gave her the benefit of the doubt. The respect she'd earned. Really, with a little more practice, Brin could probably reverse the power wave and blow it up in the vampire's face.

Wouldn't that be something to watch?

A draft swept through the corridor. The frigid air added another layer of discomfort. The overhead lights flickered with the uncertainty of a storm.

Laura pulled me down to the straw. I was grateful that Brin and Laura had noticed the weakening bars before the vampires did, but my fingerprints were still indented in the iron, and I was dreading the retaliation. Someone would notice, eventually.

Levi remained in the corridor, a crumpled heap, frighteningly close to the dry well. No one bothered to move him, but if there was a silver lining, it was that I'd learned something from the encounter.

The vampires had attacked Levi close up. But they attacked Brin from a distance, using a surge of energy she'd expected. I needed to ask her what else they used against her because the assumptions vampires made about *faibles* exposed *their* weaknesses. The ways I could attack them in return—like using fire. Brin might not be ready to trust me, but we had to stick together until I found a way out.

A soft scuffing in the corridor pulled my head around. The female vampire had returned. I recognized the robe and the inner red lining of the cowl, which she pushed back with both hands. Pale, white-gold hair swirled around her shoulders. Her lips were blood-red, perfect, and the flawless features proved the females were as gorgeous as the males.

She dropped to her knees to check on Levi, then pushed upright. Moments later, the door to our cell swung open. Another female joined the first vampire and, together, they moved Levi into our cell. They set him gently on the cleanest straw, which wasn't saying much, but the only blanket was there.

"The sires have called a meeting," she said, her voice low enough that I couldn't place her accent. "They're arguing. Some approve of hunting *failles*. Others are opposed. They say nothing good can come from it, and trouble is spreading."

I wondered where the trouble was spreading. If it included the wolves. If anyone in the vampire camp realized they'd infuriated a dread lord. Because I had little doubt that Grayson was infuriated.

But I was here, and it was my responsibility to keep everyone alive. "We need better food," I said. "More blankets and clean clothes. Fresh straw. Levi needs medical care."

"I can provide food and clothes," the vampire said. "What care he receives is up to your healer."

She looked at Laura, who nodded. Then she glanced back at me.

"No one is safe right now. I will do what I can, but survival is up to you."

"What do they want?"

"Something that threatens many," she said. "They want you."

"Why me?"

"You are *faille*."

So was Brin, but she hadn't been included in what the sires wanted. Nerves pricked my skin.

"Vampires are afraid of fire," I said, rubbing my thumb against my clenched forefinger.

The vampire's smile flicked. "We have spent centuries protecting ourselves. The one who burned was stupid. He

deserved his fate, but there are others who thirst for revenge. And they will all kill what they can't control."

Beside me, Brin had gone tense and quiet.

"Believe nothing they say," the vampire murmured as she smoothed the front of her robe. "Only some of what you see."

"Trouble filters everywhere," I said cautiously. "What should I believe?"

She glanced at the ruined black rune on my wrist. "Your history goes back to the ancient, vengeful queens—and you have already faced creatures like those of old. Killed them."

I opened my mouth to ask what else she knew, but the warning that flashed in her eyes kept me from speaking. Her lowered gaze swept toward the acolyte beside her, then to the stone corridor before she pulled the cowl over her head, concealing her face.

"You have powerful enemies," she whispered as she turned away. "And a dimmed light is often overlooked. Trust no one."

As I thought about the interaction, I realized how much information she gave. It was harder to accept than I thought. This wasn't an isolated case of a few vampires hunting *faillies* or wanting hybrids. If powerful factions were involved, willing to kill what they couldn't control, more was at stake than anyone imagined.

I didn't know how long we sat there without speaking. I longed for the Green Man's puppy magic because it always understood what I wanted before I wanted it. Then I remembered something from months ago. I'd argued with Grayson about never making a bargain with the Green Man.

He'd growled at me, and said, "*Perhaps it's an expectation for something in the future.*"

Laura was bending over Levi. I held out my hand to her. Surged energy through my fingers into hers, watching as she worked slowly over his battered body. Healing what she could. The bruises, the wounds from the bolts. I could see where the skin had drawn together, still red, but no sign of infection.

But the rawness I felt didn't come from him, or his wounds. It came from me. I ached for Levi. For Laura, having to save her brother again, and again. For Brin, who suffered for my impulsiveness.

I ached for Sutter. For Burn, who lost his home. For Jodan, who lost his life. For all the others, attacked by creatures. For the forests. For the peace in sunlit meadows, the quiet of a stream. The nights flooded with stars and moonlight. Breezes fragrant with flower scents. Birds rustling in the trees. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the Night of the Beacons, the glimmering fires on hilltops and distant mountains. How one fire triggered the next, then the next, all the fires, lighting like a string of precious gems, and it hit me, how events could be strung together until they formed a pattern.

I couldn't pretend it hadn't already crossed my mind to wonder. Why were vampires so interested in *failles*? And just what the hell did they know about an ancient, vengeful queen who had lived for so long?

Now, I thought... they knew quite a lot.

That night, while everyone was sleeping, I played. I drew energy from the stones, then swirled it, thinned it. Wrapped it around the sludge bucket like a shroud. I could see it, faintly glowing, shimmering. A mirage. I'd gotten the idea after thinking about the witch cave, and how the illusion wrapped around everything like spun glass. Now, I tested my creation. Tossed bits of straw toward the bucket. Studied the way they bounced back, singed.

I continued to toss the straw. Holding my concentration. I was aware of Brin's interest. Her expression revealed little, but her attention never wavered. It wouldn't hurt for her to know some of what I could do. I had to trust at some point.

"That won't be enough," she said.

"Baby steps," I told her. "We all start somewhere."

"What about your man coming? The vampire said trouble was spreading."

I spun the energy upward toward the ceiling and thought of a tornado. The chaos.

“He’s a dread lord, isn’t he?” Brin asked. “You talk in your sleep. You said he’d burn down the world for you.”

“He may be doing that right now,” I said, snapping my fingers as the energy dissolved and drifted harmlessly away.

“You talk a lot when you sleep. Sometimes, I hear it in my head.”

Alarm bells jangled. Was she fishing for information about the *faille* bond?

You have powerful enemies. Trust no one.

Did that extend to Brin? I’d picked up nothing of her thoughts, and I wasn’t even sure if Mace was right in his description of a *faille* bond. What if that bond existed only between the queen and me, and what if Brin had told me exactly what she was here to do? Get me to show off. Reveal what I could do.

Once again, I was unsure of her. “I can’t hear anyone in my head,” I said. “No wolf, no pack bond.”

“I get that.” She sounded disappointed, but I would play this game. Teach her, the way Caerwen taught me during my time in the wrinkle. See what she could handle, if her attempts at fumbling would give off an ability she wanted to hide. Brin needed to convince me whether she was an enemy or friend, and I’d take a page from Grayson’s book, test her.

I explained how *failles* drew energy from everything, held it deep inside, then let it flow outward. I showed her how to move small rock chips hidden in the littered straw. Murmured encouragement when she spread her fingers and huffed with the effort.

Training helped pass the time, and Brin learned quickly. I warned her manipulating energy came at a cost. Each time we did it, we weakened ourselves. I hadn’t forgotten the image projected on the cave wall of the *failles*, using their energy during battle until they collapsed, no longer able to defend themselves.

I felt more in control. The food improved. Levi no longer moaned in his sleep; I knew because he stayed in the cell with us. It was Laura's night to have the blanket since, despite my requests, they limited us to one. Levi slept, while Laura curled at his side. They both needed to recover from the beatings.

I was relieved to see them finally resting while I sat with my back to the stone and stared at the corridor, unable to sleep. Brin was restless, moving around in the straw.

The chill seeping from the stone into my back wasn't normal. I was used to the temperature in the dungeon. Within a few degrees, it was tolerable and rarely changed, unless someone left a distant door propped open and a breeze swept through.

The lights had dimmed again, as if the electrical grid was unreliable. I stared at the shadows that gathered in the corridor, in the cracks between the stones. What was it keeping me on edge? The shadows darkened along the corridor wall where it joined the floor—but they were moving. I had the sense of something evil slithering across stones. Seeking, searching like the tongues of mist I'd witnessed in the witch cave. Tasting the air.

The hair at my nape rose. Alarm tingled. Shadows crept up and outward, crowding the corridor. A dark fog now, or a mist, but sentient. Aware.

"Brin," I hissed. She didn't immediately answer. I crawled across to Laura. Shook her shoulder to wake her. "Hurry."

"Noa?" She pushed to her elbows, her brown hair a riot around her face.

I turned to Levi and shook him, my fingers clenching in his shirt. "Hurry."

He was slower to move because the wound in his leg made it difficult for him to crawl, but they needed to get away from the bars. From the front of the cell. I gripped Laura's hand.

"Help me move Levi," I hissed, frantic. "*Hurry.*"

He struggled like a dead weight. Laura's eyes had widened with worry while every nerve I had danced with the jolting

need to get away, get away.

I glanced back at the corridor. The miasma carpeting the stone floor was thickening and inches deep now, oozing through the bars of the cell two doors to our right. Dark tentacles wrapped around the iron, slid through and crept across the floor, rolling up the stone wall with gathering momentum, as if scouring for a scent.

A rat dashed from the corner, tearing headlong into the murky shadows. An instant later, it squealed.

I scabbled faster in the straw. "*Brin.*"

She looked at me, then toward Levi's old cell where the fog was rolling into the depths, a black flood. The grated dry well in the corridor disappeared beneath the thickly layered mist. Tendrils poured between the bars of the cell next to us.

The momentum never slowed, and there was no way to get above the sinuous flow.

"In the corner, closest to us," I hissed to Brin, waiting until she looked at me. "Up against the bars. As small as you can get. Laura."

I was gesturing wildly, but she'd already understood and struggled to shift Levi into the corner. He leaned against the stone wall with his knees drawn up, pressed hard against the bars separating our cell from Brin's. Laura huddled against him, protective. Brin was crawling into place.

The mist churned through the empty cells, having found nothing but the rat, and was now seeping into our cell, shifting the blades of straw, lifting them before consuming with a palpable hissing. The stench was corrosive and different, nothing like what I'd experienced in the cave leading to the Gemini Witches. Already, the sting was pitting my skin. My lungs spasmed. Like the rat, we would not survive whatever this was, not if it found us. Touched us.

I looked at Brin. "Reach through the bars and grip my arm. Flow as much energy as you can into me, and don't let go."

Her face paled, but she did as I asked, and I relished the first hot threads of her energy. Bright and young. I pulled heat from

the floor, from the rock walls against my back. I dug deep into my *faillie* center, gathered the energy, then spun it out in a circular shield that surrounded us from one stony wall, through the bars, and to the other stony wall.

The wavering light slowly formed, thickening, rising as I pushed the energy higher. The first gray tendrils of mist reached the wall with an evil I could feel as well as sense. And not only me—Laura shuddered. Levi sucked in a stiff breath. Only Brin was silent as the malevolence gathered and bunched. I didn't like thinking she knew what this mist was—but she'd known what to expect from the vampires, and she'd been in this dungeon for weeks. Months. Perhaps I wasn't guarded enough around her.

We huddled on our side of the energy wall, counting the inches as the tendrils snaked higher. I could sense frustration and rage—from a sentient mist that couldn't find its way in or over a barrier.

My skin chilled while heat writhed in my fingers. I dug deeper. Pulled more energy from Brin even though she weakened.

When my muscles spasmed, fear exploded. I forced it down, summoned every ounce of control. Focused on holding the energy in place. Spinning it. My legs trembled. The burning in my eyes wasn't normal. My muscles cramped again, jolting with contractions.

The fog was a roiling cloud, white and black, churning into a malignant gray. Did Brin have enough control to take over if I failed? She would try. But if her efforts backfired, she'd shatter the energy. The shield would disintegrate, and the fog would overwhelm us.

“You're trembling,” she hissed.

“I'm weakening.”

“How can I help?”

“Laura.” I turned to her. “Hold my arm the way Brin is doing. Let me pull energy from you.”

She did it without question, and I turned to Brin. The tendrils were licking at the top of our shield. A few more seconds, and they'd be over the edge, sweeping down on us.

The fumes burned the back of my throat. Levi coughed. His eyes were wide, but with determination and not fear. He reached out and shoved his hand against my leg. Gripped hard.

“Use... me, too, Noa.”

The pain in his voice undid me. I had the terrible impulse to step off the edge. End it. If this was magic from the witches' cave, sent to find me, then perhaps the queen had known all along where I'd be.

If I was the one she wanted to destroy—why keep fighting? Why let her destroy those I loved because I refused to face the inevitable?

Defeatist thoughts, I realized. Like the thoughts in the witches' illusion. Only this time, I wouldn't give in. If I dropped the shield, I wouldn't be sacrificing myself. I'd be sacrificing all of us, and I wasn't ready to give up so easily.

I forced the weakening down and told Brin, “Push the energy out through your hands. Aim toward the top edge of the shield. At the first sign of wavering, stop.”

Tears streamed down her face, but her hands were outstretched, and she said, “If this works, I'll know how to zap spiders.”

The shadows warped into unnatural shapes.

“It's the mist from the witches' cave,” I said. “It's her. The queen, looking for us.”

I was giving away information not everyone understood, and there would be questions to follow. But we had no way out. With our backs to a stone wall, pouring energy into the wavering shield, the threatening fog trapped us. And what I siphoned became a white-water current eroding my veins, my skin and bones. Flowing with disorienting speed. My vision narrowed. Black spots danced, distorting everything I looked at. Bits of me were dissolving. When I looked at my splayed fingertips, I thought I could see the particles pulling apart...

Soon, I would be nothing.

My eyes ached as I stared into the shadows, but hope flared when the tendrils crowded, then folded back on themselves, as if they no longer held enough energy to rise. Gravity took control, and the mist fell away, retreating... emptying into the dry well in the corridor, disappearing like water down a drain.

I had the insane need to generate flames and send them into the well, burn the entity controlling the mist.

Beside me, Brin was sobbing. Levi stretched out a hand, testing the energy shield. It was gone.

Laura tried to pull me from the corner. My legs were trembling. I pushed myself upright, then crashed back to the straw. I needed to be strong, but I'd dangerously weakened myself. So had Brin. Laura hovered, trying to heal. Only rest would help.

Time.

But I couldn't sleep. Fear invaded the dark every time I closed my eyes. Bringing with it the uncanny awareness that the queen still searched, looking for some other crack to slither through.

CHAPTER 31



Noa

THE VAMPIRES BROUGHT THREE meals—the same bland soup and bottled water we’d had since arriving, but I used the meals to count the days. Then, instead of a meal, the female vampire appeared. She wasn’t alone.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Five males accompanied her, surrounding us as we shuffled out of our cells. Levi leaned heavily on Laura while I held Brin’s hand.

They marched us down the stone corridor, then up steep, narrow stairs. Another corridor followed, more stairs, until we entered a monstrous gathering hall with a vaulted ceiling. Narrow windows glittered with stained glass—ruby, indigo, gold. I couldn’t see more than the glare through abstract patterns of color. The floor was polished gray stone, great slabs laid with both squares and rectangles. At the far end, a raised stone dais held two rows of chairs. Vampires milled around, men, women, some bored or restless, others distracted by their conversations. None of them actually sitting.

I took a moment to study the lavish clothing. The women wore colorful satins, plunging necklines. Jewels glittered at pale throats. Hair styles reflected popular trends from centuries ago. The men matched the women in glamour. Some wore court costumes—what I imagined to be high fashion in the old

courts of Europe. Then there were the others, ordinary. If I'd passed them on the streets in Seattle, I wouldn't have looked twice.

Light came from modern chandeliers with electric bulbs and not candles. Tables groaned beneath a selection of foods I doubted vampires would eat. But the display mimicked a time when they'd been mortal, preening in a human world.

Opulence was the preferred design—everything and then some. Flowers arched from standing vases in fantastic displays of lilies and blood roses, ferns and ivies. A fountain spilled streams of pale, bubbling liquid—champagne, I decided, watching several giggling women fill glasses which were suddenly tinged red. Blood red, jewel-toned red. A red they held up to the light as if evaluating purity.

Everywhere, beauty and elegance glittered, but it could not outshine the underlying depravity. Manacled to the stone wall were bodies—men, women. Arms stretched wide. Legs spread, reminding me of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Only these men, women, were still alive, if one judged by the occasional twitch of a foot. A hand.

Julien hung in a prominent position. I came close to retching when I saw him. Julien, who had carried me to safety more than once. I closed my eyes. Shook beneath the guilt. Was he manacled to that wall because of me? Because I'd wanted information on Brin? Wanted to punish the people who took her? Grayson wouldn't have asked for the information if I hadn't insisted.

I couldn't let myself care. Compassion was my weakness. The human part of me that sought only the good in others. Vampires would twist compassion, use it against those I loved.

Burn it all down, Noa.

Voices became a blur. The guards herded us through the crowd and toward the dais. They forced us to stop when we reached Julien. All I had to do was turn my head to see him. Someone had plunged a dagger into his chest, deep enough to pin him to the wall. But he still breathed. His eyes were half

open, although I doubted his ability to see when agony twisted his firm mouth.

I let go of Brin's hand. She stood behind me. Levi had weakened and Laura supported most of his weight. He wasn't healing fast enough. It was more than a seventeen-year-old wolf should have to endure, the Pied Piper, the wolf who laughed and had the young ones following him. Laura put on a brave front. Brin was defiant, but beneath the posturing, she was unsure of herself. They were doing their best. But I was the one they looked to for control.

I ran frantically through the options available. The best I could do was a fantasy where Grayson stormed in to save the day. Not likely. He didn't know where we were since his informant was attached gruesomely to the wall. Not a very sanitized way to describe Julien's situation, but illusion did nothing and I preferred reality. To fight the vampires, I had to see them as they actually were. Gorgeous monsters.

I had to be like them. Be my own horrible monster.

A dimmed light is often overlooked, the vampire had said, and I silently added that a weapon that did not recognize itself was harmless.

I would not be harmless this day.

A male vampire stood separate from the others on the dais. I held his stare, raised my chin and refused to look away. To hell with Fallon's warning about staring being an invitation. I might actually welcome the hostility, out in the open.

He took one step toward me, one step down from the dais, and made it look like he was lowering himself to a gutter level.

"She doesn't look like much."

I wore stained black jeans and a dead girl's shirt—that wasn't enough to impress? The short sleeves revealed my mutilated arm and wrist, the crusted, healing runes. Every time I breathed, I scented the muck of damp straw and Levi's blood that stuck to my clothes.

Earlier that morning, Laura had smoothed and braided my hair. The silver streak was prominent, and I was glad, because

then there'd be no doubt about who or what I was.

The vampire who spoke wore black trousers and a flamboyant white silk shirt, open to reveal gold chains draped around his throat. He'd slicked his black hair with enough oil to give the strands a sheen. I worked hard not to let the disgust show on my face.

"Looks can deceive, Ago," a second vampire said. A male. I turned my attention to him.

Pure evil glittered in his dark eyes, with a glee that wasn't normal. Tall, ordinary, well-dressed in standard vampire black. My nerves skated with awareness. This was the vampire I should worry about. The reason we were here.

There were several women on the dais, but one caught my attention. She stood distant from the others. Tall. Willowy. Straight black hair fell to her shoulders. Rather than a garish gown, she wore a black silk jumpsuit with full sleeves and flared trousers. A gold belt cinched her waist. Her expression was unreadable, but she kept her gaze studiously away from the wall as she said, "Impulsive as always, Barend. Bringing her here."

She was staring at the second male—Barend, the vampire I should fear. I shivered when he smiled.

"Where else would I bring her?"

The woman's lips drew back. "You've already infuriated the dread lord with this recklessness."

"With the sigil destroyed, he has no way of tracking her."

"He has already obliterated millions in financial accounts."

Grayson! He knew where I was. Where Laura and Levi were. And he was burning down their financial world first. Sending a message.

"We are missing another sire," the female continued. "We should assume Grayson Devante has him, since he is sworn to protect the girl."

"Martel is one of yours," Barend said, rolling his shoulders in dismissal. "For all we know, you sent him to Devante

because you're as much a traitor as your progeny."

Ice prickled at my nape. I couldn't stop myself from looking toward Julien, then back to the woman.

"And you, Barend?" Her anger simmered. "There are rumors, and if creatures are close, it's because you drew them here with your obsession over *failles*. Did you think she'd stand by and do nothing? Let you create another equal to her? Amal will destroy us before you get the chance."

Amal. The name sent alarm whistling through the closest vampires. Two shimmered and disappeared. Others went back to what they were doing. But every sense I had was on fire.

"This is High Citadel." Barend's fangs descended with aggression, defiance. "No one has ever broken through our wards."

"There were traces of her energy in the dungeons."

A churning, caustic fog, actually. One that searched like one more snake in this snake pit.

Behind me, Brin pressed her fingers against my spine and the useless, ruined runes. Her hand was trembling. I didn't dare look back at her. Or at Laura, supporting Levi. He made the effort to slow his breathing, but it was harsh with pain.

I scanned the stone walls, looking for doorways. For hidden corners and shadows. Then I forced myself to look at the bodies shackled to the wall. I guessed the living were vampires, suffering a punishment or humiliation, being incapacitated but on display. A few sad, shrunken bodies meant humans were also punished, but it was a lingering death, and given a choice, I understood why the banshee girl opted for her way out.

The vampire named Ago had taken another step in my direction. I steeled myself against the confidence in his expression.

"Why are we here?" I asked.

His dark eyebrow arched. "She demands?"

I pulled my lips back in what I swore was a smile. “Did you expect a *please*?”

Ago nodded—and a pressure wave slammed into Brin, knocking her to the ground. A tall vampire stood behind her, grinning; I added him to my list of those I’d destroy. Decided this one would be right behind Ago, and the one who’d dragged Levi.

Brin lay sprawled on the gray stone with her hands outstretched, her face bruised. Blood oozed from her lip. I spread my fingers, but before I could syphon, an iron bolt slammed into Brin’s hand, pinning her to the floor like the bodies pinned on the wall.

I twisted around, breathing hard when I saw the vampire on the balcony. He held a crossbow with another bolt nocked and aimed at Levi.

“We can do this all day,” Ago said. “Don’t be obstinate. Start with please.”

I was tempted to start with asshole, but thought better of it. But I still had to force the word through tight lips. “Please.”

“Better. The first lesson—you are not in control. You are not here as our guest. And your friends will pay for your defiance, so it depends upon how much you can stomach for the sake of your pride. Cooperate, and we’ll get along fine.”

I pressed my lips together.

“You know a dangerous secret, don’t you?” he asked.

“That you kidnap *failles*?”

“You know why, don’t you?”

“No, I do not know why,” I snapped, and I swear Ago was about to flash red in his eyes as if that wasn’t a tell, and I wouldn’t know how easy it was to annoy him.

“Speak plainly, Ago,” the female snapped. “Tell her what you mean.”

“Set...”

It took an instant before I realized *Set* was the woman's name, and the vampire who spoke—Barend—was warning her about something. Set's posture had gone rigid. I watched her graceful hands fist.

Barend turned toward me. "We have need of a *faillie*."

Something in his dark eyes made my heart pound. "Why?"

"We have had them before. They're not all as strong as you."

I had to ignore the awful, muffled gasping coming from Brin while I focused on Barend. On the cunning hatred in his eyes. "How many have you killed? The fakes? The abused girls sold to you because of the bounty you offered?"

"Look at the wolves who sold them. The guilt is theirs."

Heat trickled through my fingers, and when I looked at Brin's hand, pinned to the floor, I let myself remember Mace's warning, how an enemy might prevent me from syphoning. I'd foolishly taunted with a remark about cement shoes.

Then I thought about Mosbach, sitting on a darkened deck. Offering to give the catalyst to the vampires, to the arsonists who sat back during the pack wars, picking winners and losers.

Perhaps it was time for the arsonists to burn.

"You see nothing wrong with what you do."

"Why should we?" Barend's shrug was elegant. "As I've said, we have need of a *faillie*. We had one. Now we have two, although the first one's pinned to the floor and isn't much use to me."

Laughter floated from the women still comparing the various shades of red.

"You've been buying girls."

"Expediency," he agreed.

I thought about his earlier irritation toward Set. She'd challenged him over creating an equal—a rival.

Then the pattern traced back to vampires who knew more about an ancient queen than they let on.

“Who is Amal?”

“Ah.” Light glittered in Barend’s eyes. “Amal is one of the originals. She is the blood queen who hunts you.”

I couldn’t do more than ask, “A... hybrid?”

“Yes.”

My mouth dried. I hadn’t expected him to be so honest. Admit what the vampires did... turned a queen... made her immortal. A woman who hated kings and their descendants.

Who hated Grayson.

“She believes she’s still a rightful queen,” Baren said. “She’ll take what belongs to her. Take it back from the wolves who betrayed her centuries ago. From the humans who have invaded her world.”

“You turned her?”

“Not me, personally. I’m not that old.” Barend’s amusement sickened me. “One of the original sires turned her, months after the great cleansing. Her king had stripped away her wolf, beat her. Left her for dead. A sire found her shivering, nearly frozen in the snow. Injured, dying. She pleaded for his help. He obliged. A queen, even stripped of her wolf the way Amal was, proved too powerful to resist. She became even more powerful as a hybrid. The perfect weapon.”

“Did she want to be your weapon?”

“Not at first.”

But her alternative had been dying—had Amal even realized she was asking a vampire for help? Had he never given her a choice?

“You created a monster.”

“Not intentionally.” The vampire shrugged. “She was an asset until she grew resentful. We lost track of her, but she has reemerged, and we find ourselves needing a... counterbalance.”

“You want me to be that counterbalance?” I asked, while my mind spun with a strange sympathy for Amal. Used poorly by her king. Then used by the vampires.

What happened to the part of her who ran free in the forest? Who laughed, or wanted children? Love?

“You will do it,” Barend said. “Or the girl on the floor behind you will, since she still belongs to us.”

Sweat stung in the damaged runes on my spine. “She’s a child.”

“Then protect her,” he countered. “Take her place.”

I thought it better if I didn’t answer.

Barend spread his hands while his smile thinned. “We offer the gift of our sires. The same gift that runs through our blood.”

“I don’t want it.”

“We were all asked to leave an old life behind in order to embrace a life with unlimited power.”

This was normal to him. Vampires didn’t see the depravity I did in kidnapping girls and turning them into monsters, or killing them if they proved useless. Centuries ago, they’d started this cycle by using a wounded, frightened woman, giving her endless centuries to nurse her grievances and hatred.

They’d taken the sins of the kings and the queens and magnified them with immortality.

Was this the future expectation the King of the Forest had? That I would be the one who followed the same path to defeat the enemy?

Would fate then be cruel enough to bond an immortal woman to a mortal man—because that is what we would be.

The ice that settled in my spine solidified. “You offer a gift because an unmet queen makes you tremble?”

“She won’t stop,” Berend said. “Once she learned a dread lord was back in the world, it set her quest. She’ll destroy him.

She'll destroy you and all you hold dear unless you agree to stop her."

"As one of you."

"Either you will... or the girl will."

This was madness. I turned to Brin. Blood crusted on her lip. Her cheek had already darkened with an angry bruise. The bolt pinning her hand moved each time she breathed.

My attention shifted to Laura. Despair paled her face and she struggled to hold Levi back. I caught his attention, shook my head once. On the wall, Julien's foot jerked. Tears were running from his eyes.

I had the space of two heartbeats to decide what happened to each of them, and rage sent my thoughts racing. I couldn't stop the backward step I took. My first thought was that I should kill Barend. End this now. But he'd be suspicious, quick, and I'd risk missing with a killing strike. He'd flash away, and everyone I cared about would die while I watched.

Grayson would want me to think—to look around, then ask myself why Julien had tears on his face, nearly unheard of for vampires. But Julien understood the risk, if I attacked Barend. Appreciated it better than anyone. And in his agony, he was aware enough to warn me with those laughing brown eyes now dulled with pain.

The smile on Barend's face reminded me of the Gemini Witches. Then another memory hit me. The queen's name was Amal.

Two initials, passed down alpha to alpha, for generations. One is the letter A. The other is N. One opens the door. The other reaps the vengeance.

Did the A represent Amal, and not my mother?

Was I here to reap her vengeance?

Or my own? *Against* Amal.

Barend was waiting for an answer.

Ago growled. "Just turn her. She doesn't have a choice."

“Of course she has a choice,” Barend crooned. “We aren’t monsters.”

I wondered what his definition of monster was, if it wasn’t himself.

“I’m offering something you want,” he said, as if he knew what I thought. Or perhaps it was just obvious.

“I want to walk out of here,” I said. “With my friends, and Brin—that child you want to use.” My gaze flicked past Set as I turned my head toward the shackled bodies on the wall. “And I want Julien.”

“What if I told you all that was possible?”

Vampires are treacherous, Noa.

“You can save the lives of your friends. Of the traitor. Walk out of here as one of us. Or you can resist, fight and shed blood. But what if I told you I’m offering something far greater than freedom?”

Heat stung my fingertips.

“What if I could give you what you want most in the world?” Barend took a small step toward me while Ago remained alert, a red glow of expectation in his eyes. “I can give you justice. The chance to avenge the needless deaths at Azul. And Sutter. All those innocents. You can’t stand by and do nothing. Helplessness is death to you. But I’m offering life—and you can feel it, can’t you? How the dead reach from the grave, demanding vengeance?”

His voice was like warmly caressing silk, a fine wine that flooded my mouth with the taste of revenge. Sweet and bitter and justified.

“Your heart races. Your blood heats.”

The murmured words became a darkly compelling song that sang through my veins. That jumped and danced with seductive joy, enlivened my skin.

I burned with it.

“Your lungs fill with all the possibilities.” Barend took a single step, and yet I felt him closing in; the force of his will was like a finger stroking across my skin. “Power like you’ve never known. The ability to punish the abuser. End this threat to those you love. That’s what you want, isn’t it? To protect them? Let them live in peace?”

Julien’s foot jerked. A strangled sound came from his lips and when I looked at his strained face, I remembered... he’d said vampires couldn’t read minds. But they mesmerized. Liked to play with their prey.

“You want to turn me into what Amal refused to be,” I said, looking back at the vampire, watching the way his smile tightened while mine widened. “She refused to be an obedient weapon, didn’t she?”

“What about the man you love? Don’t you want to save him from his fate?”

I clenched my hands at the word love—a violation on the vampire’s lips.

“He inked his sigil on your skin—”

“Which you defaced,” I taunted, fighting the urge to cover my wrist, hide the damaged black wolf rune. “So much fear over meaningless ink. I’m supposed to turn to you now for protection?”

Ago hissed, but Barend’s delight was grotesque.

“He will battle her and lose. You will watch him die, knowing you could have saved him. Saved them all. I can teach you. Hone you into that weapon you want so desperately to be. You have enemies and allies alike who all want to use you. But what do you want? Amal destroys everything she hates—”

“No thanks to you—”

“You want peace and I’m offering it.”

“You want me to destroy for it,” I countered as energy swirled beneath my skin. I tightened my fists to contain it.

“Safety is fought for, earned. Never given.” The first flash of fangs from him, signaling impatience, or a growing loss of control. “Without my help, you, your friends, those you love—many of them will die. Accept my offer, and I’ll grant you a better chance at peace than you could imagine or achieve on your own.”

I shot a glance at Brin, who no longer sobbed. But she glared with tear-bright eyes that glittered with the same hot wildness coursing through me.

“Too bad I can’t trust you,” I said to Barend.

The vampire seized on what sounded like negotiation. He widened his hands with a disingenuous offer. “What can we do to earn your trust?”

I glanced madly around. When my gaze locked on Julien, what I remembered was the courtly humor, calling me *my lady*. Being afraid of Grayson’s wolf. The shelter I’d found in his arms while bedlam stormed around us. How quickly he’d offered to transport Miranda and Albert to safety when I asked.

Rusty iron bands clamped around his wrists and anchored his outstretched arms to the stone wall. The same for his ankles, but what turned my stomach was the dagger through his chest—he’d told me about being daggered by his sire as a punishment, and I hadn’t wanted to believe such cruelty existed.

But it did, and here I stood, pretending civility, negotiating with a monster, knowing deceit laced every word Barend said. But if he thought this was a negotiation, I would see how far I could push.

“Release Julien,” I said. “Then I’ll consider your offer.”

“He’s being punished for his betrayal.”

My chin lifted. I held Barend’s cunning gaze. “How much is trust worth to you?”

Barend motioned with his hand. Ago smirked and walked to the wall, moving so swiftly that I missed it, the flash of a second dagger, plunging deep into Julien’s chest.

Laura screamed. My mind blanked as Ago laughed and spun, yanking her by the hair hard enough to make her stumble. Levi struggled to force his body between them, but Ago lashed out. His boot smashed into Levi's knee.

Levi went down with a thud. The vampire kicked him again, kicked his wound, then pressed another blade against Laura's throat. The eagerness in his expression was stomach-turning. "I'll carve her up while the boy watches. He'll be next. The other *faillie*... she might be useful."

Blood marred Laura's skin in thin threads. Levi was levering himself upright, using his good arm. His bad leg remained at an awkward angle; I wondered if his knee wouldn't bend. Brin was sobbing, mindlessly wrenching at the bolt through her hand as if she felt nothing.

Their survival became paramount.

Static charged the air. Several vampires milled around with excitement while others were stoic. The woman—Set. Her expression mixed fury with grief.

My sire is a woman... a handmaid to Cleopatra... it's the wise son who does not question his sire in public...

I held her gaze, cried, understood her anguish. Looked back at Ago.

His anticipation was laughable and my thoughts spiraled. What would I lose if I did what they asked?

Even if Brin helped me read the book and we found something useful. Even if there was a way to defeat the queen, to protect Grayson and everything he battled so hard to preserve. A way to keep hope alive.

If the queen was also a vampire, who could stop her? She'd invaded a vampire dungeon with a sentient mist. She controlled creatures, using them to destroy Azul. Sutter. Other outposts and small settlements. No wards could keep her out.

She'd killed the Gemini Witches from a distance, and Barend's argument was valid. It would take someone as powerful as a queen to defeat *this* queen.

Was that my vengeance—turning into someone like her?

For how many centuries had she been building her strength? Nurturing unimagined creatures who would do her bidding? Her goal was to rid the world of those who would not acknowledge her. I'd seen her open splits in the air and send a stampeding hoard through. I'd talked to the survivors of Sutter, listened to their terror. Fought the corrupted nymphs and the yellow-tusked pigs. Smelled their stench. Watched them disintegrate beneath my hands.

I knew of no greater power—not even the kings had triumphed over the queens without stripping them of their wolves first. But they'd taken away one half of the queen's power and replaced the wolf with something much worse.

Barend understood my hesitation, and he murmured alluringly, darkly, “You could become more than what you are now. Glory in the power Amal has no intention of sharing. She has hunted *faillies* as ruthlessly as any of us. Killed more than you can count. At least we hunted them for the right cause.”

The right cause?

I wanted to throw up. “You both want to use us. Destroy us. We still end up dead no matter what the motive.”

“Only mortals die for the right principle and think it makes a difference,” he said. “I'm offering immortality.”

“I'll cooperate.”

CHAPTER 32



Noa

“NOA—NO!” LAURA’S FACE REVEALED her fury. “You can’t save us. Don’t sacrifice yourself when we’re all dead, anyway.”

“Fuck yeah,” Brin grunted. “Let her do it. Let them try to take that bitch down.”

When I looked at her, I realized the bolt was no longer pinning her hand, but she held it as if it was. I turned toward Barend.

“Release them. I won’t fight you.”

Delight lit his pale face. “Ago, don’t keep the lady waiting.”

The vampire released Laura with a final jerk. She dropped to her knees with her hands over her face. Brin leaned into her, offering comfort. I couldn’t let compassion show. I couldn’t go to them, or offer any words of solace.

I had to prepare myself for what was to come.

Two vampires stood ready beside Ago; I marked them, committed their faces to memory, then shifted my attention to the men and women standing on the dais. I marked the ones who moved closer to the doors. Studied the vampires gathered behind Set.

They were all pieces on the chessboard I was about to disrupt.

Ago circled around, preening. I circled with him. This dance was what I wanted. What I craved. The energy thrummed through me.

“You haven’t released Julien.”

“He’s the bonus,” Barend said. “After you’ve proven yourself.”

“Send the others out of this room. I want them safe, or no deal.”

Barend flicked his hand, but Set swept out with her hand and two vampires stepped from her side. They helped Levi stand, then Laura. One made a show of removing Brin’s bolt as if she hadn’t already worked it free.

Timing became critical, and I braced, extending my left arm. My left wrist, where the wounds were still tender around the obliterated wolf sigil.

Ago stepped closer.

I blinked until tears pooled in my eyes. Elevated my breathing. I pretended. Became the terrified girl drifting beneath a vampire’s thrall, unable to control herself. I was that girl in the witches’ cave, giving in to their sensuality. Welcoming the prick of fangs.

My skin heated as I moistened my lips. If Ago turned me, he would be my sire—an idea that did nothing but trigger a repulsive rage. Which I smothered, offering a simpering smile, something I thought he’d appreciate. Stroke his male ego.

I wasn’t a complete monster—I saw no reason why his last moments shouldn’t be happy moments.

I hid my excitement when he revealed his fangs, his lips pulling back—I did the same, cringing back so that his fingers tightened around my wrist to hold me in place. He thought he controlled me. I controlled him. Wanted him tethered to me, the albatross he didn’t expect around his neck, the death he held on to so tightly and didn’t even know it—justice, I

thought, as I focused on the light reflecting off the gaudy gold chains, ignoring the cruelty in his mouth, the dark, soulless light in his eyes.

Patiently, I waited. Breathed as he inched closer, head dipping, cautious.

Half my face had gone numb because, when I forced another smile, my lips twisted into a grimace. But once his greed took control, his blood lust... when his attention shifted from watching me to staring at the vein pounding beneath my skin, I struck.

Energy exploded. My free hand was around his throat. His eyes widened in disbelief. His mouth slackened with the first tugging sensations—not from him, swallowing down my blood. But from me, gobbling up his energy, collapsing his veins, his cells.

I wasn't one of the fake *faillies*.

I wasn't a girl who hadn't a clue about what she was.

And maybe I was as hateful as Amal.

The air vibrated as I syphoned the undead energy that moved like thick sludge through my body. Ago's pale skin molded against sharp cheekbones, hollowed out the spaces beside his mouth. His hands were ineffective claws that I brushed aside. His mouth slackened.

For the bored vampires, they weren't watching. It hadn't dawned on them yet what I was doing. No time to wait for their appreciation. I switched hands, kept my grip on Ago, and used the energy from him and from the floor of this ancient space. Energy traces left behind by all the vampires who stood here over decades. Centuries.

I whipped the air, spun out the weapon the *faillies* of old had used against stampeding hoards. The weapon I'd used against the queen's black mist when it had entered our dungeon cell. Doors slammed; only I could reopen them, and I kept them closed. A shimmering force field shattered windows as it settled in place. The vampires reacting first escaped, but the others beat against the impenetrable barrier I held in place.

One or two turned into ash. A pity.

Movement drew my attention. Two vampires had foolish hands extended as they attacked. Perhaps they thought I was like Brin, unable to withstand the shock of a pressure pulse. I laughed when the energy hit, pulled it in, then pushed back hard enough that one vampire turned into gray dust. The other fell to his knees.

Vaguely, I heard Brin shout in triumph.

My next move was elusive—so many choices that I couldn't choose. Fire seemed tempting, but I was reluctant to turn the furnishings into blazing torches. I hadn't gone dark enough to immolate trapped vampires because I could, or because I hated them and what they'd done to a queen centuries ago. What they wanted to do to my friends—*had* done to them.

Ago was a quivering mess, and I thrilled at the power I had at my fingertips. Satisfaction abraded my skin and the pain made me euphoric. And in that instant, I understood Amal. The vindication she must have found in destruction.

“Remove Julien from the wall,” I told Barend.

He'd taken a step back, coming up against the chairs and knocking one over. The clatter added to the commotion as sires pulled guards around them, even as they realized the pointless protection. I didn't have to touch them to harm them.

Barend said, “Only the vampire who daggered him can remove the blade.”

“Let me guess. Ago.” There wasn't much left of him at that moment. “Both blades?”

Barend nodded.

Another vampire pushed through those standing on the dais. Stately, dressed in the courtly style from several centuries ago. “I am Ago's sire, Daegal,” he said. “I can remove the blades.”

I focused on the energy, listened to the sizzling hum in the air, afraid to let the hum waver. I glanced at Set. Her eyes glittered. She motioned to the blonde vampire, who went to

aid Julien. The woman's hands were gentle, holding him while Daegal pulled the daggers free.

Julien's agonized moan chilled me. His head lolled as if he wasn't in full control.

Daegal paused at my side. "You have my permission to do what you wish with Ago. Although the wall would be a better punishment."

"I'm not sure how to put him there," I admitted.

With a bow, Daegal said, "I'll do it for you."

My legs trembled. I was nearing my limits, and we still had to find a way out that didn't involve fighting. Like a child knocking a wasp's nest with a stick, I'd agitated the vampires without thinking about the result. Barend was turning away. The shield guarding the doors was disintegrating. Vampires disappeared, leaving gray wisps behind. The female—Set—approached us. "Come with me."

I'd released Ago to Daegal, so I didn't hesitate. Set led us down a darkened stone corridor, then into another until we reached a private apartment. My nerves were jumpy. I couldn't catch my breath. Set swept inside. I counted three vampires following in our wake, supporting Julien between them. Brin was helping Laura with Levi, while cradling her injured hand. Anger bristled from Set. I was drowning beneath the questions flooding through my mind. I'd used too much energy between the shadowy mist last night and then fighting the vampires today, and I still hadn't processed what we'd learned about Amal, and how that changed everything.

The furnishings in Set's apartment were clean and modern. Egyptian artifacts provided a counterpoint to the couches and slung chairs. The vampires stretched Julien on a pristine couch. The female bent over him, tending the wounds.

And despite being in the safest place I'd been during the past several days, I was more terrified now than I'd been facing Barend. The queen could penetrate High Citadel whenever she wanted. She could be hunting us now. And the

vampires who still wanted a *faillie*—the next time I attacked them, they'd be better prepared.

From the refrigerator, Set pulled a transfusion-styled plastic bag of blood. She held it to Julien's lips, helped him puncture it with his fangs. "You need to leave," she said. "My spies tell me creatures are advancing, miles away, but in this direction. I need you to take Julien with you. He isn't safe here."

"You're Julien's sire?"

For an instant, warmth flashed in her dark eyes, and her lips softened. She brushed at his hair. "Julien was always the rebel, even when he was human. That righteous streak drew me, when perhaps I should have recognized the danger. It wasn't fair to him."

"Do you keep your human personality when you turn?" My knee jerked with nerves or the urge to run, and I craved normal, something that didn't carry the weight of the world with it.

Set shrugged. "Some do. Most don't. We can be far more depraved than what you witnessed today. The arguments have only begun over this situation with Amal. She threatens our survival. Yours, too. Some say leave it to the wolves to solve, since the original sin was theirs. Others say we meddled, and the sin is now ours."

"What do you say?"

"That taking an asp from a basket is a power play only if you believe the asp's bite won't kill you." She looked at me. "You are what she could have been."

I had no idea what Set meant. Amal had opened some door, and I was stepping through to reap some vengeance.

But the woman I'd only heard screaming in my head made more sense to me. The images she'd projected on the cave wall had been personal for her. The creatures that stormed through a meadow, through Azul, the outpost in the Carmag, even Sutter, were an extension of her fury, and perhaps even her grief over being used. Rejected by a king she might have loved, who punished her in the most vicious way by taking

half of her entire being away. Her wolf... obliterated. I understood some of the pain wolves went through when their wolves fell silent. I couldn't imagine how that felt to a queen, dying in the snow.

"Let Cybelle help you," Set said. She was staring at Levi as he struggled to sit in one of the wooden side chairs. I thought he was afraid of dirtying the elegant upholstered furnishings. His jeans had damp bloodstains; the wound in his leg had reopened.

The blonde vampire—Cybelle—took Levi's arm, helped him to a soft loveseat. She bent to straighten his leg. Laura hovered. Cybelle looked up at her.

"He has not healed as you expected?"

"I think they treated the bolts with something to slow the healing."

"I suspected it the first time I treated him." She looked at Levi. "May I cut your jeans? I may have something that will help."

Levi lifted a hand. I read the exhaustion in his eyes before his head tipped back against the thick cushions. "Leave me here." His voice was hoarse. "I'll only slow you down."

"No one stays behind." I pushed a hand across my eyes. "We'll rest here as long as possible. Then we keep moving."

"I should split from you." Brin stared at her hand; a vampire was wrapping her wound. "Let them chase me."

"What's with all the self-sacrifice?" Maybe teasing was inappropriate in that moment, but it was one way I diffused anger.

"You were ready to let them turn you for us," Brin accused. And she'd said, *fuck yeah*. Because she'd known what I would do.

I tried to smile, but tightening my muscles made my face hurt. "I faked them out."

"We came together," Laura said firmly. "We go home together because I'm not explaining to Gray why we didn't.

Come home, I mean. Leaving one of us... no.”

She was shaking, and I didn't even have to think about it when she rubbed the scars on her wrist. She was remembering her escape from the Alpen. And the girls who couldn't—or wouldn't—help themselves.

A pain started in my temple and stabbed behind my eyes. Cybelle had cut Levi's jeans and was spreading an ointment on the puncture wound in his thigh. Then she wrapped the wound tightly. The white bandage was stark against his skin. I realized I was unable to pull my gaze away. My mind kept jumping back and forth between tan skin and white bandage. Laura was watching me curiously, as if she suspected I was on the verge of panic.

That wouldn't do. Not when this had been my idea to rescue Brin, and my responsibility to get everyone home safely. They had willingly accepted the risk, but what they expected was nothing like being caught in a vampire's den where people ended up nailed to the wall.

I didn't want them to know how weak I was, how far out of my depth. I stroked the ruined black rune on my wrist, knowing Grayson would understand the terror gripping me. He'd also tell me some strength was only discovered when you dug for it.

“I'll get a brace for Levi's leg,” Cybelle said. “A sling for his arm. His mobility should improve with the wounds supported.”

Laura whispered, “Thank you.”

I stared silently, glancing from Levi to Julien. His color had improved, not that vampires looked overly robust, but he looked more normal. Exhausted. I walked toward him, sank to my knees, and gripped his hand.

“Julien.”

His fingers tightened against mine. “Don't puke on my shoes.”

“I wasn't—never.”

His mouth quirked upward. “But you certainly thought about it.”

“Maybe just a little.” I smiled in return. “How about you? Into self-sacrifice, or interested in a hike?”

“I’ve hung around this place long enough. I’d like some fresh air.”

“Hanging being the operative word.” The words popped from me, but they broke the tension.

Julien tossed aside the blood bag and grinned. “My lady, the wolf deserves you. He’ll be happy to have you home.”

CHAPTER 33



Noa

SET INSISTED WE DRINK water to flush any lingering wolfbane from our systems. The water made me nauseated, but I sipped it anyway. A vampire named Njal brought backpacks. He handed me a bow and quiver of arrows. The weapon was a welcome weight in my hand. Julien looked pale, but recovered enough to move. A third vampire, Kazamir, joined Njal and Cybelle. They'd be guiding us from High Citadel through a maze of warded tunnels beneath the fortress, protected with magic that made even the vampires uneasy.

Njal was shorter than Kazamir. Both men had brown hair, brown eyes. They ushered us down stone corridors, flights of steps, until we were below High Citadel. Cybelle led the way. We went slowly because of Julien and Levi. Silently, because of what had happened in the great hall. The vampires were outraged. Anger simmered everywhere, and, according to Set, as long as we were in the High Citadel, we were in danger.

Barend was an enemy forced into the open, and everything I'd done played into his hands.

"He won't stop," she'd added. "And if he finds you again..."

The weight of the backpack on my shoulders was familiar, flashing me back to a day months ago, when Grayson led me into the high mountains. I'd gone with him, believing he would protect me, that I'd be too hard to find if the Alpha of Sentinel Falls wanted it that way.

My throat tightened. I missed him. I knew he was fighting to find me, but that was because of his sigil. His promise. He'd never answered the question I'd asked, if what he felt with the mate bond was lust. Or love.

How could anyone love after so short a time? I'd run through my emotions, night after night, dissecting my racing pulse. The dewing of my skin. I wanted to understand why I reacted to this man and no other, and why, when he dragged his hands down my sides to cup my hips, I surrendered to him. Lost myself in touching him, worshiping every scar and ridge on his body, the proof of what he'd given of himself to protect the wolves.

But he refused to take my sigil, my promise to protect him, and it was a wall between us, strengthened, brick by brick, each time I offered and he refused.

We reached a grate set into the stone floor, round like the dry well in the dungeon. I shuddered as Kazamir bent to move the grate aside. Light caught on the edge of a metal ladder. Cybelle was the first one through the opening, disappearing into the shadows, followed by Brin, who hesitated only a moment.

When I stood at the lip of the hole, I studied the first three steps on the ladder; dark shadows swallowed the remaining rungs. Then the beam from a flashlight waggled, reflecting eerily on Brin's face as she looked up.

"The smell's not too bad," she said.

Cool air wafted up with the dank earthiness I'd smelled in the smuggler passage into Alpen. I handed down the bow and quiver Set provided, then my backpack, and tested the first rung. Dry after Cybelle and Brin. I scrambled down the eight rungs, reaching up to help Laura as she guided Levi over the edge. His foot slipped off one rung. I gripped his ankle while

he grunted. Laura clung to his arm until he'd steadied his weight. His leg was stiff, but he reached the last rung and stumbled out of Laura's way.

Then Njal and Kazamir helped Julien. He was far more unsteady than I wanted to admit.

When Njal scrambled back up to pull the grate into place, I looked around. The tunnel was narrow, hewn through black rock with a paved floor. No bioluminescence from any living thing, not even the rocks. Goose bumps pebbled my skin. The beam from Brin's flashlight threw disorienting shadows along the walls.

I resettled my weapons and pack. We walked for ten minutes in silence, relying on the flashlights. Then Cybelle was stepping around something illuminated from above. I realized the faint light came through another grated entrance, an opening to a corridor above us. We were still beneath High Citadel, but Brin had halted with her flashlight angled down, unmoving.

"Banshee girl found her way out." Brin's voice was hoarse.

I looked at the sad pile of clothes and what could have been bones. Looked away. The pile had too many bits and pieces to only be one girl.

Like Cybelle, I stepped around, closing my mind to the reality. Not only of the girl, or the realization that we currently wandered below the cells where we'd been captives only a day before. I closed my mind to the realization that Amal's sentient mist had disappeared through that grate, seeping through this tunnel. Was the mist still here? And if this was a way out, would the mist be waiting?

"How long?" I asked Cybelle.

"A few hours in the tunnels," she said. "It's a labyrinth. There's a map in your backpack. Front pocket."

"You need a map?"

"I might. I haven't been down here in ages. Njal knows the tunnels better than I do. He's spent years down here, running security checks."

“Aren’t the tunnels protected?”

“Wards weaken. The magic isn’t always reliable, which makes it dangerous, and our enemies come up with new ways to harass.” She braced her hand against a low overhang of rock. I tried to count how many enemies the vampires had and couldn’t get beyond Amal.

“We’ll stop in a few,” she added. “But we can’t rest long, so take advantage of what you can. Barend is already hunting you. He’ll have men spread out, covering all the exits, searching the obvious, but eventually he’ll think of the tunnels—if only to see if the magic kills us.”

“You said Njal spent years down here.”

“He wore a security medallion that gave him passage. Here—” She tossed a small silver pin toward me. “We made duplicates. They’re almost the same.”

Almost? My fingers trembled as I fastened the pin—shaped like a rune—to the neckline of my dead girl’s shirt. Cybelle handed pins to Laura and Levi. When she reached Brin, the girl glared before glancing back the way we’d come. Staring into the dark before opening her hand.

Anxiety helped keep the cold away as we walked, stumbled, dragged each other through the tunnel until it widened into a room-like space used by vampires on their security runs. Cybelle did the explaining. Njal was the quiet one, while Kazamir continued to radiate distrust, his eyes narrowed as he studied every shadow for threats. Scattered rocks offered seating; most were square-shaped chunks of stone, and while I helped with the settling in, Njal fiddled with a metal junction box on the wall.

He flipped a switch, and a bank of fluorescent lights flickered on.

“Motion activated,” Cybelle said when I glanced at her. “They’ll stay on as long as we move around. Go off when we leave.”

“I thought vampires could see in the dark.”

“You can’t.” She bent to help Levi as he struggled to sit. “It’s part of the security. If lights suddenly come on in the distance, we’ll know someone’s following.”

Simple and low tech. I shuddered, watching Laura fuss over Levi. Kazamir was assisting Julien. Brin sat apart from us, digging through her backpack for water. I wondered what she was thinking. She’d been too quiet since coming across the banshee girl’s remains. Perhaps she’d harbored a secret hope that the dry well was a way out, and if the girl could escape... she could, too.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t like tunnels, but at least, with my eyes closed, I could imagine myself somewhere else. Walking through the meadow in Grayson’s private wrinkle. He’d be holding my hand, and we’d be laughing. I could hear his voice, deep, husky, the warmth that turned me on in an instant. He’d tease about something. I’d tease back. The sky would be clear blue, and there’d be flowers. I’d watch him, walking on ahead, engrossed in telling me a story while I lingered behind, admiring the strength in his stride. The way sunlight lost itself in his dark hair. The cut of his muscled body, the wildness beneath the skin. Then he’d realize I wasn’t there, turn to look back. And I’d smile, cross my arms and slowly shake my head.

“Noa.” Laura touched my hand. “Are you all right?”

“What?” I was still half in my imagination, like waking from a sound sleep.

“You used a lot of energy back there,” she said. “Your skin is hot.”

“Oh.” I splayed my fingers and watched the slight tremors.

“Keep yourself hydrated.” I heard the healer in her tone. “Don’t syphon anything.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“I mean it.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “What did Caerwen tell you to do?”

“Move pebbles around, but I don’t think it’s overload,” I whispered. “It’s more like burnout.”

Laura glanced around at our group; Levi was rubbing at his leg. Brin stared as if lost in thought. The vampires sat across the space and talked quietly with Julien. They'd dressed in black, with serious boots I'd almost consider combat in style. Julien still wore the clothes he'd had on while chained to the wall, and I looked away from the rip in his shirt where the daggers had pierced him. No blood, though. Maybe vampires didn't bleed like wolves did.

"Can we trust them?" Laura whispered.

"We can trust Julien," I said, bending my head, keeping my voice low. "And if Set is his sire, I think we should trust her. Barend is the one to worry about."

"What an asshole. I've never wanted to kill a vampire as much as I wanted to kill him."

Her vehemence surprised me, but only a little. There were depths to Laura she rarely revealed, but layers of pain and anger glittered in her eyes when she looked at me.

"This is bigger than we think," she said. "Barend admitted to having you and Brin, but I'm betting he has more girls. He's fighting a vampire queen who hates vampires—one or two *faillies* won't be enough for him."

I sipped the water Laura gave me, gripping the plastic bottle in my hand. Laura glanced at the cloaking shadows filling the tunnel leading back to High Citadel.

"Noa... did you hear that?"

I shook my head at her.

"I thought something fell," she said, as if she was talking to herself.

Even with my overheated skin, my body had stiffened. I rubbed at my arms. Cybelle had wandered down the tunnel, and as she'd said... the lights flickered on overhead.

Brin was picking at the label on her bottled water. Julien was sitting on the ground now, with his head propped on a large rock. His eyes were closed. The two male vampires were

talking while Levi looked like he'd fallen asleep, his head cushioned on his bent good arm.

I hated disturbing them. But I didn't want to dismiss Laura's concerns. "Did you hear a thump?"

"Deeper—like there was weight behind what fell."

I turned to look where she looked. My body bent forward. My *faille* senses were fried and sluggish, but an arctic breeze drifted across the floor. It could have been air settling, but pressure throbbed in my head.

I shoved the water bottle back into my backpack. Cybelle was walking back with more speed in her step.

"You feel it, too?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Everyone up. We need to move." She glanced at Njal. He stood, then jogged back the way we'd come, disappearing in the tunnel gloom while lights flickered on and off, marking his progress.

Levi was pushing himself upright, readjusting the sling supporting his arm. Julien blinked, rising to his feet. I was hefting the backpack straps over my shoulders when the lights reversed and Njal came racing toward us.

"Go, go, go." He was shouting, waving his arms.

I spun. Laura scrambled for Levi, dragging him to his feet. I herded Brin after them. Julien stumbled, and I wanted to reach back for him, but Kazamir had a hand on Julien's arm.

The air currents were changing. The arctic air against my skin held a sharp edge that meant something awful had opened in the tunnel. Something more than the downdraft from the grates. Besides, we hadn't passed a grate in some time—long enough to know that a simple downdraft would not reach this far.

Behind us, Njal's expression was enough to propel the dead. For a vampire, it was startling. "Go, go, go," he kept screaming.

But instinct warned me to find out *why, why, why*. Not run away blindly. My hand slapped against the rock wall, and it

was enough to slow my momentum. I turned and stared at the shadows looming in the distance.

Every sense in my body jolted. I back peddled, my feet juddering, crashing into the tunnel wall, stumbling without balance. Lights were flashing on, a rapid sequence racing toward us while a howl bounced from the stone walls, eerie and hungry.

“Wolves,” Laura shouted at me.

“*Hybrids!*” Julien’s lips were taut as he gripped my arm, pushing me ahead of him. “Gods-damned fucking hybrids!”

Laura had her hands in the middle of Levi’s back while he turned, anger hard on his face. Brin gripped her backpack like she carried school books, except that her knuckles were white and her expression stark. I looked for Kazamir; he was yanking open a metal door set in the rock wall, dragging out weapons—a short sword, which he tossed to Cybelle. Another that he slid into a sheath on his back. Daggers, stuffed into slots I’d never noticed in his black clothes, black for more than one reason.

I readied my bow, nocked an arrow, bobbling the arrow shaft because my hands were shaking. Julien kept me moving, but I still glanced over my shoulder and saw nothing but the lunging shadows closing in on Njal, his legs pumping so fast they blurred—then he screamed.

His body jerked as his arms flew forward. His legs flew back, and it was his open, screaming mouth I stared at, his whitened eyes as a pack of black wolves emerged from the shadows and ripped, tore... pulled him into the depths.

“Noa! Run!” Cybelle had come back for me. Her weight was like a dragging anchor, only pulling me forward. She was staring at the spot where Njal disappeared.

I shook her off. Dropped the bow and raked my hands across the closest stone, syphoning, syphoning. The heat was jagged, clogged. I wasn’t sure if I had enough, but I threw what I could toward the ceiling above where Njal disappeared. Threw it with anger and vengeance as rocks disintegrated.

The tunnel floor vibrated beneath the stony collisions.

“Move,” I shouted at Cybelle. More rocks fell, then a sliding rush as the cave ceiling collapsed, kicking up clouds of black grit. The closest wolf flattened—but his *shadow* oozed outward, then up the wall as if still seeking a way through.

What in the bright hell was I fighting?

Not normal wolves. I pulled as much energy as I could and kept it flowing. The tunnel filled with choking gray dust. Chunks of rock shot out like shrapnel. The pinging echoed off the stone walls, the ceiling. Shards cut across my face while my heart pumped, fueled by the fear that it wasn't enough energy—or too much—and I'd be consumed the way Njal had. Either ripped apart by hybrids or crushed beneath the falling rubble.

But I was not consumed because Brin stood beside me. Her hands were outstretched, like mine. She'd been watching me, studying. Learning, and I was grateful for her help because I felt like I'd been underwater and was slowly returning to the surface.

Muffled sound became a dull thunder. Flashlights flicked through the swirling dust. Brin darted forward to snatch my backpack before the rocks buried it—I hadn't thought about needing what was inside. My equilibrium was off. I stumbled. There was only one direction to go since I'd blocked the way back.

“Kaz!” Cybelle had her hand on Kazamir's shoulder, jerking him around. “He's gone.”

Kazamir bared his fangs.

Her expression softened. “I'm sorry,” she said.

I shivered when the vampire glared at me.

“Listen to me,” Cybelle snapped at Kazamir. “She had no choice. If she hadn't stopped those hybrids, we'd all be dead.”

“He had a chance.”

“They were hybrids, Kaz.”

Brin was shivering with her arms wrapped around my backpack. I pried it from her, gently. Slid the straps over my shoulders. “Thank you.”

“She’s still after us,” she said. “That Amal lady. She doesn’t just want you. She knows about me, too.”

“But we fought her off,” I said. “We stopped her wolves.”

Brin still stared at the mess we’d made together. “Who would have thought wolves turned into shadows?”

“I just wanted to stop them.”

“We were lucky, then.”

“Or brilliantly smart.”

Brin huffed a dry laugh. Her resilience was creeping back. She picked up the flashlight, shook it, and played with the switch. “These batteries are running down.”

“We need to move.” Cybelle took the lead, and as I followed, I thought about Njal, knowing these tunnels because he’d spent months in them running security checks.

I thought about batteries running down. Trying to get through a maze of tunnels in the dark. Needing a map in the backpack I’d almost left behind.

I searched for the bow and quiver of arrows. Found them by the rock just as the weak glow moved on from Brin’s wobbling flashlight. But having the weapon in my hand was not comforting. I remembered being in another dark cave with a bow in my hand, and either I was overreacting now, or my overused *faillie* senses were mis-firing, because Amal’s warning was everywhere. In the shadows. The wolves. A warning that said, *I see you. I can find you. I can destroy you. It’s only a matter of time.*

My skin dampened and grew icy.

CHAPTER 34



Noa

I FOUND IT FUNNY, how the dark played tricks with human senses. Amplifying every sound. Teasing my imagination. I strained to identify each noise. Place it in terms of how close, to which side, natural or unnatural.

A soft grunt came from behind—probably Julien—but the duck-waddle thud of a kicked rock was ahead and to my left, which meant Levi was stumbling.

The slosh of water in a bottle meant Brin. She was ahead of me but behind Levi. Laura could be tracked through her breathing. Cybelle and Kazamir were too silent to know for sure where they were. I took their positions on trust.

My hand had cramped ten minutes ago from gripping the bow. Not for a minute did I think I'd destroyed Amal's shadows. I'd only diverted them. Even now, they could be seeking another crack to slither through, another ambush.

I thought Kazamir sensed the same threat. He'd taken a position at the rear of our group before we were completely in the dark, and although he said nothing to me, I was wary of him.

He'd armed himself to the teeth and would be a capable fighter. Plus... he was a gods-damn vampire, and I had no

wolf's bite that could threaten him. Keep him at a distance. All I had was fire, but after everything he'd done to help us—and because Set sent him as protection—burning him now just seemed wrong.

Julien was my cushion, walking at my back. Brin stepped up to help Laura with Levi; I thought the medication and braces were making a difference for Levi, blunting the pain. He was moving with more ease, despite the earlier stumble.

I relaxed enough to shake the cramps in my hands, loosen the muscles. After a time, Cybelle called a halt, and we circled around, looking for places to sit. The tunnel had widened again, but this time, we stood in a cavern with dead torches on the walls. Brin lit them, using a surge of *faillie* energy from her fingertips, and the yellow light was both a relief and a challenge. A relief because there were fewer shadows to examine. But also a challenge because the light was too bright after being in the dark.

I squinted, needing seconds for my vision to adjust. Julien sat on the ground. His shoulders curved inward, and his hands were limp in his lap.

I crawled over to him. Offered my wrist.

He jerked back. “What?”

“You need food,” I said. “It’s the least I can do, since this is my fault.”

He shook his head.

“What?” I teased. “Afraid it’s wolf blood? I have no wolf, remember?”

“Not wolf blood,” he hissed. “I’m afraid of the damn *Wolf*. When he gets here, he’ll pin me to his own wall for harming you.”

“I’ll tell him it was an emergency.” I dug out an arrow and pricked the tip of my finger. Waited for the blood to pool. “Open.”

When Julien refused, I gently smeared the blood on his lower lip. “Don’t be such a baby. This can be our little secret.”

“Noa...” When he protested, I slid my finger into his mouth and against the fang that descended. Then I slid over to the second fang, coating them both with my blood.

“I’m sure it tastes awful,” I said at his grimace. “But be a good boy. Take it deep and swallow.”

The light in his eyes flared with humor and not sensuality as his lips tightened. His movements were careful. He sucked gently on my fingertip, running his tongue over the slight cut, soothing any pain while his fingers cupped my hand, protective. I watched his throat contract once, twice, a third time as he swallowed before he pulled my hand away.

“Ambrosia.”

“You look a little better,” I lied.

“And you?” He studied my face. I turned away self-consciously.

“Don’t judge a girl when she’s running through tunnels and collapsing things.”

He wrapped my hand in his again, his fingers comforting against the ruined black sigil. “He won’t need this to find you.”

“He isn’t here yet,” I answered. “But he’s going to be so pissed.”

Julien’s grip tightened, and when I looked up, he smiled. “Your wolf is already over the edge, and pissed doesn’t come close. When are you putting him out of his misery?”

“Me?” I pulled back. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I told him to do the right thing by you months ago.”

“He didn’t listen, did he?” I crossed my arms. “He’s a stubborn ass.” Full of denials and then... honor.

Cybelle was asking Laura to start a fire. I thought of offering. I could do it easily, but then I remembered how vampires hated fire. Brin had already alarmed them by lighting the torches. I didn’t want to worsen the mood.

But any heat was welcome in a cavern that was freezer-cold. A pot of water bubbled softly—I hoped it was tea. I realized our escape had been planned when Laura found provisions stuffed in her backpack. I checked mine, and found a knife, compass, the folded map. Bottled water. Brin was working through a small pile of her own. Nutrition bars, a bottle of pills—pain relievers. I recognized the label.

For an instant, relief ran through me. We had nutrition bars and aspirin. What else could we want?

I was almost giddy as I glanced around, noting the cheery fire. Steam rising in the air. Even Kazamir’s brooding didn’t worry me as much as the questions I wanted to ask.

“You called those things in the tunnel hybrids.” I refused to call them wolves, not after they dissolved into shadows. “Have you seen them before?”

“I was guessing,” Cybelle said. “We’ve heard rumors about them.”

“Pretty much know they’re real.” Brin tossed a twig on the fire.

“Tell them, Cybelle, or I will,” Julien said, staring at her. “No more secrets. They should know what they’re up against.”

“Those could have been Amal’s hybrids,” she said. “But they were probably Barend’s. He’s been experimenting with his own hybrids. His group has grown fanatical—we’ve no idea how many wolves they’ve killed trying to build a hybrid army. *Failles* survive more than the others, but they’re also harder to find—and they’re female. Some of the males kill them outright, but others have been put down once they become mindless monsters.”

“Does that happen often?” Brin asked, her voice shaky.

“Too often,” Julien said.

“Is it only *failles*, or all hybrids?” I asked. “Going mindless?”

“Half of all hybrids become feral—like the wolves,” Julien said. “Which is why Set opposes Barend.”

I rubbed my arms to chase the chill. Stared at the fire winking between the small branches.

“A mindless army is ineffective,” Cybelle said. She’d moved a step back from the fire. Perhaps, being a vampire, she didn’t need the warmth. “It turns back on itself.”

“But you have to fight Amal,” I said. “Because she hates you as much as she hates the wolves.”

“My sire believes in alliances to defeat Amal.” Julien stretched his legs, tested the lingering weakness. “The way the ancients defeated the original creatures. We’ve been fighting against the creation of more monsters.”

“Does Grayson know this?” I asked.

“He suspects.” Cybelle shot a hard glance toward Julien. “Set preferred to keep it private and not escalate by involving wolves.”

“Amal is on the move.” Julien’s fangs descended before he retracted them. “Barend is beyond reckless. Keeping our greatest ally in the dark was idealistic but foolish.”

Cybelle’s fangs flashed in answer before she hissed, “There was a plan in place.”

“Yes, before Noa returned and the dread lord sigil locked in place.”

“Not all of us believe in signs, Julien.”

“And Set once watched priests slaughter chickens to read the entrails,” he snarled, making me wonder what prophesy Fate had given to the vampires. “The Wolf should know Barend gets his wolves from an elder in Sentinel Falls, a man who has networks set up across the country.”

I jerked, staring at Laura. Her eyes were wide. Levi’s face was hard-edged and his hands fisted. Were we thinking the same thing?

Julien looked at me. All business now, no emotion. “The elder finds them from out of the area, kidnaps them, sells them. Barend turns those old enough to have wolves into hybrids like the ones who killed Njal.”

“Or he tries,” Cybelle said with disgust. “Amal is more successful. We think she has two *failles* on her side, and dozens of creatures, other hybrids. We’ve been trying to monitor through our Cariboo trading agreements, but that fell apart when she kidnapped a sire and sent his ring back to us in a box. The ring was a declaration of war.”

“Against the vampires?” I asked.

“Against everyone.” Cybelle looked at me. “A dread lord and a *faille*—the one combination that could defeat her. It should surprise no one that she wants to destroy you.”

“And why Barend wants you badly enough to dagger me to the wall,” Julien added. “He knew it would outrage Set, send a warning. Stop her from interfering with his plan to ambush you. The next step was to lure *him* here.” *Meaning Grayson.* “Barend would have you both. But Set sent Martel to warn the Wolf, use the financial information as leverage, weaken the sires who side with Barend. Then...”

“What?” I demanded.

“Creatures attacked again. The last message we received was about the fighting.”

Grayson was fighting Amal? While I was locked away by vampires?

“It’s why we have to keep you alive,” Kazamir added. His frown lines had me questioning how solidly he agreed with that need. How many other vampires would die for the cause—because they did die. Like Njal. Like the vampire I’d turned to gray dust by surging energy until he exploded.

I leaned forward, my arms tight around my knees. I couldn’t change what was happening. My friends were here because they were loyal, willing to risk their lives without appreciating how great that risk could become—and Grayson had objected, because he’d worked out the threats without telling me. Or trusting me.

I’d felt small and useless, facing Barend in that great hall. And now, we were all an instant away from being lost in the Stygian dark. The flashlights were fading. Amal’s fog could

find us. Or Barend's hybrids. In any direction, down any of the tunnel openings leading from this space. Evil was lurking... waiting to consume the way Njal had been consumed.

It was crazy talk, I realized. Grayson *had* trusted me. He'd wrapped his arms around me, said he'd be waiting on the glass deck. I hadn't been small, or useless, when I faced Barend. Our situation was not inevitable when there was hope.

"Here." Cybelle reached inside her pack and brought out a small wrapped book. "Set took this from the archive—Amal's journal. Set thought there might be something useful. She wants you to have it."

Malevolence leached from the surface. My fingers curled away from taking it, but Laura crawled closer.

"You might need it." She tucked the book into my pack.

Kazamir was prowling around, restless, as he circled the cavern perimeter.

I closed my eyes and listened for Grayson's voice in my head. Only silence, and a hollow loneliness. I touched Laura's hand.

"Have you tried using the pack bond?" I whispered. "Reached out to anyone near?"

"I've been trying. But we're underground, Noa. And still in the Carmag. The alphas would have to be really close to hear us."

"Keep trying," I said. "Can you talk to Levi?"

"Yes, now that the wolfbane's worn off."

I handed her the spoon she needed to stir the pot. "How is he?"

"He needs Gray to heal him, but the pain is lessening. From what I can tell, he'll be able to shift again."

"How's his wolf? And yours?" I added.

She shrugged. "Levi's wolf is raging. Mine is pacing."

“Would you like me to soothe her?” I’d never offered to syphon energy from Laura. I hadn’t thought of her as being like Oscar, or having a silent wolf, but the thought formed that maybe I could help her wolf the way I’d helped Grayson’s wolf if it was fear she faced.

“I just asked.” Laura’s smile was wry. “She says she isn’t a baby, but thank you. She’s worried you’ve used too much energy as it is.”

Laura had read the *faille* journals from Aine, the way Fallon had, and she squeezed my hand. “Stop worrying about us and take care of yourself, Noa.”

“I can’t.”

“You can,” she said.

“I feel... lost,” I admitted.

“Our greatest moments come when we’re lost. When we realize every star in the heavens stands alone,” she said, brushing at the ruined wolf rune. “But when a star is called to do something great... at the end, Noa... that’s when it burns the brightest. When it draws to it other light until there is nothing but that star, that light. And that’s what you are.”

CHAPTER 35



Noa

MOMENTS LATER, AFTER THE tea had cooled enough to drink, Cybelle dug the map from my backpack and smoothed it out on the cavern floor. She and Kazamir bent over it, caught in a whispered debate until Julien joined in.

I was too tired to listen. Despite the fire, the cold crept back into my bones. My legs wobbled when I stretched them out; I felt odd, like I was fighting the lethargy I remembered from Aine's wrinkle.

The path of my thoughts wandered this way and that, and I wondered if I was going fracky.

Falling for the beautiful lure, the one that had me forgetting what once mattered so I'd be content with what was.

I studied the dancing fire, the sinuous movement of the flames. Licked my lips, sipped the sweet tea. I listened to the lulling sound of muffled voices, urging me to sleep when I should be on edge.

When I should be aware of each minute that passed while we did... nothing.

Every *faillie* sense prickled...

"We should move," I said.

“We will,” Cybelle answered. Her back was to me. So was Kazamir’s. I dragged my gaze over Levi, Laura. Brin. They were sitting... staring.

I braced against a rock and stood, swaying for an instant before I swept up my bow and nocked an arrow, turning on instinct, watching from the corners of my eyes for the telltale bend of light. The mark of illusion or magic. I spotted the flicker at the top of a tunnel opening. The arrow flew. Light flashed, then exploded, kicking up bits of gravel.

“Everybody—run!” Blood pounded in my head. I was kicking out the fire, knocking over the tea.

“Cybelle,” Julien roared. Kazamir was straightening, puzzlement on his face. I bent to haul Levi to his feet. Laura and Brin were locked together as they stood. I snatched up my backpack, then thought better of it and tossed it aside.

“Leave everything,” I said. “We don’t know what’s safe.”

“Go, go, go!” Julien was shouting now. Cybelle looked around, assessed, then turned and followed Kazamir into one tunnel. The rest of us followed.

“What’s going on?” Laura asked. She was breathing hard. Her voice was strained.

“I don’t know whose magic,” I said. “Amal’s or the vampires. But we were being lulled. In the smoke, or the tea. Illusion masked the tunnel. Something was coming.”

I knew that with certainty. Either more deadly tendrils, or Barend and his wolf hybrids. Some fresh horror because we’d all been forgetting who we were, and why we were there.

The tunnel narrowed, darkened, and grew coldly claustrophobic. Only Brin thought to grab a flashlight. As my feet scuffed and snagged on the rocks, the unsteady, fading light she held made rock angles and the lowering ceiling disorienting. Two miles, I kept telling myself. We could make it two miles and be out in the open. With the sky overhead and fresh air to breathe.

A blood-curdling scream brought us skidding to a halt, teetering at the brink of a gaping black pit. Below, I could see

Kazamir. He'd fallen on a bed of spikes; black iron, covered with dripping gore. The spikes speared through his body... through his stomach... his leg... his back arching while his arms reached...

I stared at his face. His eyes were wide, puzzled. His mouth opened with no sound. Cybelle was rushing forward, bending toward him with her arms outstretched toward his...

Julien's arm braced me while I flung my arms wide to stop Brin and Laura from following Cybelle. Levi surged to a halt as an ominous crack sounded and a slab of rock broke from overhead and plummeted, crushing Cybelle as she bent over Kazamir; they disappeared beneath a ton of black stone. Only a trace of red where Cybelle had been standing.

"Noa." Julien gripped my shoulders. "Don't look. Don't think about it. Just climb over. Get out."

I blinked with understanding. He wanted me to climb over the rock obstruction, over the crushed and buried bodies of Cybelle and Kazamir, like climbing over a fresh grave.

"No. Not without the rest of you. I'm not leaving."

"There's no time," he hissed. "*Listen!*"

The sounds registered then, the grunting, snarling aggression from what were most likely tusked pigs with cloven hooves, echoing in the distance.

"We'll be right behind you."

But Julien was putting me first, because they had to keep me alive. Fuck that.

"Levi goes first," I ordered. What good was being a *faillie* with a dread lord sigil, if I couldn't order people around?

"Laura and Brin next," I added as I pounded against his shoulders, glared and held his warm brown gaze. "Then I'll go and you'd better be right behind me, Julien, or so help me, I'm coming back for your ass."

"Listen to you, all commando," he teased, but his dark eyes swirled with concern.

Levi was already climbing into the cleft between the tunnel wall and the slab, then turning back to show Laura and Brin where to put their feet. Brin found a lip of stone for a handhold, levered herself upward. Her foot slipped and wedged sideways. My reaction was automatic. I held her ankle, forced a sliver of energy between her shoe and the stone until something gave enough to pull her foot free.

I followed them, my fingers slipping damply in the handholds. My focus was on my feet, not getting stuck. Not trembling so much. I was supposed to be calm, all commando, doing what was right.

Overhead, the slabs of rock pressed down at odd angles, narrowing the space into nearly impassable. I shimmied through on my stomach, wincing as sharp edges cut into my back. I worried Julien wouldn't make it through, since he was larger than I was. But the vampire flattened himself into what reminded me of shadows, stilling my heart for the seconds it took him to slither through the slotted opening.

Then we were all standing with our arms tight and our feet shuffling, none of us wanting to think about what lay beneath the obstruction we'd just climbed across.

Brin sniffed and dragged her shirt across her face. "I lost the flashlight."

She sounded too young. I hugged her. "It's all right. It's okay. See—I still have my bow and arrows."

"Gah!" Her face was hard against my chest. "The thing's glued to your hand. Doesn't count."

"It's my super power," I teased.

"Okay, kids," Levi snarked from a few feet away. "Keep moving."

"Who made you the leader?" Brin's snark matched his—*teenage wolves*.

Levi laughed. "The first one through gets to lead."

Brin kicked a loosened rock toward him as he walked away. "You remember what happened to the last guy who went

first?”

“Aw... she’s worried.” Levi turned enough to grin. Emotion surged through me, hard enough to rub my chest.

Maybe we’d get out of this alive.

I wanted that hope.

Light filtered, gritty with swirling dust and debris, but growing stronger—sunlight—and when we finally stumbled from the passage and into the fresh air, my legs gave out. Collapsing, I fell to the ground, with Laura and Brin flat beside me.

My lungs heaved as I rolled to my back and blinked. Forcing myself to focus.

Overhead, the blue sky sparkled.

An autumn sky.

White clouds drifted. But birds circled, and the ebb and flow of their cawing seemed out of tune with the jarring distant sounds. A dull clanging. Mingled shrieks and deep-throated voices too far away to be understood.

I rolled to my side, looked at my clenched hands... at my fingers, curled into sooty, crumbling blades of what had been grass.

And as my thoughts cleared... as I forced myself to stand and look around... my heart pounded.

I stood at the top of a blackened hill.

Men battled below.

And in the middle of the melee... was Grayson.

CHAPTER 36



Noa

WHAT HAD BEEN A valley was now mud. Men battled with swords and shields like something out of the distant past. They were on foot, facing creatures not unlike the tusked pigs, but larger. Bodies littered the ground. Spears protruded from hairy brown pelts. From what I could tell, the valley was bowl-shaped, rimmed with a thick forest of pine. More color was there—banners in the pines, flapping in a fretted breeze.

Sentinel Falls—blue with a white stripe.

And the Carmag—his red standard, with two fighting wolves.

He will battle on the field below and you will watch...

I panted with the realization.

Do not believe, Noa...

Believe, believe, believe...

Three fronts spread out, groups of men. I recognized Mace by his blonde hair and his voice as he bellowed orders. Fallon's troops were holding the center. Beside her, Anson's auburn hair caught my attention—although they were not fighting as a team. Anson's men were fighting on a hill while Fallon was holding space in the dip.

In the distance, I saw Grayson. His men were in full charge, tearing down a slope, clashing like a wave breaking on the shore.

Breaking, falling back, reforming.

I was screaming. Skidding and falling as I ran down the blackened hill. Levi raced beside me.

“My orders haven’t changed,” he shouted when I glared at him. “Protect Noa. With my life, if necessary.”

“*Idiot!*” I bared my no-wolf teeth. “You can barely move.”

He flashed his *wolf* canines, and the gesture clearly said, *I’m moving*... and I couldn’t argue with him. I didn’t want his wolf to emerge. Instinct warned against it, since *men* were fighting, not wolves.

Laura was running beside us, with Brin and Julien in the rear.

A man I didn’t recognize dashed past, then paused and came back. “Don’t shift! These creatures are larger, and their tusks—we’ve lost too many wolves.”

I gripped my bow, readied the arrow, while Levi yanked a spear from the ground. Laura was doing the same, wrenching a spear from a mounded wiry pelt.

“Who are you?” I screamed over the din.

“From Carmag.”

I glanced at the small red patch on his shirt sleeve. He sidestepped as two men carried a stretcher past; I recognized the wounded man—he was from Azul.

Laura rushed forward. “I’m a healer,” she hissed when the men glared at her. But her hands were already moving over the bloody bandages, and she demanded, “Where are you taking him?”

“Triage is set up in the trees.”

One man pointed toward the flags. Laura looked at me.

“Go with the wounded,” I told her. “They need you. Go save lives,” I repeated when she hesitated. “I’m more valuable here.”

“But you and Levi—”

“Have Julien to protect us,” I said, breathing hard and in no mood to keep arguing.

“And me,” Brin added.

“No,” I said to her. “Go with Laura.”

“No.” Brin was twisting a spear too deeply embedded in a creature for her to get it loose, and Levi tore it free. She gripped it in both hands.

“Noa.” The concern in Laura’s eyes was another hit to the heart, and I reached out, squeezing her cold hands.

“You aren’t leaving me behind,” I hissed. “This is my choice. I’m standing. Fighting.”

Julien stepped toward me. “My lady—”

“Not you too, Julien.” But they couldn’t know of the prophecy revealed to me. The prophecy that would not come true today.

Damp hair caught in my eyes as I stared at the gods-damned blue sky. The sounds battered me, the pain. Bitter scents tainted the air. Light glittered off metal the way it glitters off moving water. Dizzying, spellbinding.

I would not stand by and do nothing.

Julien became a black smear through the air, ripping apart the grunting pig that charged from behind a hairy carcass. Dirt, red-tinted and heavy, flew and splatted on my jeans, joining the muck already there.

“Don’t make yourself a target,” he growled, returning to my side. “If you’re going to fight, you’re going to move.”

My heels slid in the mud; my arms swung wide for balance. Momentum pulled me faster and faster down the hill until I feared I couldn’t stop when the fighting surged in our

direction. The man from Carmag had disappeared. So had Laura, but Levi gripped my arm, swinging me around.

His eyes were narrowed. I realized he was communicating through the pack bond.

“Mace is issuing orders—gods, he’s pissed, Noa. Relieved, but he says Gray knows we’re here and I’m supposed to take you—”

“Oh, hell no.”

I flinched at his expression. But instead of arguing, Levi ripped off his sling. I worried over his ability to fight until the first creature lunged out of the melee and Levi met it head on, leaping to the side and spearing the animal at the base of the skull. It flopped on the ground, legs still churning through the mud.

The bowstring quivered as arrow after arrow hit the moving targets. When I ran out of arrows, I searched for discarded quivers. Brin fought beside me; her high-pitched screams echoed each time she lunged toward a target. Sparks sputtered from her fingers. She was trying to syphon without finesse and I didn’t have time to guide her. Bodies crushed around us. Men spun, caught in the fighting that surged like storm tides, falling back or pushing forward. As pigs galloped past, I recognized their stench from Azul.

Heat burned upward through my feet and legs, exploding into my arms, searching for a way out through my hands. The energy was a searing brand on my skin, and I spun, crashed into a charging creature. My hands rose, fingers splayed and curled as I gripped the hairy, heaving side, fighting the nausea as the flesh softened and ooze coated my fingers.

Heat sizzled until the charred-meat smell burned in my nose.

The creature deflated into nothing but flaps of skin and shards of whitened bone.

Up ahead, a man battled. He wore a battered knight’s helmet and gold breastplate, with segmented, heavy protection on his arms and legs. He swung a broadsword with awkward but joyous enthusiasm that was definitely out of place—

White hair poked from beneath an ancient helmet—

Bowed legs braced, momentum from the swinging sword
nearly pivoting him—

A pig charged.

He shouted, “Tally-ho!”

Who in the flaming bright hell said—

“Fee?” I screamed.

The brush of puppy magic carried through the chaos. The King of the Forest turned to grin at me. What I could see of his face behind the helmet protection was dirt-smudged. Wiry white stubble prickled on his cheeks. “My dear girl. You made it. Had my doubts for a while.”

My bowstring twanged, the arrow flying toward the beast he missed with his swishing, looping swing.

I thought of the embroidered blue *F* on the bathrobe in Grayson’s bathroom. The normalcy in dripping water in a bathtub. Liking Grayson’s soap, messing with a stove—the words popped from my mouth. “Does Aine know you’re here?”

“Oh, gods no!” He swung the broadsword in another whooshing arc, sending a strange, thin-legged creature stumbling back. “She’d ruin all the fun.”

Only Fee—the King of the Forest—would think battling creatures was fun. When a third creature swarmed toward him, he leaned heavily on his sword and merely flicked his hand. Sent a wave of magic that shriveled the creature like a drying leaf.

“Why don’t you do that everywhere?” I demanded.

“Magic doesn’t work that way,” he said, and I thought I heard sorrow in his voice. “Like everything else, I’m getting... old.”

“No! No you’re not!”

“Who are you talking to?” Bree shouted as she stood at my back. She’d exchanged her spear for a sword, and the glare on

her face was almost comical, given how thin she was.

I heaved in a tight breath. “The King of the Forest.”

“Who?”

But Fee was no longer there.

“No one.” I dashed a hand across my cheek, shoved down everything he’d said, swung around to aim my arrow toward a man I’d never seen before. His teeth were exposed, and there was nothing... nothing in his eyes that I could see.

The shaft juddered as it sank into his chest. Bile was sour in my throat.

Levi jerked on my arm. I looked up, wide-eyed, then down at the body near my feet with my arrow still moving. I’d gone completely numb.

“A hybrid,” Levi snarled, plunging his spear into the man’s chest. “Make sure they’re dead.”

I think I nodded, but unreality was settling in as I looked around at the mess of mud and bodies. And Brin, with her sword, swinging wildly at anything still moving.

“Can you syphon?” Levi asked.

In answer, heat sizzled and raced up my arms.

“Mace’s orders. Help Fallon.” He pointed toward the troops fighting between the two flanks. The lines were weakening. Grayson battled in the far distance, while Mace did the same, only closer to our position. The Carmag was equally engaged. I read the strategy, the closing of a triangular attack to trap the creatures. With no escape, Fallon’s troops would then drive from the center, push the creatures toward the open passage, where a few stragglers still poured through.

I pivoted.

“*Bedisa...*”

My heart stopped at the sound of Grayson’s voice, my mate, speaking softly, intimately, and so deep in my mind. Where he’d always been.

“Grayson...”

His dark power was a welcome rush, even the anger... worry. *“What the hell are you doing here?”*

“I’m not pleasing Fate today.” And I hoped he heard the snap in my mental voice. *“We can fight about it later.”*

A long pause. *“Men fight at the side of creatures. Get to Fallon. Drive them back.”*

That simple *trusting* order meant more to me than if he’d said *I love you* in that moment. I dug deep for the strength, ran through the bloodied mud, my feet skating on the sloppy ground. Julien was several feet away, disappearing, reappearing, clearing the path while Levi fought on my left side, keeping us moving.

Brin ran behind. As long as I could hear her panting, I knew she was close enough.

I syphoned energy every time my feet thudded against the ground. Every time I breathed, or shot at an enemy, drew blood. My pulse grew erratic. With each inhale, the energy became more unpredictable, as if it would shoot out in all directions on its own.

Gripping the bow helped. Focusing on the pull and resistance when I yanked the bowstring back, let an arrow fly. I would not break. I would not burn out in a flame of glory. I’d depended on my friends to get me this far—they depended upon me now, to protect them from a vampire queen who was just as determined to destroy them.

Ahead, the fighting was vicious, as if the creatures recognized the trap closing around them. Men fell, screamed. I closed my mind to the sounds. Breathed in the scent of death without noticing.

A pressure pounded in my head. I climbed over bodies. Dodged flailing arms, legs, slashing spears and tusks.

Then... to my left... an ominous crack. Levi went down.

“Levi!” I screamed his name, dove to my knees in the mud.

Grief was a flash fire... *no, no, no!* Not Levi!

I clawed at his clothes, looking for blood. Searched his pale face for some sign that he still breathed.

Levi rolled to the side, yanked a broken stick from beneath his leg and tossed it away.

My heart kept thundering even as I processed—a stick. It was a gods-damned stick, buried in the mud. Broken because he'd stepped on it.

“Levi’s all right. All right!” I sent the message through our mate bond because, surely, I’d distracted Grayson with my jolting fear. I wanted to reassure him. Not take his focus off the enemy.

“Bedisa—move!” The mental order slammed into my head like a hammer. I rolled to the side as a wounded man stumbled toward me, a sword raised over his head.

I raised the bow to deflect the blow, but Brin was there, slicing...

Her sword passed within inches of my raised hand. I felt the whoosh as the man’s body fell one way. What looked like his arm fell in another direction.

My gaze flew to Levi. His fingers were taut—clawed in the mud by his hips. But I saw the subtle movement as he tightened his grip around the spear, there in the wet muck beside him.

Brin huffed, smirking as she pointed the sword toward the bow I still held. “Inadequate.”

“I could have burned him,” I told her, mixed in my emotions when she bent to grab my hand, pull me to my feet.

I was still half up and off balance when a pair of rampaging pigs crashed into us from the side.

Brin sidestepped, away from the trampling feet, but as I tried to pivot, I couldn’t get free from her hand. Her strength alarmed me. Almost as if... as if she held me in place.

The pig jerked his head with a twisting motion. His tusk caught in my jeans, wrenching my knee, dragging my leg. I collapsed on my hip. Kicked with my free foot. Heard the

grunt as I smashed the creature's snout. Energy boiled up. I kicked again.

The squeal was jarring, but I'd ripped my jeans enough to break free.

Brin was already moving away.

Levi was up and following her, and I wasn't sure about the aggression bristling from him. But my mate was screaming in my head and he was the priority.

"You'll go hoarse," I told Grayson. "I'm fine. And thanks for the warning."

"Gods-damn it, Bedisa..."

Even through our mental connection, I recognized the stony silence. Grayson was furious, with that beautiful, lethal anger that only the Alpha of Sentinel Falls could wield with utter destruction.

An anger only my dread lord could use with me, where I'd not be terrified—but exhilarated instead.

"I got tangled up in a pig," I said. "Brin was trying to help. Levi's fine, going after her... can't we fight about this later?"

I almost added a pathetic please, but I'd distracted him enough. *"It was an accident. I'll be more careful. Going to find Fallon now."*

"Julien?"

"Still with me." I could see him—the shadowy blur as he tore through the enemy. In the distance, Fallon was fighting, shouting orders; she held two swords, one in each hand. Men around her fell. She kept swinging, her blonde braid the flag I focused on as I stumbled through the littered field, stepping around the fallen. Closing out the groans and inhuman screams.

Sunlight caught on the edge of Fallon's blades. She spun in slow motion and then... jolted, like a moving wheel that suddenly wedges against a rock.

I screamed, although I heard no sound. Men were there, picking Fallon up, turning away. Her body was limp. Boneless. Blond hair fell across her face, free from the braid. Her arm swung with the movement of the man who carried her, as if the body attached was lifeless.

Time slowed.

I wanted to moisten my lips. Swallow. Breathe.

I could do none of those things.

Levi faced off with a man twice his size, battling hand-to-hand. So much blood. So many men screaming. Amal had opened the door—but where was my vengeance?

Why was I even here, if I could do nothing to end this carnage?

At the base of the valley, the open passage shimmered with a dark malice I could feel like ice against my skin.

“Brin,” I screamed. “Stand by my side.”

But when I saw her, saw the expression on her face... I imagined I looked worse. Her features were taut, her mouth twisted. Carnage was an awful thing, and to a girl, abused by so many...

But she was staring at Julien with a strangely chilling smile.

While—from behind him—a man raced wildly, a spear in his clenched hands.

I shouted a warning. Too late as the bloody spear rammed into Julien’s back, exploding out through his chest. Shock widened Julien’s eyes. He looked down at the bloody point that dripped gore.

Then he looked up at Brin.

Turned toward me.

And looked back toward Brin, while—from Brin’s outstretched hands—energy pulsed with a mad, whipping flame that licked across Julien’s skin before he burst into flames.

“No.” I barely breathed the word. But in my mind—in my mind, I was screaming. Igniting the way Julien was. Exploding into a flaming phoenix, sliding into a darkly vicious place where all I wanted was blood. Brin’s blood. On my hands, on the ground. Splattered until there was nothing left of her.

“Bedisa!”

Levi turned in slow motion. His mouth opened. I thought he said, “What...”

As if Grayson had roared at him through the pack bond.

“So weak,” Brin mocked when she saw Levi. Her hand flicked—the same gesture I’d used to spin energy in the dungeon.

And... silence. Cold and empty.

“He can’t hear me,” Levi snarled.

I shrieked Grayson’s name and it was like shouting into the black ocean depths.

Frantically, I searched for my missing bow, saw it crushed where the pig attacked me.

Brin smiled.

Levi drew his arm back, threw his spear toward her. But she clawed the air with her hand, her mouth twitching like the mouths of the Gemini Witches, and the spear Levi threw halted in midair... turned...

“No!” My voice echoed with despair and fury. Levi was down on the ground, blood pouring from his leg where the spear protruded.

I dropped to my knees. So close. Levi’s pooling blood was so close to the ash... what was left...

I would not throw up. I. Would. Not.

I swallowed the bile, my eyes stinging.

It’s not him, not Julien...

Ashes.

And an anger like none I'd ever known ran through my blood, thick with hatred.

"You killed Julien," I snarled, rising to my feet. Facing Brin's sneer.

"He was one of them." She gods-damned laughed—actually laughed. "Nothing more than a betraying blood sucker."

What did that make her?

"I wanted him to burn, like he—" She nodded at Levi. "He needed to bleed."

I pressed a fist against my stomach. "Why?"

"You picked the wrong side. Amal gave you a chance but you refused to take it."

I shook my head. I hadn't heard her right. "Amal?"

"She warned you in the cave. You were ungrateful." Brin's lip curled, and she looked older than sixteen. Years older.

I'd trusted her, ignored the doubts. Let sympathy rule, wanted to avenge the pain she'd suffered.

Looking around, all I saw were bodies. All I heard were screams. Amal's creatures. Her hateful army, following a vengeful path. Brin, Amal's stealthy *faille*, shooting sparks in the straw. Pretending to be so gods-damned weak.

"You're working with her?" My voice emptied of all emotion. I left nothing that would give me away. "Are you like her?"

Already a hybrid?

"Not yet."

Then, "Are you even Brin?"

"That girl died a few hours after the suckers took her."

I shuddered.

"Amal has allies," the fake Brin said. "Vampires who support her return. They heard how your ash friend was asking around."

The ground seemed to heave.

“She sent me. Everything was planned to get to you. In that dungeon?” She laughed, her mouth twitching upward. “You were so amusing, telling me how to move rock chips. Did you even realize I was pulling down that force field you were building so diligently? But it was enough for you to need me. Trust me. Gods, you were more ridiculous than that banshee girl.”

Levi’s blood coated my hands, warmly sticky, because I still knelt beside him. My hands gripped his as he gripped the base of the spear, the gaping, spurting wound. Laura wasn’t there to stem the blood flow, and I didn’t know how to help him.

Only one healer could help Levi. But with Brin’s force field surrounding us, he couldn’t hear me.

I slid deep in my mind, into the dark *faille* space, below the icy sea. Deeper still, sinking until I found it, the thread of energy that tugged in my chest. I held on to the shimmer of light, sent the thoughts pulsing through while the fake Brin continued to brag.

“For a moment, I was afraid Barend would win and you’d take his offer,” she said. “That’s why I pulled the bolt from my hand. I was going to use it on you.”

Grayson’s answering tug sent warmth along our mate bond. The dark wave of his power. The power swelled from a caress into a storm, and I knew the moment when he—and all the Sentinel Falls wolves—changed directions to surge toward us.

“She will always find you,” the fake Brin said. “Destroy those you love while you watch.”

I forced myself upright.

Stood while Levi growled.

Brin turned her head. The tide of men grew closer, their angry shouts cleaving the air.

The energy she threw from her fingers wavered; we all felt it sputtering out before she turned to run toward the open passage.

Amal's passage.

And chaos exploded from my fingertips. A frenzy of heat that roiled across the ground.

The current of energy flowing from me, from my hands, birthed a friction of its own, glowing ribbons that danced in streams of yellow, orange, red.

Burn it down, Noa.

Burn it for Julien.

For Levi

For Fallon.

A sob blocked my throat. Traces of ash had somehow coated my palms and I couldn't wipe them away because of who it was... but then, the ash swirled and melded with the streams of wrathful heat. Ash to fire to ash again.

And maybe burning was what I was here to do. Maybe this was the vengeance I was meant to reap, what the kings of old had asked of the queens.

I syphoned.

Stood like those queens. Like their daughters, and their daughters' daughters.

Raged with their rage. Gagged on their tears.

I shattered into a thousand savage pieces.

And the air burned as I broke the sky.

As the reds, oranges, yellows... as the bloody scarlets became a churning turbulence, tumbling with bits of flaming grass and blackened grit. Broken twigs. Autumn leaves still golden in the sunlight.

I breathed in, breathed out. Braced as racing pigs tumbled head over cloven hooves, squealing, fleeing from the torrent that drove them toward the passage. Strange, spindly creatures, hybrid wolves, all of them desperate, stumbling.

Energy cracked, and I watched, unfeeling, as the Sentinel Falls wolves, the Carmag wolves, attacked. Hacked. Ended the

living creatures who hadn't reached the passageway.

The fake Brin still ran. Her dark hair glinted like mine—both of us *faillie* and branded by the silver strands that whipped through the air, caught in the same turbulence as she swung around. Braced herself to fight.

My body throbbed beneath the intensity of uncontrolled power. My heart jolted as if electric sparks coursed through me. Everything fell away and we were that image on a cave wall.

Two women with hands outstretched, standing in a sea of mud and blood and vengeance.

Only we were not that image.

We were opponents, facing each other as slowly, slowly, I drove my enemy from the field. Drove them—Amal's allies—toward Brin and the passage she guarded.

But she was no Amal. Her name was not Brin.

And I would destroy her.

Hatred drove the steps I took. One after the other. The need for vengeance was a song that I sang. The pressure in my head crushed. Sound hissed and crackled without meaning. My bones were burning on the inside. Muscles charring. Even the air in my lungs scorched.

The last of the creatures raced past Brin and into the dark passage, disappearing—

But not the violence, not the sounds, not the screams—

Not Amal's scream—

A new vision flashed. Not *this* field, *this* battle.

A different battle, on another battlefield, horrifying in its truth. I looked at the buildings I knew in my heart—the café with the red umbrellas. The glass and wood of the archive. The houses beside the lake... those of Leo. Hattie. Oscar.

All of them, bursting into flames.

The meadow, singeing. Grass, blackened and curled.

Bodies. More ash and bones.

A woman, with flawless features, streaming black hair... a silver streak... glinting red in the burning light as she walked through the town...

I lost myself, became incandescent in the white flash of an explosion. Energy flailed from my hands. But what I destroyed was the passageway in front of me, with the creatures racing through and a girl with silver in her hair.

Then I was a rag doll, flying backward as if some greater force had pulled me by a string, tossed me, forgotten, onto the bloody ground.

I stared up at the blue sky.

An autumn sky.

Grayson was there. I couldn't focus on what he was saying.

"Breathe, Noa! I'm not losing you, not in the mud the way I found you." Then I heard his mental voice, shaking.

"Gods—open your eyes, Bedisa. Open your eyes."

His pain was more than I could stand.

At least with my eyes closed, I didn't have to see his face. See the devastation I knew was there, what I could hear, tearing his mental voice apart.

He was on his knees. Shaking.

On his gods-damned knees for me.

My mate. This dread lord. With the dark power to move landscapes. Remake the world. Remake *me*.

The sob that wrenched my throat should have drawn blood. Everything he hoped for, battled for—how much remained? Did he know? Had I shared what I saw with him?

Or had I only been with Amal—while she shared the vision with me?

It might... it might not be true, Noa.

Another illusion.

But no... the ice-crusting sea within me churned with the truth. The cold, cold hatred of the betrayed. The tears too bitter to shed for Julien, not until he'd been avenged.

Was this what the queens felt when their wolves were stripped away?

But if it was—it was not the kings I hated in that moment, but the bitter and selfish queens who had never learned compassion.

Grayson's hands were on my face, and his mental voice roared through me. *“Open your eyes. Take my energy, syphon from me. Tell me what you need and I'll get it for you—because I need you to look at me.”*

Hope drove my lashes upward and I stared at his beautiful face.

“Grayson.” I gripped his arms, spoke the words out loud. Made them real. “I saw her. Amal. This attack was a distraction. She's in Azul... the archive. The book. The town. Everything's gone.”

CHAPTER 37



Grayson

I'D FORGOTTEN HOW QUIET the night could be without the sound of Noa's breathing. How lonely, without seeing my mate's body sprawled across the sheets in my bed, her dark hair a fan on the pillow.

I remembered now, as I sat quietly, committing everything to memory.

This was the first night in the past week when Caerwen relented, allowing me through the door to sit by Noa's bed. Her stillness, silence, was a fist to my heart. How pale she was, the thin blue veins beneath translucent skin. The way she never moved, other than the slight rise of the sheet as she pulled in a jerky breath... then the endless seconds before she breathed again.

Purple shadows crowded the room. Night had fallen and the windows were black squares because the moon would not rise for hours. The faint antiseptic tang in the air reminded me we were in Anson's private hospital wing, in Westvale. The safest—the only medical facility available to me. I scrubbed my hands across my face, rocked forward in the uncomfortable chair.

I should be grateful—because Anson offered his protection. Aine sent her nymphs—Caerwen and Effa.

I should be grateful—because Caerwen allowed me near my mate when she'd been adamant, barely visible as she said Noa burned herself out. Crossed too far beyond the limit of most *faillies*. Caerwen wasn't sure she could bring Noa back from the shadowlands where she hovered, lost deep in her mind.

Noa's greatest fear. One I'd promised to keep from her, and then I sent her plunging headfirst into the depths.

I should be fucking grateful. Fallon was still alive, but facing months of recuperation. Levi would be fine. Laura might not be; her trauma from the Alpen hadn't completely healed and her resilience gave out. I didn't blame her. I couldn't. Not after what she'd been through emotionally, if not physically.

Wounds were wounds, whether or not they bled.

Mace struggled with his own dark pain, the same need for vengeance that burned in my gut.

Azul was gone.

Along with most of the wolves who lived there.

And I'd hoped to the useless gods that Noa hadn't watched it happen through her connection to Amal.

"Bedisa." I cradled her cold hand in mine, wanted to warm her fingers. *"I haven't given you the words you wanted to hear. Deserved to hear. I've never said those words to any woman, never felt this way. But you changed me. You are my reason. Mine."*

I squeezed her fingers, waited for her to squeeze back, afraid to reach out and search her mind. Afraid of what I'd either find or trigger.

"You're a dread lord," Caerwen had said sternly on that first awful day when she'd arrived and gone to my mate's bedside. "You've done as much damage to her as any lord in the past, only worse because those lords were honest. They never offered false hope."

We'd argued after that. Caerwen wanted to take Noa back to Aine's wrinkle. Effa had objected, looking like a flower—a wildflower, like the ones Noa picked. And because of the flowers, because I didn't want to lose my mate again, I'd grown angry, nearly destroyed the room where we met, shouting, "I won't risk her waking up with Aine and forgetting who she is."

Not a second time. I'd sent her to Aine once, and Noa was still angry about it.

"Bedisa..." I closed my eyes, counted each faint beat of her heart while my own was thundering. *"I love you so fucking much. I didn't need a mate bond to know it. I knew it the first time I looked into your eyes and saw the stars staring back, the endless sky, the beautiful depths of obsidian and knew I... you hold my heart. You will always hold. My. Heart. It's exploding right now, and I'm holding the pieces together because that's the only way I know."*

Her fingers jerked, twitched against mine. It could have been nerves misfiring, something in her brain flickering. I brought her hand to my lips, kissed her skin.

"I need you to be strong," I told her, whispered through our bond. *"I have to leave. Anson promises his protection, but I can't stay. You're safe here. Heal, Bedisa. Grow strong. I'll come back. I'll always come back. Please... be waiting for me when I do."*

Caerwen emerged from the shadows. I'd almost forgotten she was there until her hand gently settled on my shoulder.

"We will care for her," the nymph said.

"You will," I agreed, knowing a threat was in my voice. But I was beyond caring what the nymph thought of me.

I tucked Noa's hand beneath the sheet, smoothed her dark hair. Bent, my lips lingering against her forehead while I breathed in her scent.

Promising her all I had to give.

Love.

And.
Vengeance.



THE END OF BOOK TWO
BOOK THREE
THE BLOOD QUEEN (2024)

One to Kill.

One to die for.

Make it a good death, Wolf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Wilder first discovered the power of storytelling as a child living in California, when she got caught sneaking into a neighborhood orchard and starting a grapefruit war. She managed to absolve her cohorts from guilt and has since moderated her behavior. She now writes Contemporary Romance and Paranormal Fantasy Romance - stories that keep her up late at night, filled with laughs, tears, and characters who hang around long after the books reach “The End.”

When she isn't writing, you'll find her listening to jazz, enjoying red wine and watching the sunsets.

She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and a yellow lab named Maxine.

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